

*The
Anonymous
Amanuensis*



Judith B. Glad

Compromising behavior?

"Very well, you may see your friend, but only here, in the privacy of your room." Quinton stopped, his brows drawing together. "No. That will not do. You must not receive him unchaperoned in your bedchamber."

"Do not be nonsensical, sir!" Eve exclaimed. "Tom is fully cognizant of all that is proper. His behavior always has been above reproach. Although it was in fact he who obtained my clothing, he never behaved as anything other than a gentleman. What earthly harm could there be in his coming here to visit me?"

Quinton's scowl grew, if possible, more fierce. "What is this young man to you, Eve?"

"A friend, sir. Only a friend."

"You have not a *tendre* for him, or he for you?" Quinton persisted.

"Of course not," Eve said, letting her exasperation sound plainly in her voice. "Really, Mr. Quinton. You are, I think, overly concerned with my reputation. I am to depart in less than a fortnight for Elmwood, and will probably never be seen by members of Society again. I will not be compromised by Tom's coming here to visit. It will not be the first time."

"And what did you do together, when you invited him to join you in your bedchamber?" Quinton said. "Did you repay his assistance with your, ah, your favors?"

"You insult me, sir! You may be my employer, but you are not the keeper of my conscience, nor are you my parent or guardian." Eve was suddenly furious. How dare he think thus of her! "My relationship with Tom Patterson is none of your business."

"Your behavior is indeed my concern, so long as you are beneath my roof. I will allow no wanton activities here, my girl. If you wish to visit with Mr. Patterson, you will do so in the office, and with the door standing fully open. Do you understand?" He stood, towering over her threateningly as he awaited her reply.

She also stood and, for a moment, they were almost nose to nose. Eve felt her breath catch in her throat at the nearness of him, the warm touch of his breath on her forehead. She stepped back quickly. "I understand that you do not trust me to know how to behave with propriety, sir, and I am grossly insulted. Now, if you do not mind, I wish to retire. I find I am fatigued."

His eyes narrowed. "Of course, ma'am. But remember, I will have no wanton behavior under my roof. Good night." He turned and left the room, nearly slamming the door behind him.

THE ANONYMOUS AMANUENSIS

by

Judith B. Glad

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Douglas, Massachusetts

This is a work of fiction. While reference may be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the characters, incidents, and dialogs are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For **Kat** and **Star**—
You're simply the best daughters
anyone could wish for...

And for **Neil**, as usual.

PROLOGUE

Elmwood, Yorkshire. October

"Damn it, Eve, but you are stubborn!"

Evelyn Dixon smiled into her uncle's angry face. "I am not being stubborn, Chas, merely practical. After all, I said I am willing to look for a position as an instructor of languages in some proper school for young ladies. I have not promised to find one."

"But you'll not try very hard, if I know you." The tall, weathered gentleman threw himself into a chair and glared at her. "You've this wild idea of being a secretary and you'll spend all your energies seeking a position with some rummy Cit, rather than in a school where you will at least be among people of your own sort."

"Well, and I tell you that I will not! Any Cit with whom I accept a position will be a model of sobriety. Rummy, indeed!"

"You know what I meant, Eve. I'd have thought that your experience with Alfred, and my father before him, would have shown you how grim a life you would have as a secretary."

"Oh, believe me, it has. But Grandfather and Uncle Alfred are, I sincerely hope, not typical employers. If they were, there would be no secretaries, for who would accept employment with such curmudgeons?"

Eve smiled wryly. "Chas, I have not enjoyed working for either of them, but it has shown me that I have a bent for performing secretarial duties, where I know that I do not for teaching. I have not yet succeeded in teaching Lisabet and young Wilfred a single fact, try as I might," she said with regret.

"Ha! How anyone could teach those two wretched brats anything is beyond me. Charlotte has them so spoiled that they pay no mind to anything that does not give them pleasure."

Her uncle rose and began pacing about the office, where Eve sat behind a desk littered with papers and account books. The desk and chair covered most of the floor, so his pacing was necessarily confined to a small space before the desk.

"Be that as it may," he said, leaning across the desk after a few moments, "you must know that acting as a secretary to some merchant is not the sort of life for a gently bred young woman."

"But I am not a 'gently bred young woman.' As my uncle is so fond of reminding me, my mother was a peasant. And as Charlotte keeps me aware of, I am only here on sufferance, for my inheritance is barely enough to keep clothes on my back and food in my mouth." She grimaced. "Oh, Chas, can you not see that I must be away from here? I cannot stand much more of Alfred's reminders of my father's improvidence, nor of Charlotte's whining that I do not earn my keep."

"Yes, yes. You are miserable here, I can see. But that is no excuse for haring off to London to seek employment." Chas sat on the corner of her desk and took her chin in his hand, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Come, my dear, do not ask me to do this."

"I must. With a letter from you, telling how well I performed my duties, I have a much better chance of finding the sort of employment for which I am suited. Please, Chas. Write the letter."

"Damn your stubbornness! Very well, I will, but I hope that we will not both come to regret it. Give me paper."

Eve relinquished her place at the desk. As Chas bent over the paper, thinking, brushing the tip of his nose with the quill, she watched him. How much better her uncle looked than he had those five months ago when he was carried into Elmwood, covered with bandages, white of face, and looking near death.

And now he was about to return to duty.

She prayed that he would come through the war unscathed. If he were to be killed, there would be no one left in the world who loved her. But Chas could be of no more help her than her father, dead these five years. The youngest of four sons, Chas had no fortune of his own and certainly could not support a nearly destitute female.

Eve enjoyed her secretarial duties. Some of the Hadley wealth came from investments in the West Indies, and she enjoyed the correspondence with Sir Alfred's agents there. What she minded was the lack of gratitude, Alfred's assumption that she should be grateful that he provided her with a way to earn her keep.

Her keep, indeed! Her only new gowns in the past five years had been purchased out of her own meager inheritance. Charlotte's frequent and snide comments about her healthy appetite showed that she was begrudged even the food she ate.

"There, for what it's worth," Chas said, pushing a sheet of paper across the desk to her. She picked it up and read the letter her uncle had written.

To Whom It May Concern:

May I introduce my niece, Evelyn Dixon, as an honest and competent secretary. For the past five years, Miss Dixon has acted as amanuensis to Sir Wilfred Hadley, my late father. Her duties included correspondence with Sir Wilfred's agents in the West Indies and in Scotland, maintenance of the estate accounts, and management of the household budget. She writes a legible hand, is knowledgeable about estate management, and is capable of translating correspondence into Italian, French, German, and Dutch. I ask that you give her application for a position careful consideration.

Your servant,

Major Charles Hadley

Eve laid the letter back on the desk, uncertain what to say.

"What's the matter, Eve? Don't you like it?"

"Yes and no, Chas. It is an excellent letter, but I am not sure that you ought to claim me as your niece. You are bound to be thought prejudiced on my behalf. Perhaps you might rewrite it, make it more impersonal?"

Chas took the letter back and reread it. "I suppose you are in the right of it, Eve, though it galls me not to claim you as my relation." He again bent over the desk, writing. Soon he pushed a second sheet of paper across to her. This time Eve smiled as she finished reading it. Impersonal it was. There was no mention of her relationship to him or of her sex, just two short sentences describing her duties and her experience, a third listing her unusual linguistic skills.

"Very good, Chas. This should do the trick." She folded the letter and placed it in a portfolio. "Shall we ride before dinner, as usual?"

"Might as well. It'll be our last chance until I return from the Peninsula. I want to get an early start for London tomorrow so I can see some friends before I head overseas."

CHAPTER ONE

London. December

"My dear young lady, no one would hire a *female* as a secretary. Why, the fairer sex is too emotional, too flighty for such a position of responsibility. And no mere woman possesses the intelligence for such demanding work. Is there nothing else that you might be suited for?"

"I could teach languages, sir, but I would prefer not to have to do so," Eve replied, hoping she didn't sound as desperate as she felt.

This was the third registry office she had visited. There were only two more on her list.

"And why not?"

"I have little patience with children, particularly those who have no interest in learning. On the other hand, I have five years' experience as a secretary to Sir Wilfred Hadley and he seemed pleased with my work. If you will only read this reference, you will see."

The man grudgingly took Chas's letter and read it. Returning it to Eve, he said, "That's all very well, Miss Dixon, but it does not change the fact that no gentleman, no, nor any merchant, would trust a woman with his business affairs. You would be much better off as a teacher. Or a governess or companion."

"Then you will not help me find employment, sir?"

"Not as a secretary. And I have no requests for teachers at present. You would do much better to consider going as a governess. The school terms are barely half over, and few openings for teachers are likely just now." He frowned at Eve's *moue* of distaste. "Come back in two or three months."

Eve thanked him and left, disappointed but not entirely without hope. She was still determined to be a secretary. She decided to write letters of inquiry to all the merchants and traders whose directions she could discover...

Two months later, Eve's funds and her patience were both much reduced. Laughter, scorn, or improper advances had been the responses at each of the interviews she had had with City merchants and traders. No requests for language teachers had been received by any of the seven registry offices to which she had applied.

She had made some friends, but had little in common with most of the young women at the ladies' boarding house where she had a small room under the eaves. Only her friendship with Thomas Patterson was really close, and Eve was not sure if it was truly proper to be friends with a young man. But without Tom, her existence in London would be so lonely that she would not be able to stand it.

Eve met Tom Patterson at Marten's registry office, during the second week of her stay in London. The cheerful young man was delivering a request for a chambermaid to the agency where Eve had just concluded another fruitless interview. The two struck up a conversation as they walked down the stairs together and discovered a mutual liking.

Tom, a younger son with noble connections, had dreams of someday standing for Parliament. In the meantime, he was employed by Lord Arduin, a prominent member of His Majesty's government. And Tom was as lonely in London as Eve. They fell into the habit of taking supper together on his free evenings, or attending plays or the opera when Lord Arduin gave him tickets.

Tom had a carefree spirit and frequently made absurd suggestions for their activities. Once he tried to convince her that they should take a ride on a steamship. Another time he convinced her to don borrowed trousers and coat for a tour of an ironmongery. Tom also had a serious side and the two of

them often indulged in long philosophical discussions as they wandered the streets of the West End together.

Eve finally admitted to herself that she would have to take a poorly paid position in a shop or crawl back to Elmwood and grovel before Alfred and Charlotte. She very much feared that the alternative might be starvation, for she refused to sell the few remaining pieces of her mother's jewelry.

That same day, Tom imparted some information that gave her one last bit of hope.

"It's really too bad, Eve, that you are female, for I know that he would never engage your services. Otherwise you are completely qualified for the position."

"I beg your pardon, Tom," Even said. "I was woolgathering. What did you say? What position?"

"I was telling you about a secretarial position for which you are perfectly suited. I would be tempted to apply myself if I had the peculiar combination of skills that it requires. Mr. Quinton strikes me as being a most liberal employer." Tom leaned his chair back against the wall behind him and patted his waistcoat. "I fear I have eaten overmuch. But the cook here does concoct a delicious ragout of beef."

"Tom, you impossible boy! Who is Mr. Quinton and what is this position for which I am so suited?" Eve eyed him with exasperation. Sometimes his teasing ways maddened her.

"Mr. James Quinton engages in the spice and silk trades. I am somewhat acquainted with his present secretary, who is resigning his position to take a post in India. According to Alan, Mr. Quinton is more than a bit concerned about being able to find a replacement."

Eve took a last bite of her juicy pear and wiped the stickiness from her fingers. "There seems to be no shortage in London of young men qualified as secretaries. Why should this Mr. Quinton have a problem?"

"Because he requires that his secretary be able to translate his correspondence into Dutch and Italian, for you know that those countries are still the centers of the spice and silk trades. Because of the unsettled situation on the Continent, it seems Quinton is constrained to use foreign agents for much of his business. Alan said the volume of his correspondence is great and much of it is in those languages. It is really unfortunate that you are female."

"It is unfair, not unfortunate!" Eve had taken stock of her resources just that day and realized that she had only enough money for a few more weeks at the boarding house. "Is there no chance he might overlook my sex?"

"I doubt it. He is said to be a most proper gentleman. He's the heir to the Earl of Seabrooke, you know." Tom sipped the port that the waiter had brought to their cleared table. "I understand he holds females in the greatest dislike; won't even have a housekeeper. Alan believes it is because of his mother, whom he detests."

"How unnatural. He must be a most unlikable person."

"As to that, I cannot say. He pays very well, as well as providing extremely comfortable lodgings. But he is a sober sort, and has always treated Alan with the greatest formality. But come, Eve, why do we speak of this, since it can only depress you?"

Eve waited while Tom finished his port, then walked silently beside him through the busy streets as he escorted her back to her lodgings. She was beyond depressed, for he had held out to her the position she dreamed of...only to snatch it away. Her good night to him was subdued.

Sleep was long in coming that night. She could return to Elmwood, but would have to abase herself, to beg Charlotte's forgiveness. And Alfred—he would feed her a large helping of humble pie.

Once at Elmwood, Eve feared she would never, never be able to break away again.

Of course, she could always go as a shop girl, as did many of the young women who shared the boarding house. But they were pretty girls who could charm customers into spending their money. Would Eve, with her rather masculine looks and thin, almost spare figure, be able to charm anyone? She doubted it.

The night was pitch black when she awoke from her troubled sleep. From the relative quiet, it must have been very late. A dream had come to her, one in which all her problems had been solved, but she could not remember it. She lay quietly, trying to recapture the vision.

Something had been different about her appearance...but what?

Finally Eve recalled the substance of the dream. She had been walking with Tom along the serpentine, two young men taking the air together. She could still feel the peculiar sensation of having her legs clad in trousers, the constriction of a cravat about her neck.

Eve sat up in her bed, staring into darkness.

Could she?

Unthinkable!

Where would she obtain the garments, and how could she carry off such a masquerade?

She fumbled to light her candle. Carrying it to the small mirror over the commode, she stared at her face in the dim light. The features that she had always deplored as being too harsh and unfeminine were reflected back into her eyes. With her hair cut short, she would look like a young man, she was sure. Dipping her fingers into the ewer, she used it to smooth her wiry hair against her head. Yes, if her hair were to be cut very short, her face would lose what little aspect of femininity it possessed.

Shivering, Eve climbed back into her bed and extinguished the candle.

Perhaps. Just perhaps she could do it.

~*~

"That young man of yours is here again, Eve," the landlady called.

"Good. Please tell him I will be down immediately, Mrs. Storridge," Eve replied. She ran into her room to get her pelisse and hurried down the stairs. What a day this had been, waiting for Tom answer her summons.

Mrs. Storridge stood at the bottom of the stairs, arms akimbo. "Well, and when is he going to offer for you, that's what I'd like to know," she said sternly, as Eve rounded the newel post. "He's been hanging about you for nearly two months and should have made up his mind by now."

"Mrs. Storridge, Tom and I are just friends. I do not want a husband—I want a position."

"Well, and you're not having much luck, are you? Take my advice, Eve, and look about you for a husband. 'Tisn't natural for a young lady like yourself to be unwed. Now, you be in by eight o'clock, mind. Friend or no, I don't want that young man keeping you out too late."

"I promise," Eve answered with a laugh. She pulled on her pelisse and hurried through the door.

Tom was standing on the stoop, waiting for her. She took his arm and they walked into the busy street.

"I got your note but could not get away before this. What is so urgent, Eve, that you wrote to me at Lord Arduin's?"

"Oh, Tom," she said, "I have had the most wonderful idea. But I will need your help."

"You have it, naturally; but how can I help you?" Tom was clearly mystified.

"You can purchase some clothing for me. Trousers, a waistcoat, shirts...I have not the slightest idea of what to buy, nor where to purchase it. And I could never do so if I did. I will give you the money, if you will only tell me how much you need, and I have my measurements right here..." She dug into her reticule and offered Tom a slip of paper.

"Whoa, there, Eve. What's wrong with the garments you borrowed from me before?"

"They will not do. I had to hike the trousers up under my armpits, and the coat fit me no better than a horse blanket." Once again she tendered the slip of paper.

"First you must tell me why you need the clothing. What wild start are you up to?"

"I awoke in the middle of the night with the solution, Tom. I shall apply for the position as Mr. Quinton's secretary, but I shall do it as a man."

Tom gaped at her.

Quickly Eve went on. "So you must obtain the garments for me tomorrow, so that I can be ready for an interview. I have already written to Mr. Quinton, requesting one. I told him that I would be free to call on him any time after Monday. Please, Tom," she pleaded, seeing the doubtful expression on his face. "Say you will do this for me."

"You must be insane!" Tom said. "You could never hope to get away with such an imposture."

"Why should I not? I am taller than many men. My voice is nearly as low in pitch as yours. And I certainly do not appear dainty and feminine, as young women are expected to be." Caught up in her enthusiasm, Eve grinned up at him. "This may be my only opportunity, Tom. Do say that you will help me."

It took much persuasion to convince Tom. Finally, however, he agreed, although reluctantly. Once she was assured of his cooperation, Eve told him the whole of her plans.

"Here are the measurements. I have allowed for the garments, particularly the trousers, to fit loosely. Here is every penny I can spare, nearly five pounds. See if you can obtain several changes of clothing for me. I will purchase my own shoes, for there is nothing too unusual for a woman to wish to have stout shoes. And do not forget a nightshirt. And underclothing. Do you think there will be enough money?"

"What I think is that I shall live to regret this, Eve. Won't you change your mind?" Tom asked, his voice filled with concern.

"No. I am determined. Oh, Tom, please do not worry about me. I shall go on swimmingly, you will see."

"I hope so, but I fear that you are more likely to end up in disgrace, or even in gaol."

"Nonsense! Now, will you remember that I cannot wear the pale shades? In fact, I would prefer that you would purchase all my clothing in somber brown and dark blue."

"Just like my sister. Worrying about colors, even in men's garb." Tom smiled, although to Eve's eyes, the expression seemed strained. "Very well, Eve. I will do as I am bid, although I have a terrible premonition that no good will come of this. But what will you do about a hat?"

"Oh, heavens! I had forgot. I have no idea of my hat size. May I try yours?" Eve took the beaver that Tom handed her and set it upon her head. It fell down to rest on her ears. Before she could remove it, Tom caught her hand. He raised it to sit properly and slipped his fingers inside, pulling the hat against

the back of her head. Holding it carefully, he removed it and put it upon his own head, still with his fingers inside. It sat high on his forehead.

"There, I think that I can estimate your size from this. Have you any objection to used clothing, Eve? It would be less costly."

"Not at all, as long as it is clean. I cannot indulge in false pride if I am to succeed in my scheme." Eve could hardly contain her excitement. "Do stop looking so worried, Tom. The very worst that could occur is that Mr. Quinton would unmask and discharge me. But at least I will have made the attempt."

"At least Quinton is a gentleman. Your virtue should be safe if he does twig that you're a female."

Eve became aware that the sky had darkened. She opened her pelisse to look at her watch. "Oh, dear, I must hurry. Will you call tomorrow with the clothing, then, Tom?"

"Either that, or I will send you a note. Have you thought about where you will go to make the transformation?"

Eve admitted she had not. They decided that Tom would engage an inexpensive room at a nearby inn and would call for her the next evening to escort her there.

CHAPTER TWO

The young person who ran down the outer stairs of the Blue Bear the next evening was handsome enough, clad in loose garments of good fabric and acceptable style.

Still certain he had let himself be talked into the worst sort of imprudence, Tom watched as Eve doffed her beaver and bowed. Her golden hair was cut to approximate a fashionable brutus, although a bit shorter than usual and somewhat shaggy in the back. The bow, however, was less than graceful.

"Good God, Eve, that was no bow! And you walk like a girl. It will never do."

"Then how should I walk, Tom? Will you show me? And how to bow properly?"

"I can see that I will have to. But where?" He looked around the busy inn yard.

"In my room, of course."

"Confound it, Eve. I cannot come to your room," Tom protested.

"Of course you can. What is wrong with your coming to the room of one of your male friends?"

Knowing he was compounding his error, Tom followed her up to her room, where he proceeded to drill her in a masculine stride and showed her how to bow with grace and style. After two hours' practice, he finally admitted that she would probably do well enough.

With Tom's grudging approval of her appearance and her movements, Eve took off her coat and flung it on the bed, seating herself beside it. "Whew! You did not tell me that bowing was so much work. It is very unlike curtsyng. Nor was I aware that walking in a mannish gait was so much more strenuous than a ladylike stride. My shirt is quite damp." She stretched her arms above her head.

Tom was staring at her with his mouth open.

"What is it, Tom? Is something amiss?"

Tom closed his mouth with a click of teeth. "Put your coat on, Eve, and keep it on. Your shirt is too thin." He was blushing.

Eve caught up her coat and quickly slipped into it. "I never thought of that. Oh well, I daresay I can wear some sort of undergarment that will conceal my bosom."

Tom's face, if possible, grew even redder. Eve pretended not to notice and bowed again, this time as he had shown her. "Otherwise, how do I look?"

He still stared at her feet.

"Tom! Look at me! Do I truly move like a man? Do I swing my arms enough?"

Tom slowly looked up and watched her move, walking about the room with long strides and swinging her arms freely. His blush had scarcely subsided. "Oh, yes, you'll pass well enough," he finally admitted. "But damn it, Eve, I still cannot entirely like this."

"To be truthful, Tom, neither can I. It sits ill with me to engage in such calculated deception as I plan. But the alternative would be far worse, I promise you. My uncle—never mind." If her plan came to fruition and Alfred discovered it, Elmwood would cease to be her only remaining refuge.

"Oh! Did I tell you that I have had a response from Mr. Quinton, bidding me to call Monday afternoon for an interview? Will you engage this room for that day, so that I may come here before and after the interview to change, please?"

Tom agreed. He then went to wait outside while she changed back into her feminine clothing. He had little to say on the short walk back to the boarding house, but he positively radiated disapproval.

~*~

Eve knocked firmly at the door of the magnificent house in Portman Square, at the appointed time on Monday. Although she was inwardly quaking, she put on a brave expression and announced to the footman that Mr. James Quinton expected her. The footman escorted her into a library, where a young man in shirtsleeves jumped up and greeted her.

"How do you do? I am Alan Garfield. Mr. Quinton will be delayed for a few moments."

Eve sat quietly as the secretary returned to his work at one of the two desks in the room. Her eyes roved about the room, noting its beautifully paneled walls and ceiling-high bookcases. A portrait of a young man hung over the mantelpiece and she, thinking that it must be Mr. Quinton, examined it closely. Her supposition was proved correct, for she was soon introduced to an unsmiling gentleman who bore an older version of the face in the portrait.

"You are very young, Mr. Dixon, to have a command of the languages that I require," Quinton told her after he had acknowledged the introduction and sent his secretary from the room.

Eve pulled Chas's letter from her breast pocket. "I assure you, Mr. Quinton, that I possess the experience and skills you require. I am fluent in both Dutch and Italian. I speak some Prussian and French as well, but the latter only haltingly. I was raised on the Continent, you see, and only my parents spoke English to me." Aware that she was babbling, she stopped abruptly and bit her lower lip.

"And how old are you, Mr. Dixon?" Quinton asked.

"I am eight-and-ten." Eve lied, subtracting two years from her actual age to account for her beardless cheeks. "If you would care to read this letter of recommendation..." She held out Chas's letter.

Quinton took it, frowning as he did so. He must have read it several times over, for it was a full minute before he raised his head and looked at her again. "So you worked for Chas Hadley's father, did you? And pleased him, from all accounts, or he would not have employed you for long. I understand that the old man was not an easy person to please."

Oh no! He knows my uncle! Could Chas have spoken to him of me?

Throat tight, Eve merely nodded.

"How did you come to be employed at such a tender age?"

"I was an orphan, and my parents were...were acquaintances of the Hadley family." *I should have never lied about my age. Well, there's no help for it.* "Chas Hadley convinced his father to offer me a chance to prove myself."

"Why did you not stay on after the old man's death?"

"Oh, I wanted to seek my fortune in London," she responded airily, "and Sir Alfred thought me overly young for such responsibility."

"As do I."

Eve's heart sank.

"However," he continued, still frowning, "I have been seeking a replacement for Garfield for several months now and must have one soon. He departs next week."

"I am available immediately, sir," Eve said, nearly breathless with hope.

"I see." Quinton took a turn about the room, his brows lowered. "All right, young man. I'll give you a chance, despite your youth. You may come to me for a three-month probationary period. At the end of

that time, we will again discuss this. But I will tell you that I am not easy to please, and I am a demanding employer."

"Oh, thank you sir!" Eve cried. "I shall endeavor to please you, I promise."

It was soon decided that Eve would remove to the Portman Square house the next day, since she would be expected to be available at all times, save Sundays and half Wednesdays. Her salary, a sum that seemed generous to her, would be paid quarterly, but Quinton offered to advance her five pounds if she was short of pocket. She accepted gratefully, for she had not taken the cost of the room at the Blue Bear into her calculations and she had already been forced to dip into what she called her 'escape money.'

~*~

The apartment allocated to Eve in Quinton's house was large and airy, with a small sitting room in addition to the bedchamber. The footman who carried her trunk and portmanteau upstairs promised to return in an hour to take them to the box room, so she set about unpacking quickly. Her books and other personal possessions she placed around the room, but locked all of her feminine attire in the trunk. She had not had such a comfortable home since the death of her father, and never one so large and so beautifully appointed.

As she was placing her comb and brush on the dressing table, Eve caught sight of herself in its large mirror. Without her coat, the fullness of her breasts showed through the fine linen shirt. *This will never do. Mr. Garfield was in his shirtsleeves.*

Pulling an extra cravat from a drawer, she removed her shirt and bound her breasts tightly. With her shirt back on, she examined her reflection, moving about and stretching as she did so. *Yes, that will suffice for now, but I must contrive something more comfortable.*

Eve unlocked her trunk long enough to pull out a petticoat and her sewing kit. Stuffing them into the back of a drawer, she donned her drab blue coat and smoothed her hair. She was ready to go to work.

Mr. Garfield's manner was somewhat abrupt, but he was both helpful and informative. They went over Mr. Quinton's schedule and list of correspondents that morning. In the afternoon, Eve was set to composing answers to some commonplace letters, then to translate her answers into both Dutch and Italian.

Quinton reentered the library at mid-afternoon and asked to see her work. Eve gave him the letters she had written and watched him out of the corner of her eye as he read one after another, his face expressionless. As he laid the last on his desk, she looked at him expectantly.

"Satisfactory, Mr. Dixon. You have a way with words. Succinct, but not abrupt." His brief smile took her breath away with its sweetness. But almost instantly his face slipped back into its usual stern lines. "Has Mr. Garfield explained your daily duties to you?"

"He has, sir, and I took careful notes. I think that I will be able to handle the work you require of me."

"Good. Then continue to assist Garfield until Saturday. I will, of course, review your work daily. Tomorrow, Garfield," he said, turning to that young man, "you may give him the household accounts to deal with. Oh, and the invitations as well. I want to see how he does with them." Quinton picked up a portfolio of papers and left the room.

By evening, Eve's shoulders were knotted with tension and her head ached. She briefly regretted her masquerade, for a man could not retire merely because of a headache. She and Garfield dined together in the breakfast room, a custom, she was informed, that was followed whenever Quinton was not at home for dinner or was entertaining. Eve asked Garfield about his post in India and spent most of the meal listening as that young man told her of his hopes of making his fortune in that faraway place.

When the covers were removed and the port produced, Eve hesitated over accepting a glass. She told herself sternly that she must follow masculine pursuits if she was to pass successfully as a man. She sipped at the dark, heady wine, rather liking its taste. She did refuse the cigar that Garfield offered her, however, feeling that there was a limit to her aping of the opposite sex.

"Mr. Garfield, tell me more of our employer. Is he always so...so stern?"

"No need to be formal at dinner, Evelyn. Call me Alan, as long as we're not at work. Quinton? Yes, I would say that his behavior is most of the time somewhat restrained, rather than stern, although he can be amusingly cynical."

"Cynical? Why?"

"He is quite bitter at the treatment that he has received from the *ton*. Justifiably, I believe."

"How have they treated him?" Since coming to London, Eve had begun reading the Gazette and was fascinated by the antics of the *ton*, the *crème de la crème* of English society. "And why does it matter?"

"He is heir to the earldom of Seabrooke. It is not a rich estate, the present earl having had to sell off many of his outlying properties to survive after the disastrous investments his father made. There is left only the principal property, Seabrooke in Suffolk, and a smaller one, at Fallowfeld in Essex. On his coming of age, Mr. Quinton received Fallowfeld and a small allowance. He invested that allowance and took an active interest in managing the income from it. Eventually he set himself up as a spice merchant with his profits."

Garfield replenished his glass. Eve, reminded that hers was still nearly full, cradled it in her hands. She sipped cautiously, never having experienced such a pleasant warmth in her midriff before.

"Over the years his initial investment has grown tremendously," Garfield continued, "due mostly to his business acumen and his wise investments. But much of the *ton* disapproved of his engaging in trade and shunned him for a long time. An understanding had existed between him and the only daughter of a neighboring estate in Suffolk. When they discovered that Quinton was engaging in mercantile pursuits, the family drew back, forbidding the marriage. Only in the past year or two has he been received in society again." Garfield snorted. "And that has been due to the discovery that Quinton has made himself a very wealthy man. The *ton* would still be shunning him otherwise."

"How unfair, and how petty! I cannot blame him for being bitter. But surely that does not entirely account for his lack of warmth," Eve said with a question in her voice.

"No, I'd wager that his mother is at fault. She is not a likeable woman and would not have been an affectionate parent. But I do not wish to gossip, so I will say no more on that score. Do you play chess, Dixon?"

"I do indeed, and would love a game. But I am sadly out of practice, so you must be patient while I remember my strategy."

The evening was spent in a hard fought game, Eve finally going down in defeat; an event that made Mr. Garfield look upon her with charity.

The next few days were repeats of the first, with Eve exhausting herself in her attempts to prove her worth to Quinton. He admitted to her that he was well pleased when he reviewed her work on Saturday afternoon, telling her that Garfield had also praised her ability to understand and learn so quickly.

That night Quinton held a small farewell celebration for the departing secretary, inviting several of Garfield's friends—including Tom Patterson. Eve discovered her employer to be charming in a social setting, but she still found herself intimidated by him.

Eve was surprised when Quinton joined her at breakfast on Monday morning. She and Garfield had heretofore taken their morning meal without his company. Quinton explained that he was planning to spend the entire week working with Eve to ensure that she would be well trained and able to proceed when he was absent.

"Are you well acquainted with my...with Major Charles Hadley, Mr. Quinton?" Eve said as they were drinking a last cup of coffee together. She mentally chastised herself, for she had almost said 'my uncle Chas.'

"Yes, Chas and I have been friends since we were at Eton together," he answered. "In fact, I consider him my best friend, for he is one of the few who did not desert me when I turned to trade instead of the idle frivolities of Society."

"Chas has been a good friend to me, as well. When I came to...to England after my father's death, he was the only person who was kind to me, who welcomed me. I miss him greatly, and fear for his safety in the Peninsula."

"I am sure that there is no need to worry about Chas, Mr. Dixon. He has a fortunate habit of landing on his feet. Now, do you feel capable of dealing with the invitations that arrived in Saturday's post? I have about an hour's work before I will be free."

"Of course, sir. I think that I understand. You refuse all invitations to afternoon fetes and to card parties. You accept those to balls and musicales. Any others I am to refer to you for disposition, unless they come from persons on the list, and those are to be refused under any circumstances."

Eve was mystified as to why there should be a list of people from whom Quinton would accept no invitations, but had not wanted to ask about it. She took herself to the library to sort the stack of mail and to reply to the invitations.

One intrigued her. It was written on fine linen note stock in a flowing feminine hand. The writer signed herself 'Yours ever, Prudence' and requested Quinton's presence at a 'dinner *a deux*.' Eve placed it into the pile for Quinton's perusal.

When Quinton joined Eve in the library, he immediately read her responses to the invitations. A curt 'very good' was his only comment. She noticed, when he was looking through the others, that he set the note from Prudence apart before he sat beside her to deliver instructions as to how the business letters were to be answered.

As the days progressed, Eve gained confidence in her ability to satisfy Quinton's rather demanding requirements. She found that her experience with her grandfather had indeed been good training. It was seldom that Quinton returned a letter to her for rewording.

She was always grateful for and sometimes amused by his short notes in the margins of his business correspondence, indicating the direction her response should take. She found that she enjoyed composing those letters before, as she frequently had to do, translating them into other languages.

At first she had to refer to her grammars, for she had forgotten more than she realized. But soon her memory improved and she was able to make fast work of the translations.

Eve did not enjoy keeping the household accounts as much, for they were merely tedious. That is, they were until one day in the second week of her employment.

Eve's usual method was to separate the household accounts into two piles, one that required drafts on the household account, the other to be paid directly from the household moneys. She was doing this when she came upon a crumpled invoice from a certain *modiste* whose name she recognized from the columns of the *Gazette* as being dressmaker to many of the ladies of the *ton*. The amount was

staggering and Eve could not understand why such an enormous sum should be charged to a gentleman whose household contained no women. When she added it to short pile of items to question Mr. Quinton about, she saw written on the back, 'Do not pay this! Write a note saying that I am in no way responsible for any of Lady Seabrooke's bills. Make it strong. JQ'

Not understanding, Eve did as she was ordered and went on with the bills, putting them on Quinton's desk when she was finished with them. He did not come in that afternoon, so she had no opportunity to learn his reaction to her note.

The next morning, Quinton handed her a slip of paper, telling her that it was to be inserted in both the *Gazette* and the *Morning Post* that very day. She read it.

Edward Quinton, Earl of Seabrooke, and Mr. James Quinton wish to remind the creditors of Rachel, Lady Seabrooke, that they do not accept responsibility for her expenditures.

Shocked, she lifted her eyes to stare at him. His mouth was set in an angry line.

"As you see, Mr. Dixon," he said. "I much regret this necessity, but cannot see my way clear to avoid it. I had thought that my mother had learned her lesson by now."

"Of course, sir. I had not meant to question you. It is not my place to do so."

His face softened slightly. "You will no doubt be required, sooner or later, to deal with my mother. You should know that she left my father many years ago and, having obtained control of her personal fortune from him, she agreed never to be a charge upon either of us again. Unfortunately, she needs frequent reminders of her promise, and I am tired of delivering them. This notice should do the trick... for a few months at least."

"Yes, sir," Eve replied. "But what do you mean, that I shall have to deal with her?"

"She will be here sometime tomorrow, storming and ranting at me for making public our family affairs. And," he gave a travesty of a laugh, "for refusing to pay her dressmaker's bill. If I know my mother, this will infuriate her more than will the public notice. If she arrives when I am absent—as I must be for several hours tomorrow morning—you will receive the brunt of her anger. Please ignore it and get rid of her as soon as you can. Bartlett will help you."

"Could you not simply have Bartlett refuse her admission, sir?" Eve asked. Facing an angry woman on his behalf seemed beyond her duties.

"No, for then she will contrive to vent her anger on me at some public gathering and I do not want that to happen. There is no need to make so many others uncomfortable. Come, Dixon, all you will have to do is sit here and let her words pour over your head. She will not harm you. As soon as she has emptied her budget, she will leave. I hope to be at home when she arrives but, unfortunately, I cannot postpone my meeting with Captain Sommerset."

"He sails tomorrow, does he not? Of course, sir, I will deal with your mother."

But I will not like it.

~*~

Sure enough, Lady Seabrooke arrived the next morning while Quinton was at the docks. Eve's first indication of her presence came when she heard a screeching from the hall.

The library door flew open. "Get out of my way, Bartlett! Garfield, I want my son! Where is he?"

Eve stared at the voluptuous, red-haired woman standing in the doorway. She was no longer young, but her heavily powdered face still held remnants of what must have been startling beauty. "Garfield is no

longer here, madam" she said, her voice somewhat unsteady.

"Who are you?"

Rising to face the angry woman, Eve drew a deep breath and replied, "I am Dixon, Mr. Quinton's new secretary. May I be of assistance to you, madam?"

"You may indeed. Give my son a message. Write it down, for I want him to know my exact words." The woman leaned over Eve's desk and glared at her. "Humph. Scrawny little wart. James hires the most namby-pamby secretaries."

Eve stood straighter and glared back, biting her tongue.

"Well, sit down and pick up your pen. Don't just stand there with your eyes falling off of your face."

Eve sat. Waiting with pen in hand, she watched the angry woman prowling about the library, rifling through papers on Quinton's desk, picking up and laying down articles from the tables and shelves. Eve felt the urge to tell her to keep her hands from Mr. Quinton's possessions. Finally the woman ceased her prowling and came back to stand before the desk.

"Tell my son that I will not tolerate his ungrateful, selfish, coldhearted treatment of me. He is a worm, a toad. I would call him a bastard, but unfortunately, I was too naive then to cuckold his worthless father."

"Yes, yes, put that down, too, boy. It is outside of enough that he feels so little for his filial responsibilities that he will allow his mother to be dunned for a few paltry pounds."

Eve gasped, for the amount of the bill had been well over five hundred pounds. She saw Lady Seabrooke's eyes on her and bent again over the desk, cheeks aflame.

"Also tell him that I have reached the end of my patience with his clutch-fisted ways and hereby refuse to advance him or his equally penny-pinching father so much as a shilling toward the come out next year of that insipid brat, Penelope. Furthermore, tell him..."

"Mother, I had expected to see you this morning, but not so early that you dispensed with your beauty sleep. So good of you not to disappoint me."

Eve had never heard a voice so dripping with sarcasm. She looked up to see Quinton standing there, anger writ plainly on his face.

"That will do, Dixon. You may have the remainder of the day to yourself."

Eve quickly stuffed the papers from her desk into a drawer and fled the room. Just before the door closed behind her, she heard Quinton say, "Madam, you would advance your cause much the better if you were to cease abusing my staff. Now, what was it you wished to tell me?"

Bartlett was standing in the hall, his eye on the library door. "I am sorry for allowing her to burst in on you like that, Mr. Dixon. I have orders from Mr. Quinton not to attempt to restrain her ladyship when she is in one of her rages."

"What a detestable woman. Is she always like that?"

"Usually, sir. Now, may I advise that you make yourself scarce? Mr. Quinton will be in no mood for work when her ladyship leaves, but he will probably remain in the library until dinner."

Eve ran up the stairs, elated at having an unexpected free afternoon. At the same time she was disappointed. The hours she spent with her employer were the best part of each day.

CHAPTER THREE

James Quinton was ashamed of himself. Hurrying home from his meeting with Captain Sommerset, he had hoped to arrive before his mother, a notoriously late riser. But he had failed, and Bartlett had been unable to keep her out of the library. So Dixon was forced to face her, be abused by her.

Garfield had been adept at giving as good as he got, but Dixon, for all his competence, was no match at all for a virago like Lady Seabrooke. James had developed a fondness for the slight young man who had proven to be such an excellent secretary, wishing his own brothers, Matthew and Farley, had half the backbone Dixon did.

As was usual after a confrontation with his mother, James was depressed and drained. He closeted himself in the library and spent the afternoon reading, trying to lose himself in fiction rather than thinking about the miserable life his father must have led with his mother. James's own overdeveloped sense of filial duty forced him to be polite, but the receipt of the dressmaker's bill had been too much.

The woman had an ample fortune of her own, damn her grasping soul! Had she not bullied his father into relinquishing control of it to her, he, James, would not now be involved in trade; nor would he have suffered the indignities and snubs of Society. On the other hand, that was a small price to pay for ridding Seabrooke of her presence, for while she had been in residence, life for Lord Seabrooke and his oldest son had been miserable.

Thank God, Penelope had not been exposed for too long to her mother's vicious tongue and unstable personality, for Lady Seabrooke had left her husband when her daughter was barely a year old.

Matthew and Farley, both unfortunately like their mother, had followed her to London as soon as they were of age. The worst of it was that Matthew was James's heir. If he were to gain control of the estate, Matthew would squander it within a year.

Bartlett's hesitant knock brought James out of his reverie. "Would you be wanting dinner, sir?" the elderly butler asked,

"I have little appetite, Bartlett. I think not. But stay! Is Dixon about?"

"I believe he is in his room, sir."

"Perhaps he will dine with me. Surely some fellowship will bring me out of my megrims. Ask him to join me in the dining room, if you will."

"As you say, sir," the butler agreed, bowing.

Eve was surprised when summoned to dine with her employer. She usually took dinner alone in the breakfast room, her position being enough above that of the servants that she could not dine with them.

She was still unsure of her position, despite Garfield's telling her that he had sometimes joined Mr. Quinton for dinner. But he was more of an age with his employer. Eve, conscious of her youth and worried that too much social intercourse with Quinton would lead to her unmasking, had been well satisfied to avoid him outside of working hours.

Quinton was obviously making an effort to be sociable. "What did you do with your unexpected holiday, Dixon?" he asked her over the soup.

"I read most of the afternoon, sir," she answered.

"You read? A free afternoon and you read? Why did you not go out and have an adventure? That is what most lads of your age would do."

"Oh, sir, I have had so little time or opportunity for reading these past five years. Gr...Sir Wilfred kept

me very busy and his library had few interesting books in it. And when I came to London, I was busy seeking a position. Your library is like a buried treasure to me."

"And what did you read?"

"‘Songs of Innocence’, sir."

"Ah, Blake. He is not one of my favorite poets, but he does well enough. Have you read Coleridge?"

"No, sir."

"I recommend that you do so. His early poetry is magnificent. It is too bad that he seems to have lost his creative fires."

"What of his would you recommend that I read, sir?"

Quinton spoke of Coleridge and his poetry through most of the meal. Eve felt fortunate that he was willing to expound so, for she was uncomfortable and did not really know what to say to him. Finally she thought of something she could contribute.

"Mr. Coleridge writes for the *Morning Post*, does he not, sir? Are you then a Whig?"

"I have no politics, save that of free trade. Let the politicians play their idiotic games while we merchants keep the country prosperous, if they will only allow us to do so," he answered with some heat.

"Yes, sir," Eve replied, chastened.

"Here! Dixon, don't be so downcast. I meant not to shout at you. I do not approve of politics and will not discuss the subject. Let us find another topic of conversation. Tell me about your childhood on the Continent."

On this subject Eve was able to discourse, for there were few verbal traps into which she could fall. After all, childhood adventures were much the same, whether undertaken by a lad or a lass. She related tales of her parents' frequent moves about Europe, as her father had changed residence often to escape his creditors. He had been a professional gambler, sometimes spectacularly successful; but the odds always caught up with him eventually and they were forced to move on. Quinton expressed his pity that she had had such an uncertain childhood.

"Oh, but you must not believe that, sir," she protested, "My father was a joyful man, always certain that the next place would see him winning enough to set us up for life. And Mama was so good, so sensible, that we never went hungry and always had a clean and comfortable home. Why, Papa was even able to put a bit aside so that I might have an inheritance, even though it is very small. I was never unhappy, even after Mama died, for I kept..." She stopped, appalled at what she had almost said, that she had kept house for her father after her mother's death.

"You kept?" he prompted.

"I kept the...the household accounts so that even then we were not destitute," she said quickly. "But Papa died three years after Mama, of a wasting disease, and so I came home to England."

"And what awaited you here? Do you have family?"

The covers had been cleared and Quinton poured her a glass of port. Eve sipped it while thinking rapidly.

"None. After Mama's death, Papa wrote to Chas, reminding him of their old friendship, and asking him to look after me. Fortunately Chas was at home to receive my letter when Papa died. I have been at Elmwood ever since."

"So, Dixon, we have much in common. I, too, was forced to make my own way in the world, for my father had little money, despite his estates. Once my mother—never mind. Suffice it to say that I was forced to leave school and come to London to seek my fortune.

"But confound it, lad, I cannot continue to call you Dixon. Evelyn is it not? Is that what your friends call you?" Quinton was working on his third glass of port, while Eve sipped at her first.

She spoke without thinking. "No, sir. I am usually called Eve."

"Womanish name! I'll wager it caused you to defend yourself often as a schoolboy."

"No, sir, for I always had tutors. But it has caused confusion a time or two, I admit."

"Well, Eve it will be. I cannot be so formal with one who is barely out of leading strings. Come, lad, do not look so shocked. I am an old man compared to you."

"Yes, sir. If you say so, sir."

"And that is another thing I will not have. You will wear the word out, you use it so often. Or you will have me so puffed up with my own consequence that I will become insufferably proud. You may reduce the 'sirs' to a mere twenty or so a day."

"Yes, sir. I mean, yes, Mr. Quinton."

"Better," Quinton said, pouring himself another glass of port.

Eve's discomfort did not abate, though Quinton became more loquacious as the level of the port decanter dropped. He seemed to relax, become increasingly less formal as the evening wore on. He was not apparently inebriated, unless his talkativeness could be seen as an indication of his being foxed. She was both glad and sorry when, near midnight, he sent her to bed with a warning that tomorrow would be a busy day.

What a nice man! I quite like him, she thought as she settled herself. He is nothing like he seemed at first.

~*~

Eve reveled in the freedom allowed her by masculine attire. She could wander about London with impunity, not subject to the many dangers she had faced as a young woman. Quinton's business occasionally required that she visit the City or the docks. She thereby saw a side of London from which she would have been banned—and protected—had her true sex been known.

She grew to love the sounds and smells of the docks—voices crying in a dozen languages, the creaking of windlasses, the breeze-borne scents of spices from the East and West Indies, the acrid odor of the tarred ropes, the unpleasant yet somehow appropriate odor of the unwashed, hard-working bodies.

She grew to know many of the shipping clerks who worked in the dusty, echoing warehouse. Now that she was better acquainted with Quinton, she was not surprised that most of them admired and respected him. He treated them fairly and was willing to overlook a lack of experience in favor of half a lifetime's labor before the mast and familiarity with the seaports of the world.

Mosely, whose position in the Quinton ménage was unclear to Eve, soon became one of her favorites. He was a short, wide-shouldered man with a decided limp that slowed him not a particle. She slowly prized his story out of him, fascinated at all he had done when even younger than she. He had shipped as a cabin boy on a merchantman out of Bristol when he had been but one-and-ten. His years at sea had been hard and his hands and face bore the scars of many battles with rigging and the elements.

Mosely had been forced to retire from the sea forever when his leg was caught in the anchor cable and

nearly torn from his body, as his ship made port at Rotterdam. Thrown upon shore with a gimp leg and no other means of support, he had been rescued from almost certain starvation and death by Quinton's agent, who taught him the rudiments of writing and ciphering.

Eve mentioned Mosely to Quinton after her first encounter with him.

Her employer confessed his early amazement at the seaman's instinctive understanding of the principles of trade and his extensive knowledge of the cargoes to be had at most of the world's principal ports.

"I called him to London about a year ago, thinking he would serve me well. And he has. The captains respect his understanding of their problems, the other clerks look to him for his instinct for sellable commodities and his knowledge of ports around the world."

Eve found Mosely fascinating, once she recovered from her first impression of the man as resembling a vicious old pirate. Behind the creased and weathered visage was a lively mind filled with tales of peoples and places all over the world. Often, if Tom Patterson was otherwise occupied on Wednesdays, Eve's steps trended toward the docks and Mosely's aerie on an upper floor of Quinton's largest warehouse. There the two of them, the scarred and twisted ex-seaman and the young woman masquerading as a man, spent many a happy hour talking of the lands across the seas from England.

Quinton had, after the evening spent discussing poetry and literature with Eve, unbent somewhat. Still grave most of the time, he nonetheless became more paternally friendly toward his secretary. They usually dined together, on the infrequent occasions when he had no evening engagement. Their table conversation ranged from good-natured arguments concerning the role of government in trade, through deep discussions of philosophy, to gossip about the *ton*.

Eve felt that some regulation of ports was necessary, while Quinton wished all Excisemen to the Devil. Quinton admired the Scotsman, Hume, and thought his philosophies profound, while Eve was more conventional in her metaphysical beliefs. And Eve listened avidly to Quinton's relation of the latest *on dits* with bated breath.

As they grew easy with one another, Eve and Quinton gradually moved into an intimacy such as is common among masculine friends. Her employer rarely dipped deeply into the brandy during their evenings together. He seldom drank to excess, so when one night he chose to partake of a second, then third glass of brandy after dinner, Eve was shocked.

"You are not keeping me company, Eve," Quinton protested, as she covered her glass with her palm to prevent his refilling it a third time. "And your sobriety reproaches me."

"I do not mean that it should do so, sir," she said, "but you must have realized by now that I do not have your capacity for drink. Besides, my employer demands that I appear in the morning with a clear head." She grinned at him.

Quinton's lips twitched, but he did not respond with the hoped-for smile. "Ah, Eve. To be so young and free from care as you." He sipped his wine. "Know you of the Cyprians' Ball, youngling?"

"I have heard of it, yes. I understand that it is an annual affair, but know little else of it." She rather suspected who patronized the fete, but could not suppress a tickle of curiosity about it.

"Held by and for the barques of frailty with whom we gentlemen of the *ton* amuse ourselves. It is, in its own way, as exclusive an event as any Society ball. Invitations to it are coveted dearly by those of the demimonde who aspire to a rich and titled keeper." He snorted, an expression of derision on his face.

"Prudence wishes to attend and I have refused to escort her."

"Prudence, sir?"

"Eve, that is at least the twenty-third time you have called me 'sir' this evening. You are not my servant, but an employee and, I hope, a friend. My name is James, you know—at least outside of our business relationship."

"Yes, sir...I mean, James. I shall strive to remember. Only it seems discourteous, somehow, to call my employer by his given name."

"Your manners are correct to a fault, but sometimes overly nice. A young lady of your years might be overstepping the bounds of propriety to use my given name, but between men such informality is not unseemly. And though I know you do not do it to flatter me, as many of my clerks do, I continue to dislike your excessive use of the word *sir*. It reeks of servility. You should strive to emulate that rascal, Mosely."

"I doubt, sir—ah, James—if I will ever call you 'Jamie' as does Mosely. And 'Your Nibs' is somehow not my style. I shall strive for 'James' at least half the time, if you will settle for 'sir' the other half."

Again Quinton's lips twitched, this time more dramatically. "Impudent brat! I warn you, though, if your 'sirs' exceed your 'Jameses' in any day, I shall take my revenge. Here, now, your glass is empty." He filled Eve's glass before she could protest, then drained the remainder of the bottle into his own. "Ring for Bartlett, Eve, that's a good lad. I have sorrows to drown."

Eve did as she was bid, not wishing to frustrate her employer, yet hoping that he would not broach the second bottle. In an attempt to distract him, she asked, "You said Prudence wished you to escort her to the Cyprians' Ball, James. Who is Prudence? Or should I not ask?"

"Prudence," Quinton mused, staring into his port. "Prudence Foggett—what an outlandish and inappropriate name for one of nature's works of art—is at once the bane and the reward of my existence. She is my mistress." This time his lips more than twitched and Eve was treated to the first smile she had seen on the face of her employer. But she did not like the expression, for it was lascivious rather than kindly, giving the pale, saturnine face a feral, predatory look.

Not knowing what she should say, Eve sat silent. How, she wondered, would a *man* respond to such a comment? The silence lengthened, uncomfortably so to Eve, although Quinton seemed content to be lost in his own recollections. Finally he returned to the present.

"Do you know, Eve, I have no knowledge of what you do for manly recreation. D'you visit a bordello? Or have you a woman of your own?"

Eve was thrown into confusion. The color rose in her cheeks as she sought the words to reply to Quinton's question. He saw her confusion, but mistook it for youthful embarrassment.

"Ah, lad, don't let me embarrass you. It is none of my affair how you take your pleasures."

"It is not that. It is just that I have not...I do not...Oh, confound it sir, what I mean is that I am as yet inexperienced in such things."

"Unfledged, are you? How does that come to pass? Most boys have managed to satisfy both their curiosity and their urges by six-and-ten or thereabouts."

"I just never found the opportunity, I suppose," Eve said, hoping that he would be satisfied and go on to another topic.

But Quinton was fixed on the subject at hand.

"Nonsense! Even that priggish brother of Chas's must have had a dairymaid or tweeny who was not entirely uncomely. I am 'mazed that you found no opportunity for a bit of slap and tickle behind the barn. You're not a shy lad, Eve."

Taking a large swallow of port to conceal her distress, Eve choked. When Quinton had done with pounding her back and she with coughing, she sought the words to reply to his implied criticism. He was making it seem as if she should be ashamed of her virginity, yet if he were to discover her to be female, he would expect her to be untouched.

Overcome by momentary anger at the inequities extant between the sexes, she almost spoke her mind, but stopped herself before she blurted out a verbal indiscretion. Holding her wits about her, Eve met her employer's eyes with a long, level stare.

"Mr. Quinton, I hope I do not insult you by saying that my sexual activities are none of your business. I may be lacking in experience, but it is by my choice, I assure you. And I do not feel that it is your place, even as my employer, to criticize me for making that choice."

"Indeed! I beg your pardon," Quinton began, his injured sensibilities evident in his frosty tone.

"Oh, sir, please!" Eve interrupted. "I meant no insult, truly I did not!" Having had time to realize just how imprudently she had spoken, how she must choose her next words very carefully, she spoke slowly and distinctly. The wine she had consumed made the latter difficult. "I abstained more from cowardice than lack of desire, you know."

Putting a note of regret in her voice, she went on, "There was a maid, but she was in the kitchen, not the dairy, who seemed to look favorably upon me when I first came to Sir Wilfred's." Well, it *was* the truth. Sally had been friendly when Eve arrived at Elmwood. "But my own fears kept me from taking advantage of her interest, even as I wished I had the daring to do otherwise."

Clearing her throat, lest the lie catch in it, Eve went on. "I believe that I might be less hesitant now, should a similar situation arise. Under the present circumstances, though, I have little opportunity to encounter females, and am reluctant to visit a bordello." She hoped he would not offer to find a means of enabling her to met females of the appropriate persuasion and, indeed, he did not, lapsing into silence as he poured still another glass of port.

His mood turned morose shortly thereafter, and soon Eve begged his leave to retire, pleading sleepiness.

In truth, she wanted to be alone, with time to think of the inexplicable manner in which his earlier friendliness had affected her.

Surely she was not attracted to her employer.

Of course not!

CHAPTER FOUR

Feeling that mention of the previous evening's conversation would only cause her more embarrassment, Eve greeted her employer the next morning with a cheery smile and a comment on the clemency of the spring weather. But his severe expression and distant manners were back again, so she felt somewhat rebuffed. Quinton continued to be withdrawn for several days and Eve was certain that she had offended him after all.

Aside from her distress at having the relationship between herself and Quinton on a less than cordial basis, she found that she missed his touch. He had, since their first evening of friendly conversation, taken to placing his hand on her shoulder as he leaned over her to give instructions as to how to reply to a letter or to handle a problem. The first time he did it, she stiffened, not being used to such familiarity from a man. But she quickly reminded herself that, to him, she was another male and that the gesture did not constitute undue familiarity. In the weeks since he had first touched her, she had grown to like the friendly gesture.

Eve continued to be distressed over Quinton's withdrawal but did not know what to do about it. When her Wednesday half-holiday arrived, she took her troubles to Mosely.

"Ere, laddie, what's eating at ye? Nary a smile since you climbed up here, and a long face enow to fright a 'obgoblin!"

"I'm blue-deviled, Mr. Mosely," Eve said. "Mr. Quinton had been unusually silent and cool these past few days and I have been worried that I have offended him."

"What d'ye do to get 'is goat? Can't see ye being sassy to 'Is Nibs," the unlikely clerk replied.

"Well, he might have seen it as impertinence. But I did not feel that it was any of his concern," Eve said, slowly. "Oh, Mr. Mosely, I need your advice!" She recounted the very personal conversation she had had with her employer.

"Can't say as I blame ye, telling 'im off like ye did. 'Twasn't any of 'is business. "Course, 'e's probably feeling bad that 'e poked 'is nose where it wasn't wanted and don't 'ave no idea 'ow to apologize. Cheer up, laddie. 'E'll come around soon, pretending as 'ow nothing ever 'appened. 'Is Nibs ain't one to 'old a grudge, but 'e also ain't one as knows 'ow to admit 'e was in the wrong."

"Are you sure, Mr. Mosely? Perhaps if I apologized..."

"Don't ye go doing no such thing. 'Twas 'im in the wrong. Leave 'im alone. An' ye get yerself a smile on yer face. 'Ere 'tis, spring and all, and ye're sittin' around like it was still winter. 'Owcum ye're up 'ere talking to the likes o' me and not out oglin' the gels?"

"Well, I could say it is because you are more interesting than the girls, but you would not believe me. The truth is, I told Tom Patterson that I would meet him here at the docks and show him about. He's never known anyone who was acquainted hereabouts, and he wishes to see the sights," Eve said. "He should be here any moment, and I should go down to greet him."

"Well, get ye gone, then. What are ye sitting with an old man like me when ye could be out gallivanting with yer friend? But mind ye bring 'im back 'ere long about suppertime. I'll stand ye both to a pint or two. Git!"

Eve got, but at the end of a long and interesting day, she and Tom returned for the promised pint. Later Tom told her that Mosely was the best part of the day.

"But, Eve, I am not sure that I approve your friendship with that old pirate. He is not fit company for a gently bred young woman," Tom told her as they rode back to the West End in a filthy hackney.

"Pooh, Tom. You are just jealous that I have the opportunity to meet such fascinating characters as he. Mr. Mosely has never said or done anything that would be in the least offensive to even the highest stickler. Just because he's homely and scarred and his language is uncultured, you call him unfit company. Well, you are wrong! He is a person of the best sort—kind, thoughtful, and generous. Many so-called gentlemen are not. And I think you're a snob!"

"I am no such thing!" Tom countered, and the rest of their conversation degenerated into a debate worthy of siblings.

By the next week, the argument was all but forgotten. But once more Tom reminded her that there were activities unsuitable for a young woman when she asked him to take her to a hell.

"Now, Tom, surely no harm will come to two young men who merely wish to observe the gaming," Eve said persuasively. "You are being overly protective."

"I won't do it. Eve, it is outside of enough that you are indulging in this ridiculous masquerade. And with my connivance! I will not do it!"

"Oh, come now. My father was a gambler, after all!"

"I'll warrant he never took you with him when he was gaming."

"Well, no, but I was much younger then. I do not wish to go merely to satisfy my curiosity, you know. I feel that if I am to continue to play my role, I must understand what young men do to entertain themselves." She grinned at him. "And who knows, I may decide to venture a pound or two toward making my fortune."

"You will do nothing of the sort. Besides, I ain't taking you to Crockford's." Tom folded his arms across his chest and glared stubbornly at Eve.

Eve sat silent while the covers were removed from the table in the small private dining room. While they awaited the port, her mind was turning over arguments that might be used to persuade Tom to do as she wished. When they were once again alone, she resumed her arguments.

"I always wondered what it was that made my father gamble. Oh, he taught me the games, but they were just that—games. I thought perhaps, if I were to observe gentlemen at serious play, I might gain a better understanding of what passions consumed Papa, that he dragged Mama and me all over Europe for so many years," Eve said, trying to make her voice sound at once curious and wistful. "And now I have the opportunity to see what sort of life my father led and you will not cooperate."

"I certainly will not!"

"How could it harm anyone? We would simply be two young men observing the activities of our elders."

"Well, you just may put it out of your mind, Eve, for I am not taking you to a gaming hell," Tom said mulishly.

"Then will you accompany me to Vauxhall, Tom, please?"

"Absolutely not!"

But Eve was not to be disappointed on this head, and her arguments gained in persuasiveness. Finally Tom agreed, but only under the conditions that they would go to the famed pleasure gardens as observers, and not take part in the dancing or drinking. It was agreed between them that they would go on the following Wednesday night.

Once she had obtained Tom's reluctant agreement, Eve suggested that they have a game or two of

piquet before they called it a night. Tom acquiesced, and eventually lost several hundred pounds—albeit imaginary—to his companion.

~*~

"Look, Tom, there is Lady Seabrooke," Eve said softly, although there was little need for her to lower her voice. What with unseasonably mild weather and a moon nigh full, Vauxhall Gardens were crowded tonight. The noise of the crowd and the music from the orchestra nearly drowned out normal speech.

When Tom did not respond, she took hold of his sleeve to catch his attention. At his questioning look, she motioned toward the booth just across the way. "Lady Seabrooke," she said more loudly.

"Where?" Tom said, peering about him.

"Over there, in that booth. She is the lady with red hair, in the deep green gown. Let us stand here a while. I wish to observe her."

"We'll be trod upon by the dancers if we stay here."

"Not if we slip into this booth behind us." Eve calmly climbed the low barrier into an empty booth and sat upon a chair within.

"Eve, you can't do this," Tom protested from without. "These booths are private."

"But this one is empty, so no harm will be done. If its occupants return, I will apologize and we will depart. Now come here, Tom, for you are blocking my view." She patted the seat beside her. Tom joined her, his reluctance all too evident. He sat quietly as Eve craned her neck to keep her employer's mother in view.

After a few moments' observation, she gasped. "Oh, my! He cannot be any older than I, and she at least eight-and-forty. How terrible!"

Tom had been watching the dancers, clearly uninterested in Lady Seabrooke. "What are you muttering of?"

"Look at what Lady Seabrooke is doing!" Eve stood on tiptoe to enhance her view of the opposite booth. "She and that young man with her. How can she behave so?"

Lady Seabrooke and her companion were obviously oblivious to their surroundings, for they were going about their amusements without inhibition, caressing and kissing one another without regard to the fact that they were in full public view.

Beside her, Tom also stood and peered across the dance floor. After a glance, he caught her arm and spun her around so she could not watch.

"Let me go!" Even tried to see past him, but his shoulders were broad and he held her so that they shut out her view.

Just then an older couple entered the booth and demanded that the trespassers leave immediately. Eve's apologetic excuse that they must have mistaken the location of their own private booth was received grudgingly.

By the time Eve could again get a clear view, others had joined Lady Seabrooke and her young man, and all were engaged in lively conversation.

"It's just as well, I suppose, Tom. We cannot waste our evening sitting about, with all of Vauxhall to explore. Look! There are jugglers!" And Eve was off, weaving through the dancers on the crowded floor, eager to get a closer view of the three gaudily dressed men who were nonchalantly tossing

flaming torched between themselves.

Eve wormed her way to the front of the crowd surrounding the jugglers. Fascinated, she watched their seemingly effortless movements, marveling at their ability to catch the torches by the right ends, never grasping the flames, yet never seeming to watch where their hands were either.

When the jugglers switched to wooden clubs, she lost interest and drifted to the back of the crowd. Tom was nowhere in sight. Worried, she headed back to the booth where she had last seen him, only to spy him just disappearing down a path leading into the less well-lit part of the gardens. She followed, although by the time she made her way through a clot of giggling young women, she could no longer see him.

Hoping she was indeed following in Tom's footsteps, Eve made her way along an increasingly dark route. The path she trod was thickly screened with shrubs and trees and poorly lit. Here and there she came upon small openings supporting benches of stone. Most were occupied by couples intertwined in embraces.

She wandered for some moments, not certain of how to find her way back to the lighted areas, her cheeks growing warm when she saw sights better ignored. Several times she was jostled as pleasure seekers ran headlong along the darkened paths. Once she came upon a group of men surrounding a pair of revealingly dressed women. Standing well back from them, she listened as they carried on an impromptu bidding for the favors of the women.

When finally she found herself once again in the part of the park where dancing was taking place, Eve was beyond relieved. Vauxhall Gardens were every bit as licentious as she had heard. Deeply grateful she was clad in trousers and not a gown, she sat upon a stone bench and fanned herself. *This is clearly no place for an unaccompanied young woman.*

She scanned the crowd for a glimpse of Tom's broad shoulders. At last she spied him, waiting by the entrance to the line of private booths. She hurried to his side.

"I think that I am ready to depart now," she said, before he could demand to know where she had been.

"About time," her companion growled. "Eve, if you ever run off like that again, scaring me out of my liver and lights, I'll...well, I don't know what I'll do, but it will be something you'll regret."

But they were not to depart immediately, for just as they approached the gates, they came face to face with Lady Seabrook, without her youthful partner. Eve moved aside so the lady could pass her.

"Not so fast, sir," the lady said, snatching at Eve's sleeve. "You're that namby-pamby secretary of James's. I want a word with you."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. My friend and I were just leaving," Eve said. She attempted to free her sleeve from the lady's firm grasp, but had no success.

"Well, and I say you are not. Come with me. I wish to speak with you," Lady Seabrooke said, imperiously. She pulled Eve toward the booth she had occupied earlier.

Short of creating a scene, Eve had no choice but to go along with the lady, so firmly was she held. She cast a resigned glance at Tom, who moved to follow.

"Not you." Lady Seabrooke waved him back. "Wait here. I won't eat your friend."

She pushed Eve into an empty booth, pushed again so that Eve almost fell into a chair. When Eve tried to rise, she was firmly shoved back onto the seat.

"You'll not get away until I've emptied my budget, young man," Lady Seabrooke said, her fading beauty marred by a petulant twist to her mouth "You are privy to all my son's business, are you not?"

Then you may be of assistance to me. I shall make it worth your while."

Eve could only shake her head, stricken with speechless astonishment.

"It is my intention to partake of my son's business successes. I wish you to inform me when he buys into cargoes, so that I may do so as well." Pulling a second chair nearer to Eve, she sat and once again caught Eve's coat sleeve with grasping fingers. "Such an unnatural child! He begrudges his own mother a share in his good fortune."

"I am on the edge of penury." Her ladyship dabbed at her kohled eyes with a wisp of lacy handkerchief. "I go practically in rags and can barely afford to keep food on my table, while he lives in luxury in that magnificent house of his in Portman Square. Surely you will have pity upon me, young man?"

"I do not see, ma'am, what I could do to help you," Eve said, curious despite her skepticism. Mr. Quinton had said his mother had a fortune of her own, so surely she could not be living in abject poverty. "You must speak with your son."

"Ah, but he refuses to see me... He will not answer my letters, beg him though I do. And now he has forbidden me his house. Oh, oh!" she sobbed into her hands, "What is a poor woman to do? Surely you must pity a mother so neglected by her eldest child. And his dear brothers. They are deep in debt and must leave London to escape the Marshalsea."

About to promise a word with Mr. Quinton in his mother's behalf, Eve remembered the tongue-lashing she had received from this woman not so many weeks past. Even if she entirely believed Lady Seabrooke, she would not be inclined to help her, unless there was strong evidence that she was being mistreated.

Eve doubted such evidence would be forthcoming, even if she were to demand it. Mr. Quinton had given her no reason to doubt his veracity.

Yet she did not wish to call his mother a liar to her face. "Lady Seabrooke, I have nothing to do with your son's finances," Eve said, as gently as she could. "I am merely his employee, and cannot do anything to assist you, I am afraid."

"Oh, but you can! You can tell me of his investments. And knowing of them, I can copy them, so that I too can profit."

"I could not do that, my lady. Your son's business matters are confidential."

"Of course you can, you young idiot! I will pay you well. Look at you, shabby and worn. Surely you would like a regular income over and above your pay from my miserly son."

Outraged now, for she saw what a consummate actress the woman was, Eve said, "No, my lady, I would not. There is nothing you can say to me that would persuade me to betray Mr. Quinton's confidence in me." She was by now thoroughly disgusted with Lady Seabrooke, but did not know how to escape, short of forcefully freeing herself from the lady's grasp.

Lady Seabrooke glared, but did not immediately answer. After a few moments, she said, "Well, if you cannot, you cannot. But tell me, Mister, ah...Mr. Hickson, is it not? No, that is not right. Mr. Dixon. So, Mr. Dixon, do have some of this wine. It is excellent." Her voice was no longer hard and demanding, but dulcet and gentle. She poured a glass of wine and offered it to Eve, who took it automatically, though she did not drink.

"You must know, Mr. Dixon," Lady Seabrooke went on, "that my son has had a great number of secretaries over the past ten years. Few of them have stayed over a few months. Since you have now been in his employ for some time, I can only hope that he has mended his ways." She peered at Eve from under improbably long lashes.

"Mr. Quinton has always been a kind and generous employer to me, ma'am," Eve said, not understanding the innuendo in the woman's tone. Once more she attempted to pull her sleeve free.

Instead her motion prompted Lady Seabrooke to grab her wrist with the other hand. "Ah, yes, it always begins that way. I hope, for your sake, Mr. Dixon, that he is reformed, for you seem like a very nice boy. How old are you, by the way?"

"I am twenty, ma'am." As soon as the words fell from her lips, she remembered that she had told Quinton that she was eighteen. How she hated this need to deceive everyone!

"So young! So innocent to be exposed to such a monster of depravity. Take my advice, Mr. Dixon, and leave my son's employ before...before..." Again the scrap of lace was applied to the suspiciously dry eyes. "Oh! I cannot continue. The thought of your being exposed to his perversions quite sickens me!"

"I do not understand, my lady, what you are attempting to tell me. Mr. Quinton's behavior is always everything that is correct."

Eve was now so curious as to what the lady was alluding that she had quite forgot her earlier wish to depart. Even when her wrist was released and the lady's hand gently grasped hers, she sat still.

"You must have noticed that there are no women in my son's household," Lady Seabrooke said, her voice low, as if she were imparting a secret. "Have you never wondered why there are not?"

"I was told that he has an aversion to women because..." Eve hesitated, not wanting to risk the lady's anger.

"Because he so dislikes his mother. Is that not what they have told you?"

Eve nodded.

"Well, they lie!" Extracting a fan from a pocket in her shirt, Lady Seabrooke plied it rapidly before her opulent bosom. "Oh, my poor child, do you not understand? My son is unnatural. He has no women in his household because he cares only for men. And more particularly, for very pretty, very young men such as yourself."

"My lady!" Eve said, shocked to the core.

"Yes, I can see that you had not suspected." No longer clutching, her soft hand patted the back of Eve's, a sympathetic gesture that somehow felt wrong.

"My child, you are in grave danger."

PAT...PAT...PAT

"Grave danger," she repeated. "Soon my son's self-restraint will erode and you will be at his mercy." Her eyes grew dramatically large. "Oh, my dear Mr. Dixon, please take my advice! Leave his employ as soon as you can!"

One more flutter of the fan, then she snapped it shut. "Now, I must keep you no longer. Your friend will be growing impatient." She stood and extended a hand to be saluted. "Be warned, Mr. Dixon. Leave my son's employ, lest you become as debauched as he!" She rose in dismissal.

Eve stumbled from the booth, confused and distressed.

Her distress must have been evident on her face when she rejoined Tom. "What is it, Eve? What did she say to you?"

"I cannot tell you, Tom, for I must have time to think on it. No, do not tease me," she protested as Tom started to insist on knowing the reason for her distress. "Either she is a terrible person or I am vastly

mistaken in Mr. Quinton. But I cannot tell you what she implied. It is too terrible!"

She refused to say more. So Tom, mystified and himself somewhat overset, found a hackney and delivered her to the house in Portman Square.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fortunately, business matters took Quinton to Bristol early the day after her encounter with Lady Seabrooke, which gave Eve a respite from his company. She was relieved, for she felt unable to face him until she had had time to consider what his mother had told her.

Not completely cognizant of the implications of Lady Seabrooke's words, she nonetheless understood that her employer had been accused of something unspeakable. She found herself often distracted from her daily tasks by an unruly mind, which kept replaying the woman's warning.

It cannot be true, Eve told herself a hundred times a day. *Surely I did not mistake the lecherous expression on his face when he spoke of his mistress that terrible and embarrassing evening.* Quinton's interest in women, at least those of a certain sort, seemed to Eve, with her limited experience, all that was normal. But Lady Seabrooke had seemed so sincerely concerned that Eve could not entirely discount what she had said.

How advantageous that Quinton was away from London just now, for if he were here, she would find it impossible to behave naturally toward him. If his hand came to rest on her shoulder, she knew she would offend him with her involuntary retreat.

Yes, Eve decided finally, that was why she could not completely discount Lady Seabrooke's warning. Are such gestures really acceptable among men, she asked herself time and again?

Or did Quinton have designs on her person, as his mother accused him of doing?

Eve's efficiency suffered greatly for several days, until she was required to deal with a decision that she felt to be beyond the scope of her position.

Among the correspondence one morning was one that threw Eve into a state of shock. She was going through the household accounts, a task she was now left to do without supervision, when she came upon a bill from Rundel and Bridge. A thousand pounds for a set of diamond jewelry! Certain that there must be some mistake, she set it aside. Perhaps his mother was again attempting to bilk her son. But when Quinton did not return that evening, nor the next, she became worried. Her instructions were to pay all bills as they arrived, Quinton having explained that he had no intention of following the practice of most of Society, that of making tradesmen wait unconscionably long to receive their just receipts.

When the third day after the bill in question had arrived, but Quinton had not, Eve decided that she must handle the matter herself. She dispatched a note to the jewelers, asking them by whom the diamonds had been purchased.

A reply came almost immediately. Mr. Quinton himself had purchased the item, ordering it to be delivered to a Miss Prudence Foggett. The writer had added, gratuitously, that it was not the place of Mr. Quinton's secretary to question his purchases, but in order to expedite the receipt of payment, the information had been provided.

Eve was furious. She dashed off another note to Rundel and Bridge, telling them that it was indeed her duty to question any expenditure connected with Mr. Quinton's household accounts and that, had the information not been forthcoming, the bill would not have been paid. Since she now was assured that her employer had made the purchase, payment would be made as soon as Mr. Quinton returned to put his signature to the draft. Once the draft was prepared for signature, Eve put the situation out of her mind, certain that she had handled it well.

The incident, oddly enough, served to reassure her that Quinton was not as his mother painted him. How could he keep a mistress, lavish his money and attentions upon her, if his taste was not for

females? Eve put her worries over Lady Seabrooke's insinuations from her mind. Only an occasional niggling doubt disturbed her determined belief in Quinton's normalcy.

Sundays Eve usually spent quietly alone, wandering around the Portman Square or curled up on a comfortable sofa in the library, reading the books she had never had time to read before. Twice a month, Tom rented for her the small chamber at the Blue Bear, so that she might change her garments and go to visit Mrs. Storridge. She had taken a sincere liking to her one-time landlady, and enjoyed the few hours she spent as herself, not living a lie.

Her best black gown, in the valise entrusted to Tom's care, was after three months becoming tiresome, but it was the only one Eve felt she could wear without arousing suspicions. The excuse of still being in mourning for her grandfather was thin, but she could think of no other reason why she must always appear in the same gown.

Mrs. Storridge tended to mother her, something Eve found curiously comforting. Her questions were easily answered for the most part, since Mrs. Storridge had no idea of the duties of a secretary, nor of the conditions under which Eve worked. So she was able to satisfy the woman's curiosity with descriptions of the interior of Quinton's house and the inhabitants thereof. She even invented a housekeeper, Mrs. Blodgett, whom she described to Mrs. Storridge as 'a great stickler for propriety and one who likes meals to be served on time.'

More lies, she lamented more than once. But Eve could see no other choice, save seeking another, less remunerative, position.

As time went on and the end of her three-month probationary period passed, Eve became conscious of a feeling of strain on those Sundays when she donned feminine clothing. She needed advice. Tom was the only person, other than Mrs. Storridge, she could turn to.

Taking advantage of Mr. Quinton's absence one evening, Eve invited Tom to dinner, having previously obtained permission to do so. Knowing of Tom's preference for a well-cooked ragout of beef, she had, with some difficulty, persuaded Emile to prepare a simple dinner around that, in the volatile French chef's opinion, plebian dish. Tom was vocal in his praise.

After dinner, Eve suggested that they stroll to Green Park and enjoy the long May twilight. She wanted to take advantage of Tom's charitable mood.

"I wish to speak to you privately, Tom, but did not feel that I could do so with Bartlett and the other servants able to overhear," she explained when her friend complained humorously about being torn away from his port.

"Such very good port it was. I must tell Lord Arduin about it, so that he can discover from Quinton its source," Tom said. He sighed, dramatically. "And now, Eve, what was it so important that you had to deprive me of a second glass to tell me?"

"I am not quite sure how to state it, Tom," Eve said hesitantly. "I have a problem that I cannot solve and I need your advice."

"Advice I have in plenty. The first of it is to be done with this masquerade. I still cannot like it," Tom said, reminding her of a subject of frequent disagreement between them.

Eve shook her head. "No, dear friend, that is not a thing I will do. I am earning my living. I am happy with Mr. Quinton. And I particularly enjoy my freedom from the strictures which surround young women."

She skipped a little ahead of her companion, then turned and bowed extravagantly to him. "Give up all of this? Give up being able to walk in the park of an evening, to explore London freely, to go about on

my own without a chaperone, and to be free from unwelcome advances by drunken—and sometimes sober—gentlemen? No, I would not willingly relinquish my trousers, not now."

She became serious. "But that is what I wish to speak to you about."

"You need more trousers," Tom ventured.

"No. Well, yes, I would like another outfit. One that is perhaps less worn than those I have. If I were to give you the funds, could you, perhaps..."

"I will, though I should not."

"Thank you. You are a true friend. No, Tom, what I wished to say is how am I going to avoid going to Mrs. Storridge's so often?"

"Why should you?"

"It has become very uncomfortable. I no longer have to think at all times of how to behave, how to move as a man. I sometimes go on for hours at a time forgetting that I am anything but a young male. I will not say that I always think as a man, for I do not. But I almost always behave as one now. On those days when I return to skirts, I must constantly remind myself that I am a young woman."

"I don't understand. You *are* a young woman. Why should it be uncomfortable to act as one?"

"When I first put on trousers, I was constantly aware of them. Every moment, I worried that I would do something, make a motion or react in a manner out of character. I observed Mr. Quinton and his servants, trying to ape their motions and their turns of phrase. The first few Wednesdays I was free, I found myself watching other young men, storing away how they moved and how they laughed, their language and their mannerisms, so that I could imitate them. Gradually it became easier to act...to *be* the young man I appeared. "

Eve walked a few paces in silence, seeking the right words. "Eventually I found that I had developed a...a *masculine* personality of my own. But on the days when I become female again for a few hours, I am thrown into confusion. All my carefully cultivated manners, the very way I walk, has to be suppressed. And the next day is even worse, for I have to change personas and become a man again.

"It is very trying, Tom. I fear that one day I will forget who I am. "

"Well, I cannot understand how you could ever forget that you are a woman," Tom said, a note of criticism in his voice.

"Well, I do not exactly *forget*. I just do not remember. Can you not see the difference?"

"No."

"How can I explain it? Look, Tom, Papa had a friend in Hamburg who was an actor. I remember him telling us one evening that he 'slipped inside the skin' of the characters he played. He tried to see the world from their eyes and to react to it as they would have. I recall clearly that he said it was sometimes difficult to remember who he really was, once he was thoroughly inside one of his characters."

Stopping, she turned and faced Tom, holding his eyes with her gaze. "I am no different from an actor in that I am playing a role. But I must play it all the time. I must forget that I am Eve Dixon, the girl who grew up in Europe and who once dreamed of silken ball gowns and a husband and children. Now I am Eve Dixon, a young man who wishes to get on in the world, possibly become a merchant like my employer. I study the issues before Parliament, the profits to be made on this cargo or that, even the stocks on 'Change, just like any other ambitious young man."

She laughed, somewhat ruefully. "Why, the other day I found myself telling Mosely with all sincerity

that I had an urge to go to the Indies and make my fortune."

They seated themselves on a bench along one of the park's paths. Eve sat a while in thought, realizing that her words were not meaningful to Tom. She wondered how to make him understand. He too, seemed lost in thought. She knew he was concerned for her, and she regretted causing him to feel so.

A pair of gaudily dressed girls strolled by, eyeing the two apparently carefree young men on the park bench. They walked a way farther, then turned and came back.

"Lonely, gentlemen?" the taller, more attractive one asked. Her companion said nothing, but swayed her hips suggestively at Eve, smiling seductively.

"No! Go away!" Tom said in a strangled voice. His face was red as a beet. Eve glanced mischievously at him, then returned the smile of the shorter girl.

"We are not particularly lonely, Miss," she said. "But we would not be averse to more varied conversation. What had you in mind?"

Tom stared at her, gaping.

"Coo, laddie! If you don't know what I has to offer, you oughtn't to be here this time o' night," the girl retorted. She leaned over and pinched Eve's cheek. "It's a child, it is, Maisie. We're wastin' our time 'ere."

"Maybe it's time he learned what it's like to be a man," Maisie replied. She turned to Eve. "And Sally here is to one to teach you. She likes little boys, she do."

Tom finally regained his voice. "That's enough. Let's get away from here!" He took Eve's arm in a firm grasp and pulled her to her feet and along the path at a near run.

The jeering laughter of the prostitutes followed them.

After they had gone a hundred or so yards, Eve's resistance finally slowed Tom's headlong pace.

"Idiot!" he scolded, in a quiet but angry tone. "Why did you encourage them? You should not speak to women such as that. It's not proper."

"Tom, you must know that I had no intention of doing more than conversing with them," Eve said, still breathless from being dragged along the path. "But I have never met a prostitute before and I was curious. I intended to ask her why she chose such a way of life."

"Eve! You forget yourself. A young lady should not even be aware of such creatures, let alone converse with them."

"Pooh! I knew about mistresses and prostitutes many years ago. And so, I'll wager, do most young women. We females are not blind, Tom, nor stupid."

"But you should ignore such things," Tom insisted stubbornly.

"And so I would, were I a proper young lady. But I am not. I am a young man, and so I may speak of them as I wish. But I will not, for it evidently distresses you. Oh, Tom, please do not try to protect me so," Eve pleaded, laying her hand upon his sleeve. "Just keep on being a good friend to me, and help me stay in character. Now, tell me, have you thought of any way out of my dilemma about Mrs. Storridge?"

"No, I have not, except that you must find excuses to avoid visiting her so often. Perhaps you could invent an important commission laid upon you by Mr. Quinton that prevents your coming to see her."

"I had planned to do just that, next time, but I cannot go on doing so forever. I am afraid that if I never

called on her, she might come seeking me, just to make sure of my safety." Eve sighed. "If only she were not so motherly. And if only I did not have to deceive so many people."

"Well, you know how to avoid it, Eve. Give up this masquerade."

"That I will not do." Again she sighed. "Well, we will never agree on that score, so let us speak of something else. Will you be free next week so that we may climb the Monument as we had planned?"

"I would not miss it for the world," Tom said, apparently admitting temporary defeat in the matter of Eve's masquerade.

She had a feeling, however, that he would not give up.

Quinton returned after ten days' absence, satisfied that his time in Bristol had been well and profitably spent. The evening of his arrival, he dined at home, inviting Eve to join him. His spirits high, doubtless due to the successful completion of a new trading agreement, he suggested that they follow their single glass of port with fine brandy suitable for toasting the anticipated profits. Eve did not feel that she could refuse.

Besides, she had never tasted brandy and was curious.

Emboldened by Quinton's return to his earlier friendly manner and by the brandy she had consumed, Eve brought up the subject of the diamond necklace. His broad smile surprised her.

"Ah, yes, Prudence's diamonds. They were my apology for not escorting her to the Cyprians' Ball. She was so pleased with them. Insisted that I take her to the opera to show them off to her erstwhile compatriots."

"Then I correctly prepared the draft in payment?"

"Of course. The services rendered me by the lady are well worth the diamonds."

"Services, sir?" Eve asked, before she could stop her tongue.

"Come, now, Eve. You know she is my mistress. Prudence Foggett. Gad! What a name. Each time I speak it, I curse her parents, for such a divine creature to be cursed with a name like hers!"

He poured himself another glass of brandy, raising his eyebrows when Eve shook her head as he proffered her the bottle. "Ah, yes, the services rendered me by dear little Prudence. It is too bad, lad, that you are still innocent. Otherwise you would understand that a mistress like Prudence is worth far more than a paltry diamond necklace. Not like a wife, who takes and takes and takes. And when there is no more to take, she forbids you her bed. Not like my mother, who made my father's life and mine miserable, until she had milked the estate dry and departed, seeking more excitement and new prey." He glowered into his glass.

"But surely not all marriages are like your parents'." Eve was severely distressed at the bitterness she heard in his voice. "Some must be happy. My parents loved each other dearly, and my father was devastated when Mama died."

"But your mother was a peasant, I believe you told me. Perhaps it is only ladies of the *ton* who are rapacious. But I doubt it. I think it is a characteristic of the sex. Your mother was that happy exception, I expect."

At Eve's involuntary frown, he went on, "Your previous employers' wife is another example of the viciousness inherent to the female sex. I have met Chas's sister-in-law and I dislike her intensely. She is whining, selfish, grasping, and, by all that Chas has intimated, cruel to her servants and cold to her husband."

"Lady Charlotte is not a good example of womanhood, I must admit. But know you no women who are fine and gracious and generous? Are all your female acquaintances like Charlotte and your mother?"

Eve was not about to allow Quinton to denigrate her entire sex because of two or three bad examples.

"No, but enough of them are that I am determined that I want no women about me except those over whom I exert control. Like my sister. And my mistress." He slapped his palm upon the table, the loud crack causing Eve to jump in her chair. "Damn it, Eve! Even the meek and shrinking little chit to whom I was promised at an early age proved to be a betrayer and a wanton. And she not yet seventeen."

"But I understood that it was her family who forbade the marriage, not the young lady," Eve protested.

"Who told you that?"

"Forgive me. It really is none of my business. Only Mr. Garfield, when he was explaining that you kept no housekeeper nor any live-in housemaids, told me that you were bitter over being rejected by your intended's family."

"And so I was," Quinton said, his words slightly slurred now. "I was, indeed. But that was not the whole of it. Georgina, the little baggage, wrote to me, telling me that, even had her family approved the marriage, she would have refused to go through with it, for she had it in her head to wed someone who could introduce her to Society and who would allow her *cicisbeos*. She had decided that I was not that someone, for she knew that I would do neither. She has since wed an old dodderer who keeps her clothed in the first stare of fashion and who allows his fellows to partake of her favors." He snorted. "But they do not move in the first levels of Society, that crowd. I know, for my mother is one of them."

"So you turn instead to a mistress who only allows you her favors because of the lodgings and jewels you provide her. Is she any better than the women whom you denigrate?"

"Come, Eve, do I detect disapproval?"

"No, sir. Not at all." But she did disapprove. At least she thought that disapproval was the source of her reaction every time he spoke fondly of his mistress. "It is not my place to approve or disapprove your actions."

"But you do. I can see that. Are you then a prude? I would not have taken you for one." Quinton sat in the chair across from her and looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face. "You must know, lad, that most men of my age and station keep mistresses. It is so much more sensible than visiting a bordello. Safer as well." He smiled. "However, it is not cheaper, as you can see from that bill. Prudence is a very expensive piece. Well worth it, though." He leaned back, a smug expression on his face and his eyes staring into the distance.

Eve chose not to answer him, nor to recall him from his no doubt pleasant reverie. Why did it cause her heart to ache when Quinton spoke of his mistress, she wondered?

Wistful of changing the subject, Eve moved across the room to the bookshelves and skimmed her eyes along the titles. Seeing nothing that sounded like light reading, she selected a book at random. She turned to face Quinton and said, lightly, "I find I am somewhat sleepy. Would you find it amiss if I took this and went to my bed? The brandy must have gone directly to my head."

Seemingly lost somewhere within himself, Quinton merely waved a languid hand at her and continued to stare into space.

When Eve got to her room, she discovered she was carrying a book of sermons.

Later, in her bed, she tried to discover why every time Quinton spoke of the beautiful Miss Foggett, her stomach threatened to knot and her throat to tighten. She should be immensely relieved, her inner self

scolded, to have yet another proof that she, in her masculine role, was in no danger from her employer.

Eve was now convinced that Lady Seabrooke's warning had been a carefully contrived lie, calculated to cause trouble for her son. The truth was that Quinton was a perfectly normal man, with as much of an eye for the ladies as anyone. So her virtue was in no danger of being assaulted by her employer. And knowing him a thoroughly manly man, why should she be distressed by proof of his masculinity?

She tossed and turned until well after midnight and when she finally did sleep, her dreams were of Quinton. But in them, she was no longer Eve Dixon, the secretary, but Eve Dixon, the kept woman, bedecked with flashing diamonds, gowned in revealing garments, displayed for all to see in a box at the opera. When she awoke with an aching head and gritty eyes, she recalled those dreams. How could she have seen Quinton in such a light? Was she developing a *tendre* for him?

Never, she told herself sternly. She merely admired and respected him for his business acumen and his considerate treatment of her. Never mind that her body thrilled whenever he laid his hand upon her shoulder.

The next morning Quinton burst into the room, all trace of his previous night's mood gone. "Have you finished those letters to Holland? Good, let me see them." He picked up the proffered letters and moved to his own desk. After reviewing them, he appended his signature to each and returned them to Eve with a word of approval.

"When you have finished with these, I wish you to write to my steward at Fallowfeld. I have a notion to get out of London early this year. Tell him to prepare for our arrival on Monday next. And warn him that we will need two additional bedchambers made ready, ones suitable for ladies to occupy. Oh, and we'll take Emile and two or three of the permanent staff from here, as well. Tell Bartlett to make the usual arrangements, will you, Eve?"

"Very good," Eve said, her heart sinking. Was he planning to take his mistress to Fallowfeld? "Will the ladies be traveling with us?"

"Hardly. They will be coming from Seabrooke and it would be impractical for them to come to London, only to travel back with us. I am going out, Eve. Is there anything else that I should attend to before I go?"

"Nothing, sir. I believe that you have taken care of all my questions." Even the one about Prudence, she finished silently, conscious of a feeling of tremendous relief that his mistress would not be one of the Fallowfeld household.

"Good. I will see you tomorrow." He left, whistling softly. Eve was certain that he was on his way to visit Prudence.

A few moments later, he stuck his head back inside the door. "Mosely will go with us. Make sure you let him know."

Now why on earth? Eve wondered.

CHAPTER SIX

Eve spent the Sunday before the departure for Fallowfeld with Tom Patterson, having again engaged a room in which to change her clothing. As usual, her skirts felt strange and confining. How she looked forward to the summer in the country, when she would not be required to don them for at least three months. She and Tom visited Mrs. Storridge, who relaxed her prohibition against men in the house so that they might take luncheon with her. Assured by Eve that all was well, she expressed her happiness that Eve was to be in the country for the summer.

"For it gets that hot and humid here in Town, you know," she said. "I only wish that I could get away myself for more than the two weeks I spend with my sister in Bath. But I confess, I find myself uncomfortable being away from here any longer. Where is this Fallowfeld that you will be staying, Eve?"

"I understand that it is in Essex, near Colchester."

"Well, you will enjoy yourself, I'm sure. Do you good to get out of town, away from the noise and confusion. You'll come back all rested up, for you look as if you have been working too hard."

Eve tried in vain to explain that she would work at Fallowfeld as she had in Town. Mrs. Storridge's idea of a visit to the country was that it was a holiday. Later Eve and Tom laughed at the woman's warnings to Eve to stay out of the sun and to behave with circumspection while she was at Fallowfeld. "For you should know that gentlemen will often be less careful about their behavior in the country," the landlady warned.

"I really don't think that she has any idea of my duties, Tom," Eve said.

"How should she? Her only knowledge of country living must come from the *Post*. It certainly gives a distorted picture of Society's behavior." Tom took her arm. "You do not have to be back until evening, do you?"

"No, I am nearly packed."

"Well, then, let us pretend that we are idly rich and promenade in Hyde Park this afternoon. I have a wish to ape my betters."

"Oh, Tom," Eve laughed, "we are not dressed for Hyde Park, and they are not your betters. You are as well born as most of them. Besides, someday you will be rich and famous, after you have obtained the position in government that you seek."

Tom persuaded Eve to accompany him to the park and she found that she was glad she did. It was most entertaining, seeing the *ton* in all its glory. What was even more entertaining was to pretend that she was part of the panoply. They strolled, arm in arm, along the walks, smiling and nodding to others engaged in similar occupations. She enjoyed herself thoroughly until she saw a familiar face. Mr. Quinton, driving a dashing curricule, was accompanied by one of the most beautiful women Eve had ever seen. She darted behind Tom, hoping that Quinton would not notice her. When her employer was out of sight, she pulled at Tom's arm. "We must get away from here, Tom. What if he should see me?"

"He would not recognize you, Eve, not in that bonnet. But if you are worried, we can walk along one of the paths away from the road. I doubt that his companion would wish to stroll in the mud."

They hurried along a side path and were soon lost to sight from the road. Eve's nervousness decreased and she was able again to laugh and joke with Tom.

The rest of the day was most pleasant. They dined on sausages and buns from pushcarts, munching away as they walked along Piccadilly. It was late when she changed again into her trousers and coat. She told Tom that she had no need of his escort back to Portman Square, but he insisted. As the

hackney drew up before the Quinton house, he took her hands in his.

"Eve, I know that you feel that you can handle just about anything, but promise me that you will write if things do not go well for you at Fallowfeld. I worry about you being so far away. At least in Town, you can always come to me, or to Mrs. Storridge, if you have problems. In the country, you will have no refuge."

"I promise, Tom. Thank you for being such a good friend. But you need not worry about me. Mr. Quinton is truly a fine person and is very kind to me."

"You never know," Tom said glumly. "Write to me, won't you?"

Eve agreed and opened the door of the hackney. "Goodbye, Tom. Take care of yourself," she called, and jumped down, not wanting to let him see that she was reluctant to part from her only friend.

Eve's tasks multiplied in the days before the household's removal to Fallowfeld. She was required to make arrangements for daily messengers to and from the country estate so that no business details were neglected. It took her nearly an entire day to compose and send all the letters notifying Quinton's friends and business associates that he would be out of Town for the next four months.

Quinton left the house Saturday morning, assured that she had all preparations well in hand, and had not returned on Sunday. Eve thought she knew where he had gone and found that the knowledge caused her pain.

The departure from London, originally planned for Monday morning, was delayed when a note was handed to Eve at breakfast. It was from Quinton. It informed her that he and Mosely were unexpectedly engaged for the morning and that she should inform Bartlett that their departure would be delayed until sometime in the afternoon. Eve notified the butler of the delay, saw Emile and his companions off in a *fourgon*, and went into the library to read, hopefully having no more duties until they arrived at Fallowfeld.

When Quinton finally arrived, looking tired and angry, it was nearly noon. Mosely, too, had a tightness about his mouth that showed his irritation. Eve was informed that there had been a problem with Lady Seabrooke that Quinton had been forced to settle before he could leave Town.

Once in the coach, he closed his eyes, saying he'd had little sleep the night before and wished to nap for a while. Mosely's knowing wink in Eve's direction confirmed her suspicions as to where their employer had spent the past two nights.

Due to their late start, a lamed lead horse, and Quinton's irritability, the party was forced to stop for the night at an inn short of Chelmsford. Not a large hostelry, it boasted only two available bedchambers. Bart Coachman would sleep in the stables, but that still meant that Eve and Mosely would be forced to share a bed. Eve took a deep breath upon hearing the news and merely commented, "I hope that you do not snore, Mr. Mosely."

Supper was less than pleasant, for Quinton was once again the stern and silent person whom Eve had first met. She and Mosely were also silent, not wishing to disturb the gentleman who sat in solitude at a table across the small common room.

Mosely's whispered, "Damn woman. Wish she'd leave the master alone," drew a quick smile of agreement from Eve.

"Is he always like this when he has to deal with her?" Eve whispered back.

"Aye. Or else 'e drinks too much. 'Twere better when she wouldn't 'ave anything to do with 'im. But now 'e's rich, she thinks she can cozen 'im into sharing the wealth, so to speak. Bitch!"

Quinton must have heard the last, as Mosely had allowed his voice to rise. He turned a quelling eye upon his two employees and they fell silent once again. Eve did not enjoy her dinner.

Quinton went to his chamber immediately upon finishing his meal. Mosely and Eve sat on in the common room after dinner, sipping at mugs of ale. Eve, at least, was relieved to be free of Quinton's company, for his mood had been so black as to cast the entire room into a gloom. Screwing up her courage, she asked Mosely if he knew what the problem had been that morning.

"More of the same, lad," he replied. "'Er Whorish Ladyship pledged a pile of her jewelry at a gaming 'ell on Saturday night. Drunk she was and not aware of what she was doing. When she sobered up Sunday and saw 'ow much she 'ad lost, she sent for 'Is Nibs to get it back for 'er. I got a message from Bartlett and chased 'im to ground last night at the Foggett's place. 'E was in a rare taking when 'e read 'er note. Then 'e couldn't find Lord Preston, 'im that 'ad the winnings, 'til this morning. That didn't improve 'is temper, neither. Nor did the draft for nearly five thousand pounds 'e gave Preston."

Draining his flagon, he waved for a refill. "I doubt 'e would have done it if the jewels was all 'is mother's, but some of 'em is family heirlooms she took when she left 'is lordship. 'Owsomever, Master Jamie took 'is revenge, for 'e kept the family baubles when 'e redeemed 'em.

"What a battle that was. I was out in the street and could hear her a'screaming. 'E told 'er 'e'd keep everything if she didn't shut 'er budget."

"Are the jewels so valuable, then?" Eve asked.

"Worth a pretty penny, I'd say. But it was the principle of the thing, you see, lad. Some of those jewels belong rightfully to Miss Penelope, and Jamie was determined to get 'em back for 'er."

"Why does her ladyship have such a hold over Mr. Quinton, do you know, Mr. Mosely?"

"She don't, not anymore. 'E let her get away with so much because she 'eld the jewels. She'd promised to turn 'em over when Miss Penelope made her comeout. 'E feared if she got too furious with 'im, she'd keep 'em. Now 'e's got them all, maybe 'e'll stop being so easy with 'er."

"I am not surprised he often seems somber, then. To have to deal with a terrible person like that—and his mother, too!" However much Eve disliked her Uncle Wilfred and Aunt Charlotte, she believed they were merely selfish and thoughtless. Mr. Quinton's mother seemed almost evil to her.

"God love you, lad! Master Jamie's not like that atall, not with them 'e's fond of, like Miss Penelope." Mosely laughed. "'E's mighty serious about 'is trading ventures, o'course. Now 'e's got no time for those who've scorned 'im in the past. But 'e's as kind and as good a man as you'll ever meet and that's a fact. Didn't 'e give me 'onest work, when many wouldn't 'ave even noticed I'd been 'urt in 'is employ?"

"How did he learn of it?" Eve asked, having been curious about Mosely's story since she first met him.

"Ah, that's a dull tale, lad. Ye'll not be wantin' to hear it." He gulped the last of his ale, looked inquiringly at Eve's tankard, and called to the buxom barmaid, "'Ere, lassie, we'll 'ave another round."

Despairing of her wits if she had to drink another pint of ale, Eve sought to distract Mosely with conversation so that she would be able to pour most of her new tankard's contents upon the floor. "You said, Mr. Mosely, that you went to Miss Foggett's lodgings. Will you tell me about her? I saw her once in the park and was impressed with her beauty. Mr. Quinton must be very fond of her."

"More like 'e's fond of what she gives 'im. And pretty is as pretty does, lad. She's sweet enough to Master Jamie, all right and tight. But a right 'arridan she can be. Never so kind when the Master's around, she's that cruel when 'e ain't. I 'eard 'ow she took a quirt to 'er maid when the poor lass didn't bring 'er parasol quick enough to suit 'er. 'Er cook says she's a rare one when she gets in a tantrum.

You want my opinion, she's cut from the same cloth as the old witch."

"What old...oh! You mean Lady Seabrooke?" Eve was amazed to hear Mosely's opinion of Prudence. "But if she is so bad as that, why does Mr. Quinton continue to keep her?"

"She don't let 'im see that side of 'er, lad. And 'Is Nibs, 'e ain't too clear sighted when it comes to the ladies, not 'aving 'ad much experience of the better sort. As long as the Foggett wench can turn 'im up sweet, 'e thinks the sun rises and sets in 'er. And she is mighty comely, I vow!"

"He told me once that all women were deceitful and grasping." After this long in his employ, Eve had come to believe that Quinton was a brilliant man. Now she was hearing that he was blind where women were concerned. "Does he not see her for what she is?"

Mosely shrugged. "Maybe so, maybe not. As long as she has 'im by the ballocks, so to speak, 'e'll ignore that side of 'er. Ye'll find out soon enough, lad, that a clever woman can make a man be blind to 'er faults."

"I hope not," Eve answered, with feeling. "Oh, but Mr. Mosely, I so pity Mr. Quinton for never having known a kind and generous woman like my mother. And there are many, you know."

"Aye, that there are. And I'm that sorry for 'im, same as you. But I can't see what to do about it. 'E never seems to come in the way of any of the good ones." Mosely drained his tankard and stretched. "Drink up, lad. We'll be starting bright and early, so we'd better get some sleep."

Eve choked over the remains of her pint—what she had not surreptitiously dribbled onto the floor while Mosely was not watching her. She was going to have to share a bed with this man. How would she ever get into her nightshirt? Could she sleep in her clothing? She followed Mosely up the stairs with panic knotting her stomach. It had been bad enough, using the men's necessary behind the inn. But at least she had been able to wedge the door closed and hold it from within.

Not for the first time, she sincerely regretted her masquerade.

Events favored her, however, for Mosely went outside to blow a cloud before he retired. Eve hurried into her nightshirt. By the time Mosely was back in their room and undressing, Eve was pretending sleep, wedged on the far side of the narrow bed against the wall. Her pretense soon gave way to the real thing and she slept surprisingly well, considering her circumstances.

"Wake up, lad. It's well past dawn." Mosely's voice was gruff in her ear. Pulling her face from her hard pillow, she raised her head and looked to the side. Mosely was just climbing out of bed and she realized that he had slept naked. A wave of embarrassment swept over her. Averting her face as he pulled on his breeches, she scrabbled at the foot of the bed for her clothing.

He seemed to ignore her as she sat on the bed and worked her trousers on under the nightshirt. *Now what?* she thought as she fastened them at her waist. *I cannot remove the nightshirt. Could I wear it instead of a shirt?* She looked up to see Mosely watching her curiously.

He winked. "No 'urry, lad. I'll get out of yer way and ye'll have more room to move around." He pulled the shirt over his hairy chest and ran his hands through his hair. "There, now. 'Is Nibs'll be wanting an early start, so don't dawdle."

Eve breathed a sigh of relief as he left the room. She jumped from the bed and leaned against the door. She quickly checked and was relieved to see that it could be secured against entry from without. Quickly stripping off her nightshirt, she completed her morning ablutions, then donned the undershirt she had made from the petticoat, pulling its laces painfully tight. Then her outer shirt. Once dressed, she relaxed. She was once more safe from discovery. By the time Mosely returned, she had packed her portmanteau and was ready for breakfast, elated at having got through so difficult a time with such

ease.

Quinton was in a better mood this day. "Do you ride, Eve?" he asked as the coach bowled along in the morning sunshine.

"I love to ride," she answered fervently. "But there has been no opportunity since coming to London. I used to ride with Chas, after he recovered from his wounds."

"You should have said something. I keep several hacks in Town, but rarely get the time to exercise them. Had I but known, you could have ridden with Mosely, saving me the expense of hiring a man to keep the hacks in trim."

"Perhaps it is just as well," Eve replied. "If I had been free to ride your horses, I might have neglected my work to do so. I would rather ride than anything."

"The work will still be there after you have ridden. Do not think that I haven't noticed your diligence. There is no need for you to return to the library in the evenings under normal circumstances, Eve. If there is too much for you to do, tell me and I will get someone to assist you from time to time. Alan sometimes asked me to do so when the correspondence piled too high." He frowned at her. "Are you overworked, boy? Do I expect too much of you?"

Eve was stunned with his solicitude. She stammered a denial. "I have rarely been working in the evenings. Most of the time, I have been going through the files, reviewing the histories of your investments."

She looked at him shyly. "I hope you do not mind. I thought that I should learn all I could about your affairs, so as to do better." She hoped that he would not take her to task for so overstepping her bounds and was relieved when his face showed amazement and pleasure.

"Mind? On the contrary, I am delighted. Alan, excellent secretary that he was, did what he was told, but showed little initiative of that sort. Why, you are already more valuable to me than he ever was! But I do not want you studying while we are at Fallowfeld. Make use of the stables whenever you wish, and amuse yourself as you will. Spend some time with Penny—she'll keep you from being overworked."

Hugging his compliment to herself, Eve sat in a happy daze all the rest of the way to Fallowfeld. He liked her work! She had proven herself. At the end of her three-month probationary period Quinton had merely told her that her work was satisfactory. He had been distracted when Eve reminded him of the date, news of the loss of a cargo having reached him the day before, so she had quietly thanked him and gone on with her work. Shy about asking his opinion of her abilities, Eve had never brought up the subject again. But she had never expected such praise.

Her lashes lowered, she watched him covertly as they rode along. Such a handsome man, she thought, and so kind.

How she envied Prudence.

And how she detested her!

CHAPTER SEVEN

To reach Fallowfeld, one drove along a short, curving drive through a stand of giant oaks. The modest house, built of mellow pink brick, was two storied, with ivy tracing over the walls. It stood on a slight rise, surrounded by gently sloping lawns and masses of shrubbery. On one side, Eve saw what appeared to be extensive rose gardens in full and colorful bloom.

As the coach drew up before the porch, a red-haired girl came running down the steps. She drew to a halt and stood, bouncing from one foot to another, while the passengers descended. An older woman followed her at a more sedate pace.

"Oh, you are here at last, Jamie! I am so glad to see you! Thank you for having me. Such a beautiful house." The girl threw her arms about Quinton's neck as soon as he stepped from the carriage.

He hugged her briefly, then set her away from him. "What has become of my shy, quiet sister? Who is this little hoyden?"

His face lost its wide smile when he turned to the plain, gaunt woman standing quietly behind his sister. "Miss Comstock, I gather that you arrived safely," he said, bowing slightly.

"Yes, sir," she responded. "Though we were distressed to arrive here and find you absent. Had you problems on your trip from London?"

"Nothing to signify. Now, Penelope," he said to the girl who had taken his arm, "do stop tugging at me and mind your manners. Let me make you acquainted with my secretary, Mr. Dixon. Eve, this is my sister, Penelope. And her governess, Miss Comstock."

Eve bowed and murmured her pleasure at meeting the ladies. She noted that there was a strong family resemblance between Miss Quinton and her brother, beyond their flaming heads. Both had the same level gray eyes and cleft chins, both were tall and slim. Unfortunately, the facial characters that made Mr. James Quinton so handsome were, on his sister, less than commonly pretty. She could almost be called plain, until her face lit up in a charming smile.

Penelope curtsied, but it was clear that her brother's secretary was less worthy of her attention than the gentleman himself. "What have you brought me from London, Jamie? When will we have a ball? May I choose my own gowns? Oh, Jamie, it is all so exciting. Are you really to bring me out in London next spring?"

She bounced in her excitement, until Quinton said, "We can speak of these things later, Penelope. Now it would behoove you to mind your manners. Shall we stand about in the drive all day long? Where is Ackroyd?"

"Here, sir," a plump, meticulously dressed individual answered from the doorway. "I shall have your baggage seen to immediately. I have put Mr. Dixon in the green chamber, near yours. Miss Penelope and her governess are, of course, in the other wing. Shall you wish to change before luncheon?"

Two footmen appeared from behind him and made short work of removing the trunks and cases from the boot of the coach. "I trust you will find everything is in order, sir, and luncheon will be served whenever you wish." Eve had never seen so proper or stuffy a butler and she found herself wondering if his nose ever descended from its elevated position.

Quinton indicated that he did wish to change, so he and Eve followed the footmen carrying their trunks up the wide stairway to the first floor. Eve looked around her, admiring the interior of the house. Although smaller than Elmwood by far, it was quite modern and much more comfortable, decorated in a rather severe, but tasteful, style. The corridor to the bedchambers was lit by a large mullioned window at its end, but the white wainscoting along the walls kept it from being dark and gloomy as so

many interior corridors were wont to be.

"Inform Ackroyd that we will dine in half an hour, please," Quinton told the footman. "Now, Eve, this will be your apartment. Your office is just across the hall. There is little room in the library so we have converted an unused chamber for that purpose. Mosely will sleep across there, next to the office, so this wing is entirely masculine. I hope you will be comfortable." He opened the door to the next room and entered, leaving her alone with the footman.

Eve's apartment was smaller than the one in Town and lacked a separate sitting room, but it was no less comfortable. She peered out the window, finding that, as she had suspected, she could see one end of the rose garden as well as the stables and a pond. The distant view was restricted by another copse of oaks, these even larger and more thickly crowded than the ones along the drive. She looked around the green painted room, admiring the walnut furniture and the pale green draperies framing the windows and about the bed.

A knock came on the door. When Eve answered, she found Ackroyd waiting. "Would you like someone to unpack your bags, sir?"

Oh, my! Am I to be treated as a guest?

"Thank you, Mr. Ackroyd," she said, not quite speechless with pleasure "I can manage," Eve assured him, thinking of the two gowns and other feminine apparel in the bottom of her trunk. She had not wanted to leave them in her room in Town, for fear they would be discovered. "I have not so many garments that it will be a difficult task. But I do appreciate the offer," she said, smiling.

The butler bowed slightly, his expression unchanged. Eve found herself wondering if his face had frozen in that expression, as children were often threatened with. Alone again, she quickly removed all non-incriminating items from the trunk, then locked it securely with her gowns and petticoats safely inside.

Luncheon was dominated by Penelope's excited chatter and Quinton's responses to her naive questions about London and the *ton*. Miss Comstock dined with them, but had little to say beyond warning her charge several times not to bedevil her brother. The toplofty Ackroyd directed the service. Here, as in Town, there seemed to be no housekeeper and no female servants in evidence. Eve wondered why, given Quinton's extreme dislike of women, he had invited his sister and her governess to visit Fallowfeld.

Following the meal, Quinton warned his sister that he and Eve would be working much of every day and that she would have to amuse herself. At her pout, he reminded her that he had told her this before and she had agreed not to be a nuisance. His words were tempered by a suggestion that she explore the stables and chose herself a mount, with Mosely's advice. As if his words had reminded him, Quinton turned to Eve, who was just leaving the dining room. "And you, as well, Eve. When we have put our office in order, you should go to the stables and look over the assortment there."

Eve thanked him and went upstairs to the office. Several hours' work awaited her, and she wanted to get it done so that she might visit the stables that very day.

When she sought Mosely later that afternoon, Ackroyd advised her that he would probably be found at the stables. He was, indeed, and was engaged in grooming Quinton's magnificent black stallion, a huge horse that Eve admired upon first sight.

"I thought you were a sailor," she said, coming up behind him.

He grinned over his shoulder. "Nothing says a man can't change 'is way of living. 'Orses, now, they ain't anywhere near so dangerous as ships. And they stay a lot drier."

"That they do." She watched him as he stroked the brush along the shining black coat. "How beautiful he is!" The horse twitched and snorted at the sound of her voice.

"Aye, that 'e is. Quiet there, fellow," Mosely soothed. "I wouldn't get too close if I was ye, lad. Regal, 'ere, is pretty unfriendly and 'e 'as a tendency to bite."

Eve stepped back, not particularly wary of the horse but not wanting to alarm him. "Mr. Quinton suggested that you might help me choose a mount. Have you the time this afternoon?"

"Aye. Just let me put this fellow back in 'is stall." He led the horse away and returned shortly. "Now lad, just 'ow well do ye ride?"

"Well, I have been told that I do very well, but it has been several months. Perhaps you could choose me a moderately spirited hack and judge for yourself." Eve had not ridden astride since she was a child and did not wish to make a fool of herself.

When Mosely led out a rangy sorrel mare, she looked the horse over. "I'll wager she is not the most attractive horse in Mr. Quinton's stables, but she looks as if she has plenty of wind. Does she jump?"

"Like a pegasus. Raspberry 'ere is one of the best horses in the stable, but she don't look anywhere as good as she rides. Spirited, too, but not fractious. Let's see 'ow ye do."

Eve took a moment to introduce herself to the horse, crooning and scratching her nose.

Raspberry whuffled and lipped her collar.

"No, love, I haven't a carrot for you. But just wait. I promise you one later. Now," Eve said as she gathered the reins, "let us see how you go." She swung herself into the saddle and found Mosely's estimate of stirrup length perfect. While they waited for Mosely to mount, Eve and Raspberry took a few turns about the stable yard, feeling each other out. The mare, to Eve's delight, proved to be a pacer.

Later, as they urged the horses into a gallop along a back lane, Eve laughed aloud in her pleasure. Raspberry, as if feeling her rider's joy, lengthened her stride until they had left Mosely behind. When Eve finally pulled Raspberry to a halt, the man was fully a quarter mile behind them. As she waited for him to catch up, Eve dismounted and hugged Raspberry. "Oh, you beauty!"

Mosely reined up. "So ye like 'er, do ye? Miss Penelope, now, she just sniffed and went on looking for a flashier mount. She couldn't have 'andled Raspberry like ye did, lad, and that's a fact, for all that she rides well enough. And whoever said ye rode well didn't lie. All right then, lad, Raspberry's yers."

"Thank you, Mr. Mosely. She is a wonderful horse." Eve remounted and they rode back to the stables in companionable silence.

When Quinton entered the office next morning, he found Eve already there. "You did not ride this morning?" he asked her.

"No, sir," she said, seeing by his garments that he had already been to the stables. She regretted having missed seeing him astride Regal.

"Why not? Morning is the best time to do so," Quinton said absently, as he riffled through the previous day's post.

"I intend to do so this afternoon, after I have done working."

"Nonsense!" He tossed the pile of correspondence back on to her desk. "It does Raspberry no good to sit in the stables all day. And I do not require you to stay indoors on a day as lovely as this. Out!" And he pointed at the door.

"But Mister—" Eve faltered. His finger still pointed at the door. "Oh, very well, but you will spoil me."

And there are several letters to translate."

"There is no need for either of us to spend more than half days working as long as we are in the country, Eve. I have many fewer social demands on my time here, so I can do my share. You should enjoy yourself while you have the chance." He leaned back and propped his booted feet on an open drawer in the desk. "Did Sir Wilfred never give you a holiday? Is that why you are so diligent about your tasks?"

"Gran...ah, he granted me Saturday afternoons free, sir, and Sundays were spent in meditation and prayer. I usually rode in the evenings after my work was finished."

"The old curmudgeon. Chas said his father was a sanctimonious sort. Well, I order you to ride daily, to help me amuse Penny, and to enjoy yourself while we are here. Now, will you get out of here and go riding?" A rare smile took the sting from his orders and Eve skipped out.

She changed into her oldest trousers, wishing she had some buckskins. Short of sending to Tom for them—and how would she explain that action—she had no idea how to obtain them. At least she had decent riding boots.

She sat, holding one boot and wearing the other, reflecting on how much she liked Mr. Quinton. *He is so much more cheerful than I expected, and so kind. How I wish I could be myself and be done with this masquerade.* In her mind's eye she saw his crooked smile, his pale gray eyes, and was conscious of a warm feeling in her middle. Shaking her head, she quickly donned the other boot and grabbed her hat. *Do not think about him,* she told herself crossly. *He is your employer and he will never know that you are a woman.*

Penelope was just mounting the little chestnut mare she had selected as her mount when Eve arrived at the stables. "Oh, how glad I am to see you, Mr. Dixon. Will you ride with me? Mosely cannot, and I hate to take a groom."

Eve agreed and soon was mounted on Raspberry. "I must confess that I prefer a riding companion, Miss Penelope. I had to ride alone most of the time at my last post, and did not enjoy it nearly as much as if I had had company."

"I know what you mean. Miss Comstock does not ride and Fa—my father—only rides to get somewhere, never for the pleasure of it. I learned to ride from our groom at Seabrooke, but he rarely has time for me any more." The girl glanced shyly at Eve. "Perhaps we could ride together every morning."

"Whenever I am not needed by Mr. Quinton," Eve agreed, turning Raspberry onto the lane where she and Mosely had raced the previous day. "Have you been this way? It opens out soon and there are some lovely views farther on."

The two of them rode along the lane, talking of this and that. Penelope was curious about Eve and asked many probing questions. Whenever possible, Eve told the truth, or only bent it a little. She hated the lies she was forced into by her deception. By the time they had reached the junction of the lane with a wider road, she and Penelope were well on the way to becoming friends.

"Do you know, Mr. Dixon, I was terrified at coming here, to Fallowfeld," Penelope commented as they turned their horses onto the road.

"Why?" Eve said.

"Oh, because I had only seen Jamie a few times, briefly, for the past several years and remembered him as being so much more silent and solemn than he is. I was quite in awe of him; for all that he was never other than kind to me. But he almost never smiled."

Eve laughed. "I, too, thought him overly serious when I first met him. But do you know, Miss Penelope, I think that his is a naturally thoughtful disposition, one that was encouraged to reticence by the trials and frustrations of having to make his own way in the world as a very young man. You know, he began his mercantile career when most young men are carefree and heedless."

Penny's exclamation of surprise stopped Eve's words. "What is it?"

"I was surprised, Mr. Dixon. I had not realized he engaged in...in trade." Her tone told Eve what she thought of a gentleman lowering himself to such a common pursuit.

"You should be proud of him. He is a most successful merchant and has earned the approbation of the *ton*."

It is only an exaggeration. Just because there are still some who snub him does not mean that most do not respect and admire him.

"Furthermore, he is a very kind and generous person."

"Oh, I know that," Penny cried. "He invited me here, did he not? And he has promised to present me next spring!"

Eve chuckled, wondering if Penny had any idea of the sacrifice her brother was making to have his sister and Miss Comstock among his household. It was quite a departure from his usual all-male ménage.

"I do hope he will not change his mind," the girl bubbled on. "I so look forward to all the balls and the parties, riding in park and...and...oh! Just everything in London!" She hesitated. "You said my brother had followed a mercantile career since he was a young man. Do you mean he is a storekeeper?"

Penny's expression showed distaste.

Quickly Eve reassured her that Quinton's business dealings were many and varied, and none of them entailed his selling across a counter. "Have you never spoken to him of what he does in London?" She thought it most peculiar that Quinton's own sister knew so little about him. What an unusual, aberrant family.

"Well, I had asked Fa, but he always fobbed me off, saying I would not understand." Her finger went to her chin, and her expression became thoughtful. "I do believe he is ashamed of how Jamie made his fortune." Penelope giggled. "What a great pity! I have always held him in awe, and now I am even more impressed. But I shall not let on, for it never does to let one's brothers know that one is impressed with them. They can become quite unbearably conceited. At least that is what Miss Comstock told me. She should know, for she has four older brothers."

They rode on a ways, leaving the woodland and crossing a wide meadow where ox-eye daisies and Queen Anne's lace waved in the light breeze. Its far edge dropped away into a gentle slope, which allowed a distant view of the River Stour. They dismounted and admired the view.

Eve breathed deeply of the warm, moist air. Such a peaceful, mild region, vastly different from the Cleveland Hills of Yorkshire where Elmwood was.

"So this is your first visit to Fallowfeld, Miss Penelope," Eve said when they had remounted and turned back the way they had come. "How long do you remain?"

"Oh, do call me Penny, for I am sure that we shall be good friends. I have never had a friend before. There are no young people of our class near Seabrooke. And Fa would never take me to Norwich or anywhere. There were the children of our tenants, of course, but as we grew up, we grew apart. They lead such different lives, you know, and Fa discouraged me from seeing them, anyway, once we got out of short skirts. I have been so wretchedly lonely!" she concluded in a mournful voice.

"You shall be lonely no longer. I am also certain that we shall be friends. Since Mr. Quinton has told me that I shall only be working half days while we are here, we can have many adventures together. To begin, shall we race to the gates?"

Penny agreed and kicked her horse into a gallop. Eve nudged Raspberry's sides and tore after the younger girl, but held her mount in so that Penny might win the race.

During the light conversation in the parlor that evening, Eve's fingers itched for knitting or needlework, so that her hands might be occupied as were Penny's and Miss Comstock's. She found herself unable to relax, even after retiring. Sleep eluded her. Penelope was such a nice child. How unfortunate it was that the girl had never known a mother's love.

Penny had artlessly confided that Miss Comstock, who had been her governess since she was twelve, was the closest to a mother she had ever had. Her infancy and young childhood had been overseen by a series of nursemaids and housekeepers, of whom Penny could recall little. Matthew and Farley, closer in age to James than to Penny, had seldom been at home after the girl was out of leading strings. They had attended Eton, as appropriate to their station, but neither had continued his education. Instead they had both gone to reside with their mother and taste the delights of London.

Penny confided to Eve that, on their few visits home, she had found her brothers to be nasty, mean boys—liars, cheats, and thieves. Although discounting this impression by a younger sister, Eve admitted to herself that, if the two were anything like their mother, Penny might very well be right in her estimation of their characters.

From the girl's artless disclosures, Eve also gained the impression that Lord Seabrooke, although kindly enough, was ineffectual and absentminded. Apparently he had provided the child with little of a father's attention and love. Although her brother, Jamie, had given her much of his attention during his infrequent visits to Seabrooke, Eve gathered that they had been too few and too far between to satisfy the girl's need for attention from her family.

The more Eve heard about James Quinton's family, the better she appreciated her own, for all that their life had been catch as catch can during much of her younger years. What a singularly unpleasant childhood Penny must have had.

Once again Eve found reason to regret her masquerade. Her masculine persona would undoubtedly prove a handicap in the development of a true friendship between her and Quinton's young sister. And Penny was in need of a friend and confidant, Eve was certain.

The girl's prattle revealed an incredibly inaccurate knowledge of what her Season would entail. Miss Comstock, for all her homely wisdom, did not appear to have great experience with Society. Her knowledge of the *ton* seemed to have been gained solely through the reading of romances and articles in publications such as *La Belle Assemblée*.

Doubtless her governess had filled Penny's imagination with tales of beautiful but poor maidens being swept off their feet by handsome, rich dukes and other such faradiddle. Even Eve, totally inexperienced as she was, knew that many young girls, fresh from the country, frequently had a harrowing time of it in their first Season. Penny would need a wiser and more sophisticated hand to guide her than Miss Comstock.

But how to tell the girl's brother, without giving offense? Would he believe such a warning, coming as it did from one whom he believed to be an eighteen-year-old youth?

Not likely.

Chapter eight

The friendship between Eve and Penelope grew as the days went by.

Eve was often hard pressed to maintain her masculine persona during their daily rides. The two often tied their horses to a convenient shrub and sat in the grass on a low rise where they had a view of the lush fields and oak woodlands around Fallowfeld. Many girlish confidences were received by Eve as they spoke of Penny's dreams and ambitions.

Eve was herself much more reticent, for the dreams she held in her heart were not those suitable to the young man she seemed to be. She entered in to Penny's fantasies about her Season with enthusiasm, but was careful to warn the girl frequently that it would have its pitfalls and its disappointments.

Eve, enjoying her growing intimacy with Penny, was not at first aware when the girl's reactions to her underwent a subtle change.

Penny had been more subdued than usual for several days before Eve took notice of it. When the girl's usually buoyant spirits were absent for the third day in a row, Eve questioned her about it as they sat on their grassy knoll.

"There is nothing wrong with me, Mr. Dixon. Must one be always laughing and carrying on like a silly chit?" She rolled over and lay on her stomach, gazing up at Eve. "You must think me *such* a child! But I promise you I am not. Why I am old enough to...to marry!" Her always-rosy cheeks flamed and she buried her face in her hands.

Concerned, Eve touched the girl's shoulder lightly. "Oh, my dear, have you developed a *tendre* for someone?"

Eve's memories of her first love were still painful. Leander Smythe had been a friend of her father's, much younger than Jonathan Dixon, and incredibly handsome. At least to Eve's young eyes. He had broken her heart, and that he had not ruined her to boot was probably due to his winning a large bet and taking himself off to greener pastures.

Penny nodded, but did not show her face.

"Is he someone unsuitable? Someone your brother would disapprove of?"

A silent no.

"He does not reciprocate your regard?"

Muffled, the reply came. "He does not know of it."

"Ah. That does make the matter somewhat difficult." Thinking to cheer the girl up, Eve said, "Perhaps you have not given him any indication of your regard."

Penny pushed herself erect. "I have tried, but he is blind!" Her eyes welled tears, one of which traced its way down her cheek. She sniffed.

Eve was at a loss for words. She reached out and clasped Penny's hand.

And found hers caught in an unbreakable grip. "Eve, can you not see how I have come to regard you?"

Good God!

Eve drew back as far as she could, given Penny's hold on her. "Penny, I...ah, you...Oh, this cannot be!"

The girl flung herself at Eve. Only by scrambling backwards on hands and knees was Eve able to avoid being embraced. "Penny, you must cease! I am not what you think. I cannot...Oh, blast and damn!" She leapt to her feet and retreated across the clearing.

"No! Stay where you are," she said, holding up a hand when Penny would have pursued her.

"You must listen to me, Eve," Penny cried, her one little hand pressed to her heart, the other flung wide in a dramatic gesture of despair. "My regard for you has gone far, far beyond friendship. Do you not care for me, even a little?"

Still virtually speechless with astonishment, Eve leaned back against a tree. She felt as if she had run a long distance, or dropped from a great height.

Breathless. Heart pounding. Shaking.

"Penelope," she said, finding her voice again, "I had no idea..."

"No, I knew that you did not. That is why I decided to tell you, even though you must think I am bold and pushing."

"I think only that you are a romantic young girl who has never before met a gentleman of your own age," Eve said, hoping to discourage the girl. "In your youth and inexperience, you have mistaken friendship for a stronger emotion. And you must not. You cannot."

"Why not? I am old enough to know my own mind. My grandmother was younger than I when she married my grandfather. And Jamie has said you have been on your own for more than five years. Surely you are not too young to enter into a lasting relationship."

"Penny, this is all nonsense. You do not know what you are saying. There are many very good reasons why you must not develop a *tendre* for me. Oh, my dear, if you only knew..."

Eve was completely nonplussed at the situation that had developed. She pulled her wits about her.

"Come, child, I am taking you back. You must promise to put all of this out of your mind."

"I am *not* a child!" But Penny willingly allowed herself to be handed up onto her horse.

When she had arranged the skirt of her habit, she looked down at Eve. "I shall not put it out of my mind. Doubtless I have surprised you, but I believe you will soon accept my love. You *must* realize that we would be well suited to each other."

With that dramatic statement, she turned her horse and urged him into a trot.

Eve quickly mounted and followed her, mind awlirl.

The dilemma occupied Eve's thoughts the rest of the day, until she could not concentrate on her assigned work. Only one possible solution presented itself amid all the possible scenarios she envisioned—some farcical, some heartbreaking, and most bringing an end to her masquerade.

When the ladies withdrew after dinner, she asked Quinton if he would grant her a few moments of private speech before they took the port into the drawing room as they usually did.

"Surely, Eve. In fact, I confess that I would not mind remaining here for some time. I love my little sister, but I find that her artless chatter does sometimes pall. Neither does Miss Comstock have a fund of interesting conversation. Yet, having invited them here, I feel that I must entertain them in the evenings." He filled their glasses and lounged back in his chair. "There was something you wished to say to me?"

"There is, sir, and I am not sure how I should begin." Eve sat silent for a moment, wishing she could confess all to him. But as yet unwilling to face the consequences of her masquerade, she decided to get over the ground as lightly as she could.

"Miss Penelope, this afternoon, gave me quite an unpleasant surprise," she said, choosing her words carefully. "She indicated that she had ah...developed a *tendre* for me."

At Quinton's start and angry scowl, she held up her hand. "Please, sir, hear me out. I call it an unpleasant surprise because I had no idea that your sister viewed me as other than a friend. I have done nothing that I am aware of that might engage her affections, and am extremely distressed that I should have done so."

After staring at her for a long time, he spoke. "You say that you did nothing to encourage her in this. How then did it happen?" His expression revealed nothing of his feelings.

"I do not know, sir. It is an impossible situation. I attempted to reason with her, to point out the differences in our stations, but she would not hear me."

Was I so different? No one could have convinced me that Leander was a cad.

"There seems to be no other solution than that I resign my position and leave Fallowfeld." Something seemed to shatter inside Eve as she spoke. "Once I am gone, Miss Penelope should recover quickly, for I am convinced this is nothing more than a young girl's infatuation, easily recovered from."

"What are your feelings for my sister?" Quinton asked Eve, his voice still without inflection.

"She is a delightful child. I am fond of Penny—Miss Penelope—much as I would be fond of a sister, had I one. My feelings could never go beyond that, sir, I assure you."

"I see." Quinton again leaned back, steepling his fingers before his face. He sat very still for a long time. "So you see your departure as a solution to this situation?" he finally said.

"I do, sir," she replied, her chin almost quivering with the effort of keeping the tears from flowing. She tore her gaze from his and lowered it to her glass, clutched so tightly in both her hands that her knuckles were white. She waited for his next words.

Quinton arose and paced about the room, movements abrupt, as if he were controlling a strong emotion.

Anger? Eve did not, could not, move. Suddenly she felt his hands on her shoulders, gripping strongly.

"Eve, I will not lose you because my silly chit of a sister fancies herself in love with you. I could never find another secretary who pleased...who suited me as you do." He gave her a small shake and then released her. "No. You will stay and I will speak to Penny."

Eve was mute, so great was her relief at his words. The tears she had held back thus far now coursed down her cheeks, unstoppable. She blinked rapidly, ashamed.

"Here, you young idiot." Quinton handed her his handkerchief. "Do you then like your position so much that it brings tears to your eyes?" He patted her back. "Ah, Eve, you are still such a lad. I am constantly amazed that one so young as you could be so competent."

"I am sorry, sir." Eve dried her tears and blew her nose. "You must think me a witless ninny to give in to tears. They are so unmanly."

She raised her chin and straightened her shoulders. Looking him firmly in the eye, she said, "I assure you, Mr. Quinton, that I am not in the habit of weeping like a child. It will not happen again, sir."

Quinton's mouth twitched, then he broke into the first full voice laugh that Eve had ever heard from him.

She stared at him, astonished.

"Witless ninny!" Quinton gasped out between shouts of laughter. "Unmanly!" He gave her a resounding clout on the shoulder, knocking her askew in her chair. "You woolly headed young jackanapes! Here you are, barely out of short coats, and you worry about being unmanly! Come, drink

up. I want to propose a toast." He continued to chuckle as he refilled their glasses.

"To Mr. Evelyn Dixon, the most exemplary of secretaries and the oldest man of eight-and-ten that ever was!" He raised his glass to Eve.

"Now, what say you to a hand of piquet this evening, while we let Penny and Miss Comstock amuse themselves? I will speak with Penny in the morning, after I have had time to compose a suitable scold." Again he clapped Eve on the shoulder. "Come, you witless ninny. Bring the port."

Eve did not ride the next morning, feeling that she would be both safer and more comfortable in the office. In the few hours she was alone, she accomplished a credible volume of work, almost enough to make up for her inability to concentrate the previous day.

Quinton did not join her until nearly noon. "You are in for an uncomfortable time, my young friend," he said as he seated himself at his desk. "Penny is playing the dramatic role of rejected maiden and you would do well to avoid her as much as possible for the next few days. I don't doubt that you will be the target of innumerable die-away gazes and heartfelt sighs for a long while."

"You are probably right, sir," Eve said. "But she will recover eventually, as all young girls do from their first infatuations. And she may be wiser for the experience."

"As wise as you, my lad? I doubt that she will ever attain that level of wisdom. No matter. What have you for my review this morning?"

Eve handed him a stack of papers and they both fell to work.

Unable to avoid Penny at dinner, Eve was impersonally friendly to her that evening and during the ensuing few days. Penny, her face wearing the pathetic expression of an abandoned calf, said little, but she did sigh frequently and with feeling.

Miss Comstock, having been informed of the situation and commanded to ignore it, offered no sympathy. Both Eve and Quinton acted as if Penny were behaving normally.

Hoping to distract his sister, Quinton made a suggestion a few days after Penny's declaration to Eve. He usually gave a dinner party for his neighbors, he told them at breakfast one morning. Perhaps Penelope would assist in planning it this year.

Immediately Penny threw herself into the task with enthusiasm. She practically tripped over her own tongue in her excitement, proposing extravagant entertainment, suggesting exotic dishes to be served, and complaining that she had nothing suitable to wear.

With the party plans involving her attention, Penny gradually regained her usual exuberance. Within a sennight, her behavior was almost normal. She did, however, treat Eve with distant politeness rather than the friendliness of the first days of their acquaintance.

With Fallowfeld lacking a housekeeper, Eve and Miss Comstock were pressed into service to make most of the arrangements. Penny did her best to help as well, but Eve soon realized that the girl had no idea of how to choose a menu or compose an invitation. When she mentioned this shortcoming of his sister's to Quinton, he seemed unconcerned. He assured Eve that the girl, once married, could always turn the management of the house over to a housekeeper. Eve was appalled that he should be so insensitive of the skills necessary to a young lady.

"But you cannot believe that, sir!" she cried. "Only think how the servants would hold her in disrespect were she not awake on every suit. It is vital that she learn housewifery, if only to ensure that she will be able to oversee her household servants properly."

"Are you telling me that my sister must learn to cook and clean like any common housemaid?"

Nonsense, Eve. Those activities are for servants, not for the daughter of an earl."

"It is not nonsense, sir! Oh, I do not mean that Pen...Miss Penelope should become a drudge, but she must learn the principles of housewifery if she is to marry into a great house, as I am certain that you hope she will do. I cannot believe that you intend to allow her to marry without having the slightest idea of how she is to comport herself once she is a matron."

"Well, then, let her mother-in-law teach her. That will ensure that she will go on in a way that will be pleasing to her husband, for he will be accustomed to it." Quinton rose from his desk and took up his gloves, obviously impatient to be done with the subject. "What do you know of all this anyway, Eve? Surely your mother did not instruct you in womanish pursuits?"

By now Eve was thoroughly incensed with his lack of understanding. She sought the words to make him understand. "And if she had, sir, I would no doubt be the better for it. But no, it is because my mother lacked those skills deemed necessary to Society's matrons that I feel so strongly about this. She came to my father from a perfectly respectable home, but of the yeoman class, not of the *ton*. As a result, whenever my father entertained any who were his social peers, she felt uncomfortable for she had no one to teach her the manners and customs of Society. I would not see Penny in such a fix."

"Penny does not come from a peasant's hovel," Quinton said.

He paused when Eve stiffened in anger.

"Never mind, lad, I spoke out of turn. Your mother could not have been other than a lady by nature, to have produced you. I still do not see, however, what use Penny will have for such useless pursuits as ordering dinner, arranging flowers, and writing invitations."

"Those are but a minor part of the skills she will need if she is to take her place in Society. Surely, Mr. Quinton, you had never intended to simply take Penny to London and turn her loose upon the *ton*? Surely you intend to engage a respectable woman to see that she is prepared for her Season and properly embarked upon it?"

"Not a bit of it. I will have no women in my house other than Penny and Miss Comstock."

"Then you may be sure that Penny's debut will be a disaster. If her impulsive nature and naiveté do not lead her into serious trouble, her lack of adequate chaperonage will make her *persona non grata* to most of Society's hostesses. Miss Comstock seems a most unsuitable companion for a young lady in her first Season, apparently lacking the style and sophistication to guide Penny as she should. And *you* cannot, for there must be many absolutely necessary events where a gentleman would be *de trop*."

"Enough, Eve," Quinton said in icy, clipped tones. "Penny is my problem, not yours. And you overreach yourself. I am going riding." He stalked from the room, slapping his gloves against his thigh in irritation.

Eve sank into a chair and buried her flaming face in trembling hands. *Oh my, she thought, I have put my foot in it now. He will never forgive my presumption.*

After a few moments' reflection, she accepted that her angry words could not be recalled so that she must make the best of whatever their effects would be. She decided that the only action she could take was to avoid the subject hereafter and attempt to behave as if the entire episode had never occurred. For the next few days she did so, and was relieved to see that Quinton did the same.

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Sir William and Lady Oatland were the proud parents of a son of sixteen and a daughter of eighteen. The girl, Emelina, had just finished her first Season in London and was swollen with her success. She had managed to snare a wealthy widower, a baronet, with two small children. Considering that her

visage bordered on the equine, her voice grated on the ear, and her bodily proportions resembled nothing so much as an exceedingly plump pear, such an accomplishment was praiseworthy. Will Oatland was spotty faced and clumsy, his arms and legs still not adjusted to a recent spurt of rapid growth.

The other family with children near Penelope in age was comprised of the Widow Thompson and her two sons. The elder, Richard, had just come down from Cambridge and was full of his own importance, for he had been offered a minor post in the government. The younger, Harry, was destined for a career in the ministry and he already showed traces of the pomposity and assumed omniscience that characterized so many of that profession.

The rest of the guests were an interesting assortment of old and almost young, mostly neighbors with whom Quinton felt comfortable. He assigned Eve the task of overseeing the young people's activities so that he could, in his own words, enjoy being a host.

Quinton's valet had done his utmost with Eve's best coat and trousers, but when the guests entered, she felt as though her garments were unspeakably shabby. Her embarrassment hardly mattered though, for none of the guests except young Master Oatland so much as glanced at her, once she had been introduced as Quinton's secretary.

Both of the young men immediately paid court to Penny, who gloried in their evident admiration. Eve overheard several remarks from the lips of Richard Thompson that bordered on warm, but not enough so that she felt constrained to interfere in Penny's first real flirtation.

Despite Miss Oatland being engaged, it was evident that she held a *tendre* for the self-important Mr. Thompson. She did her best to cut Penny out from his company, though not too successfully.

Will Oatland flirted ineptly with Penny, and was soon ignored. Eve bit her lip, wishing it were her place to remind Penny of what good manners demanded of the hostess. Miss Comstock seemed oblivious to any problem, and Quinton was conversing with some of his other guests in the library.

Harry Thompson refused to partake of the dancing. He confided to Eve, as the two stood on the sidelines watching several couples move through the pattern of a round dance, that he considered dancing a snare of Satan. He had often tried to convince his older brother not to engage in it. "But Will is a sinner born, Mr. Dixon, and I fear his soul is lost for all eternity."

As soon as she could get a word in edgewise, Eve excused herself, explaining that she had a duty to all of her employers' guests. She quickly joined Penny, who was laughing immoderately at something said by the elder Mr. Thompson.

Miss Comstock was engaged in a lively conversation with an elderly neighbor and not paying attention to her charge.

"Miss Penelope, may I speak to you privately?" Eve asked, as soon as there was a pause in the laughter.

"Don't interrupt me, Eve," Penny told her without even so much as a glance. To her companion, she said, "My brother's secretary. Very much the busybody, don't you know."

Now Eve had heard Penny giggle, had heard her laugh without restraint, but never before had she heard anything like the shrill, affected "*Tee hee hee*."

For two pence I would leave her to her own devices. But she could not, for Quinton had specifically requested her to keep a close eye on his sister. So she clasped Penny's elbow tightly and said, "Your brother wishes to speak to you."

Penny tried to break free, but Eve had been expecting her to do so. She held fast.

"Oh, very well!" Flouncing, Penny walked beside Eve toward the library.

In the hall, Eve drew her to a halt. "I relayed your brother's request as a device to lure you away from Mr. Thompson, Penny. Mr. Quinton does not wish to speak to you, but I do. You must be made aware that your behavior verges on the unladylike."

"Why, you meddlesome..." Penny all but sputtered in her ire. "My behavior is none of your concern!"

"On the contrary. Your brother feared you might, in your inexperience, commit a *faux pas*. I am only doing as he asked and reminding you that your behavior reflects on him."

"Am I to have no fun at all, then! Should I sit on the sidelines with the matrons?"

"You may have all the fun you wish, as long as you behave like the lady you are. No more loud and immoderate laughter, no more allowing Mr. Thompson to monopolize your company."

Penny stamped her dainty little foot. "I will do as I please."

"Then so will I," Eve said, stung yet feeling like an ogre. "And I will be pleased to inform your brother that you are making a great cake of yourself and should be sent to bed like the child you act."

"Oh! Oh, you beast!"

Before her slap could reach its mark, Eve caught her by the wrist. "Do not, Penny. I am larger and stronger than you, and not averse to returning any blow you land."

Penny wrenched her hand free and ran down the hall.

Following, Eve saw that she slowed her headlong rush before entering the parlor. When she joined the other young people, she appeared calm, although her color was still high.

By the time the party broke up, Eve was thoroughly disgusted with both the Oatlands and the Thompsons and their snobbish pretensions to gentility. Penny's behavior had been somewhat restrained for the remainder of the evening. She went to her bed quietly, without complaining to her brother of Eve's high-handed tactics.

~*~

Penny had, as evidenced by her comments at breakfast the next morning, developed a tremendous awe of both Miss Oatland and the elder Mr. Thompson. The former she thought incredibly sophisticated, the latter breathtakingly handsome.

"I vow, Jamie, Miss Oatland seems up to every rig and tow in town. She went to so many *ton* parties and she met so many people of exalted rank. Why I was terribly impressed at her adventures. Did you know that she attended a ball at Vauxhall Gardens with the son of an earl? And Mr. Thompson has even met the Prime Minister! Is that not marvelous? He will be working in the Home Office, you know, in a very important position."

She cast a sidelong glance at Eve. "Why, he is hardly older than Mr. Dixon and already he has gone far beyond the level of a mere secretary. And his dress was all that was elegant. I was quite taken with his red and white striped waistcoat and his lavender coat. Why do you never dress so well, Jamie?"

Not waiting for a reply, she babbled on. "He told me that his cravat was tied in the 'Mathematical', a style much favored by the leaders of the Corinthian set. Is that not delightful?"

Quinton curtly told his sister to put a damper on it. "You cannot take either Miss Oatland or Mr. Thompson as representative of Society. The girl was the laughing stock of St. James Street, so industriously did she pursue a husband during the Season. I take it that she did not mention that Vauxhall Gardens are known for the riffraff they attract?"

Riffraff? Surely not! Many of those I saw there that night appeared perfectly reputable.

Then Eve thought of some of the others she had seen that night, and decided that perhaps Vauxhall was not the most appropriate entertainment for a respectable young woman after all.

But I enjoyed myself, nonetheless.

"Young Thompson's post, no matter what he told you, commands neither the responsibilities nor the salary that Eve's does. As for his clothing, only those dandies who are totally lacking good taste will dress as he does. I would not be seen in anything so outré as a red and white striped waistcoat, and his cravat was the poorest attempt at a 'Mathematical' that I have ever seen." Quinton sat back and eyed his sister. "Have I covered all your comments, Penny?"

"You are hateful!" Penny cried, slamming her teacup into its saucer. "You said that you wished me to meet other young people and when I do, and express admiration for them, you make derisive comments. Just because Mr. Thompson was more elegant and better mannered than your precious Mr. Dixon, you hold him up to ridicule."

"And you, my dear sister, are totally wanting in manners. If you do indeed wish to make your comeout in less than a year, you will do well to mend your ways." He emphasized with a shaking finger, "And learn to tell the difference between persons of quality and those who merely ape them."

"Your brother is in the right, Miss Penelope," Miss Comstock put in before Penny could speak the angry words that seemed ready to spill from her mouth. "Both Miss Oatland and Mr. Thompson, and indeed their entire families, showed a sad lack of polish and gentility. They are not at all the sort that you will wish to cultivate, I am sure."

"Then why were they invited?" Penny challenged.

"Because, you nitwit, they are my neighbors. I could not exclude them, nor would I wish to. Sir William and I are involved in business dealings. Furthermore, there are only two families nearby who have children your age." Quinton tossed his napkin on the table as he rose. "Finish your breakfast, Eve. The day is wasting"

Eve was swallowing the last of her toast when he leaned back inside the breakfast room. "I will do my best to introduce you to people more of our own sort, Penny, but until then, I wish you to be polite to the Oatlands and the Thompsons. However, I do not want you to become fast friends with them."

"Snob!" Penny accused.

"As you will. But you will obey me or return to Seabrooke. Do you understand?"

Penny gave an angry nod as Eve followed her brother from the room. When the door closed behind them, she burst into tears. Miss Comstock hurried to her side, to offer pats of consolation, sniffs of smelling salts, and murmurs of commiseration. Eventually Penny regained control and brought her wild sobs came to a hiccupping stop.

"Oh, Comsie, why can I do nothing right any more?" she cried, wiping the tears from hot cheeks.

"Jamie has taken me in detestation and Mr. Dixon hates me!"

"Hush, Penelope. You are simply overly tired after last night's excitement. Come with me and we will bathe your cheeks and put lavender water compresses upon your eyes."

Penny followed, wondering why Miss Comstock's sympathy seemed forced.

Once Penny was resting quietly, the older woman seated herself beside the bed and took Penny's hand. "My dearest Penelope," she said, "do you not see that your behavior is giving your brother a disgust of you?"

"But he is so cruel, so coldhearted!"

"He is neither. Mr. Quinton is a generous brother who adores you. But you must understand that he has little patience with females who are willful and who throw tantrums."

"I do not—"

"You did. And it is not the first time you have given him a disgust of your behavior. I do not know what happened some days past to upset you, but for some time you were irritable and moody, quite difficult to live with." Gently she removed the damp cloth from Penny's eyes, dipped it in cool water, squeezed and replaced it.

"You know that Mr. Quinton holds his mother in the greatest detestation. If your behavior should remind him of hers, what do you suppose the result will be?"

"I am not mean and selfish like her!" Penny protested.

"Of course you are not. You are in no manner like your mother, as I who know and love you am fully aware. But my dear, Mr. Quinton does not know you yet. He only sees that you are acting in a spoiled, willful manner, flouting his wishes and ignoring his good advice."

"Well, I do not mean to do so," Penny said as she sat up, pulling the compress from her eyes. "Oh, Comsie, I would do anything to please Jamie. You must know that. But he is being so strict and stern."

"So it must seem to you. Perhaps some of his strictness is because he is exceedingly distressed by your recent behavior."

"He cannot love me! He always seems so...so angry!"

"I do not think he knows of any other way to behave when faced with feminine hysteria and vapors." She patted the girl's hand. "Now, I suggest that you rest a bit, then go out for a ride. The fresh air will do you good."

She pulled a light quilt over Penny. "Do think about what I have told you."

CHAPTER NINE

Several days after the dinner party at Fallowfeld, a note came from Lady Oatland inviting Penny to accompany her family to an assembly to be held at Colchester the following week. As it was addressed to Quinton, Eve opened it. Not knowing how her employer would wish to respond, Eve put it in the pile of letters she had prepared for his signature. She was aware when, later that afternoon, he came to the invitation.

"The Devil!" he exclaimed.

"Sir?"

"I have here an invitation...but you know what it is, Eve. You have read it?"

"Yes, sir, but I was not sure how to answer it. Do you not wish Penny to go with them?"

"Not really. You heard what I said to her. Although the parents are good enough people—Sir William is a fine farmer and a good neighbor—those offspring of theirs are as silly a pair as I have seen. I had hoped, before I had the dubious pleasure of observing her for an evening, that Miss Oatland would be a friend to Penny, for my sister needs friends of her own age and sex."

Nodding, Eve kept silent. She believed that, had Penny more friends, she would not have seen Eve in such a romantic light.

"But I do not want Penny to turn into an artificially mannered and pretentious chit like Miss Oatland. Nor do I want her to develop a *tendre* for the likes of the Thompson sprig. Putting on airs as if he were about to become Prime Minister. 'A post in the Government,' indeed!" Quinton snorted his disgust.

"I think you should allow Penny to go to the Assembly," Eve said quietly.

"You are out of your mind!" Quinton stared at her, plainly confounded.

"Perhaps." She leaned forward over her desk and caught his eye. "Mr. Quinton, how is Penny ever to learn to tell gold from gilt if she has no experience with the latter? She is, beneath her lively nature, an extremely sensible girl. But she is young, inexperienced in judging people, and eager to taste the excitement of growing up."

The closed expression on his face did not encourage Eve. Determined he should hear what she was saying, she took a deep breath and went on. "You said yourself that the elder Oatlands are good people. I cannot believe that they would allow Penny to come to harm at a public dance. And Miss Oatland, full though she now is with her own importance, is probably at heart as good and sensible a woman as her mother. But even were she not, one evening in her company will not spoil Penny for life."

The cold, distant expression did not leave Quinton's face, so Eve returned her attention to the papers on her desk. She had done all she could to help Penny.

Quinton did not reply, but he also did not at once return to his correspondence. Eve hoped he was giving her words some thought. Certainly he seemed to be considering something, for his eyes gazed into the distance.

Have I made him angry with me again? I hope not. He must allow Penny to go to the Assembly. It will be just the thing to bring her out of her sulks. How I wish I could go with them.

In her mind she saw herself, clad in a gown of bronze satin, her hair grown out and gathered in a knot on her head with wavy tendrils falling to her bare shoulders. Her mother's amber and gold set decorated her throat and wrists; she carried a posy of yellow roses and asparagus fern in a gilt holder. A gentleman bowed before her, then took her into his arms for the waltz. A red haired gentleman, who held her closer than propriety allowed and who smiled lovingly into her eyes. As they whirled about the

ballroom, all eyes were upon them, envying them their so evident love for one another.

Eve suddenly became conscious of tears stinging her eyes and a tightness in her throat. She pulled herself from her daydream and glanced quickly toward Quinton. Fortunately, he was deep in his correspondence, so she was able to dash the back of her hand across her eyes. She picked up yesterday's *Gazette* and turned to the shipping notices. Her flaming face thus hidden from Quinton, she took several deep breaths and regained her mental equilibrium.

Fool! Stop this nonsense. You have made your choice. You will never, never waltz with him, for he must never learn of your deception.

And with that mental scolding, she resolutely turned her thoughts to the shipping notices.

For some reason, they held her less in fascination than usual.

~*~

"Penny, I have received an invitation for you to attend the Assembly at Colchester with Sir William and Lady Oatland," Quinton said at dinner the next evening. "Would you wish to go?"

"Would I wish to...oh, Jamie, I would *love* to go! But you said...I mean, you told me..." She stared at her brother in apparent amazement. As if remembering that she was angry with him, she drew a deep breath and continued in a lofty manner, "You told me, sir, that I was not to engage in a friendship with Miss Oatland. Have you then changed your mind?"

"Stubble it, brat! Spending an evening in her company is not becoming her bosom bow. Well? How would you like for me to respond?"

Penny burst from her chair and ran around the table to throw her arms around her brother. "Oh! You are the best of brothers! Of course you must accept with pleasure. But Jamie, I haven't anything to wear! Only this old muslin!"

As the pale yellow gown she referred to was completed only the previous week, Quinton was less than sympathetic to her lack of suitable dress. He pulled her arms from his neck and gave her a push in the direction of her seat at the table. "Go and finish your dinner, Penny. I can't see that there's anything wrong with that gown. It seems suitable for a chit of your years."

Before Penny could retort, Miss Comstock intervened. "Miss Penelope, your white muslin would be the most suitable attire for a provincial Assembly."

"But it's so plain! And it's muslin! Should I not have an evening gown?" She pouted.

"My dear little sister, that is an evening gown. There is not a young lady in London who would be ashamed to wear it. Very young misses do not bedeck themselves in satins or taffetas."

"Well," Penny said, not entirely convinced, "Miss Oatland was wearing satin the night they came here."

"And should not have been. It didn't become her. But she is engaged, and may wear somewhat more sophisticated clothing. Or at least that's the way I understand the rule."

"I believe you are in the right of it, Mr. Quinton," Miss Comstock agreed. To Penny she said, "Society has many very rigid unwritten rules and it behooves a proper young lady to obey them. It has been decreed that young girls not yet out must dress in pastel colors and eschew the more opulent fabrics. Your muslin is quite correct. We could, though, add some decoration at sleeves and hem to make it a bit more festive."

"Oh, yes, let us do so. Jamie, dear, may we go to Colchester tomorrow to purchase some velvet ribbon. Please!" Penny said, smiling winningly at Quinton.

"You may go to the village tomorrow. I'll not have my cattle run to Colchester for something so easily obtained nearby. Go to the village for your ribbons."

"Yes, indeed there is quite a fine selection at the haberdashery in the village," Miss Comstock said.

Penny again pouted, but did not argue.

Eve had stayed out of the conversation, gratified that Quinton had decided to allow Penny to go to the Assembly. She was aware of an ache somewhere in the middle of her chest as she listened to the discussion that ensued between Miss Comstock and her charge, as to whether velvet or satin ribbons would best suit the muslin gown, and whether Penny's white kid slippers would be suitable for an evening's dancing.

As soon as the ladies left the dining room, Eve begged Quinton to excuse her to her bedchamber, pleading restless interrupted sleep the night before. But the truth was she could not bear to hear any more of Penny's enthusiasm for her first public dance. Eve had never gone dancing.

The lumps in her mattress had grown and reproduced since the night before, she discovered as she tried to find a comfortable position. And her pillow—had the feathers somehow turned to pebbles the size of goose eggs? She gave the offending item several hearty punches, then discovered that she could not stop pounding at it.

Again and again her fists drove into the unresisting bag of feathers until she felt herself panting and heard a voice crying, "It is not fair! It is not fair!" over and over again. It was her voice, she suddenly realized. And the poor pillow—she had punished it so cruelly that one seam had split and fluffy bits of goose down were floating about the room.

"Oh, my! What a mess." She hopped out of the bed and began chasing the feathers. The slight breeze from her movements stirred the air in the room enough that even more of the fluffy bits had joined their fellows in a wild coruscating dance. Distracted, Eve stood in the center of the room, watching. Finally one drifting feather encountered the candle's flame. A flare, then the smell. Eve's wits returned to her all at once; the smell of burning feathers was effective in bringing one out of giddiness. Ignoring the feathers still drifting lightly around her, she extinguished the candle and crawled into bed, coming to rest against the hard, carved headboard.

"It is not fair but, as Papa used to say, who ever promised me that life should be fair? No, one, of course," she whispered. "I wanted to be a secretary and I have succeeded. I enjoy what I am doing. James...Mr. Quinton says that I am very good at it. So I should be very happy. But I am not!"

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them. Gazing into the dying fire, she said aloud, but very softly, "Eve Dixon, you are indulging in romantic fancy. Even if he knew you were female, James—*No, I must never call him that!*—Mr. Quinton would never give you a second glance. You are neither beautiful nor voluptuous like Miss Foggett. Stop crying for the moon! You would not know what to do with it if it were sitting in your lap this moment."

With this very practical advice to herself, Eve squirmed under the quilts and hugged her leaking and much diminished pillow.

"Go to sleep, you great, stupid secretary!"

~*~

Penny and Miss Comstock went to Colchester with the Oatlands the day before the Assembly, so that the ladies would have time to explore the shops and sample the dissipations of the city before their evening of dancing. The party would remain in town until the day after, putting up at one of the better hostelryes.

Quinton had commented to Eve that he hoped Lady Oatland would be able to endure Penny's high spirits better than he, for he was thoroughly exhausted by her boundless enthusiasm. He did admit that her present mood was preferable to the languishing and sighs they had all been forced to endure after Eve had rejected her affections.

Fallowfeld was unusually quiet after Penny and Miss Comstock departed in the Oatland carriage. At dinner that night, both Eve and Quinton found little to say and, by unspoken mutual agreement, both retired to their chambers after a single glass of port.

The depression that had held Eve in its clutches for the past week had not departed. She was able to put it aside while performing her duties, but when alone and unoccupied, she found that it was nigh overwhelming.

Quinton, too, had been unusually quiet since giving Penny permission to go to the Assembly. His mood seemed not the one of sobriety to which Eve was used, but rather more thoughtful and watchful. She felt his gaze on her several times during the week, yet when she looked toward him, his attention was always elsewhere. In an attempt to lighten her mood, Eve sought to lose herself in Miss Austen's latest book, and succeeded for several hours, until she found her eyelids heavy and her mind not following the plot.

"What say you to a trip to Colchester, Eve?" Quinton asked the next morning at breakfast.

"To Colchester, sir? Whyever for?" Eve answered, surprised at his suggestion.

"I have it in mind to attend the Assembly myself. And you have been wishing you could go, have you not?"

"Why, no, not really, sir," Eve said, truthfully, for she had no wish to attend the Assembly as a young gentleman.

"Then why the Devil have you been moping about here like you had lost your last friend? You haven't even ridden in three days. Damn it, Eve, it's not like you to be so quiet and mournful. If it's not the Assembly you want, what is it? I am sick of your mopes!" He slammed his cup into its saucer, slopping coffee onto his wrist. With a curse, he mopped at the liquid with his napkin, glaring at Eve all the while.

Eve stared at him, momentarily at a loss for words. What could she tell him? She thought quickly. "I had not realized that my mood was so obvious to you, sir. Believe me, it had nothing to do with Penny's going to the Assembly. For several days I have not felt at all the thing. Food has not been agreeable to me and I have not slept well. But this morning I am feeling much better," she lied, "and regret that my indisposition has caused you distress."

"And that's another thing! Come off your high horse, Eve. Be done with this formality! I thought we were friends."

"And so I once thought, sir!" Eve flared. "But we cannot be, for you are my employer and have the right to dictate my moods. Friends do not!"

Appalled at her own words, Eve gasped.

"But they do, lad." Quinton rose from his chair and came to stand behind Eve. Putting both hands on her shoulders, he said softly, "Friends have that privilege as well. Nay, they have that responsibility. A friend must be concerned when he sees another's most obvious depression and must do what he can to alleviate it. A friend hurts when you do; an employer only deplores the loss of efficiency. Eve, can you not share the cause of your black mood with me? Perhaps I can help."

Wishing with all her heart that she could turn to him and tell him of her growing love for him, Eve

shook her head. "I told you sir, that I have been somewhat indisposed. Perhaps that has made it appear that I was in a fit of depression, but I was not. And I am truly much better today."

"Well, if you wish me to believe that, Eve, I suppose I must," he said, releasing her and returning to his seat. "But I still think we should go to Colchester tonight. There's some moon. We could leave this afternoon and not stay so late that we could not return tonight. Has your 'indisposition' left you with enough energy to accompany me?"

"I think so, sir, and I thank you for the invitation," Eve said, pretending enthusiasm.

Although Eve had dreaded the two-hour trip to Colchester, alone in the carriage with Quinton, she found that she enjoyed it considerably. He was obviously putting himself out to entertain her and so he did, with tales of some of his first ventures into trade. He told them in such a droll manner, always making himself out as the veriest innocent taken advantage of by more experienced men, that she soon lost the remnants of her depression.

And she was excited, she had to admit, to be going to the Assembly, even in a coat and trousers. It was, after all, her first such experience and she was determined to enjoy it. But she wondered if her dancing skills, taught her by her father and unused since his death, would return so that she would not make a complete cake of herself tonight.

Would she remember that she must take the gentleman's part in each dance? She hoped so.

Eve felt strange, asking young ladies to favor her with dances. As a result, she stood by the wall and watched more than she participated in the dancing. Miss Oatland, approached out of a sense of duty, fortunately had already pledged all her dances. Penny reluctantly granted Eve a round dance, but maintained a formal attitude throughout it. But there were other girls who were pleasantly cheerful and seemed to enjoy dancing with the golden haired young man who was Mr. James Quinton's secretary. One or two even went so far as to flirt with Eve, but she, not knowing how to respond gracefully, ignored their fluttering eyelashes and inviting smiles. It was somewhat of a relief when Quinton caught her at the refreshment table and suggested that they depart, even though the Assembly would continue for another hour.

"Well, Eve, did you enjoy yourself?" he asked as the coach bowled along the road toward Fallowfeld.

"I did, James, and I am glad that you suggested that we go. I saw you dancing a waltz with Penny. Was she enjoying herself?"

He laughed. "Oh, she was in alt! It seems that she has made several new conquests. And she has decided that young Thompson is a self-important prig. For that I give thanks."

"As do I. Penny can do much better for herself than he. I thought that if she had a chance to know him better, he would not long fool her with his self-importance."

"So you did. Perhaps my little sister is more up to snuff than I gave her credit for being. Now if she can just be convinced that the Oatland chit is not one to emulate."

Eve yawned. "I think you do not need to worry on that score, sir. Just get her to London and let her meet other young girls of her own class and she will see that Miss Oatland is sadly lacking in breeding and good taste." She yawned again.

"Good God, I forgot that you said you had been sleeping poorly. Here, take this rug and curl up on the other seat. I'll wake you when we arrive."

Eve thanked him and did as he suggested. To her surprise, she slept soundly until he shook her awake at Fallowfeld nearly two hours later.

CHAPTER TEN

Eve took to riding in midafternoons, after her friendship with Penny underwent its unfortunate alteration. She would have preferred company on her rides, for she found that too much solitude allowed her to dwell upon her feelings toward Quinton. She took to pushing Raspberry, galloping her wildly over the countryside, jumping her at every opportunity, so that both were weary each afternoon when they returned to the stables. The horse showed no sign of strain from this treatment, and Eve found that the exertion left her able to fall into sleep at night without thoughts of Quinton intruding upon her rest.

Penny continued to avoid Eve whenever possible. When she spoke to her brother's secretary, she adopted a polite, distant manner that reminded Eve of Quinton when she first met him. It distressed Eve that she and the girl were estranged, but she saw no help for it. Better this than Penny's infatuation with the young man she believed Eve to be.

One drizzly afternoon several days after the dinner party, Eve and Raspberry followed a faint track that she had not before explored, since it was some distance from Fallowfeld. The silence was broken only by the soft thud of the horse's hooves on the grassy track and an occasional drip from the branches overhead.

Suddenly a loud whir sounded from under Raspberry's front feet as a dark object exploded from the ground and streaked into the woods. The horse reared and bucked. Eve, whose attention had been elsewhere, went hurtling through the air. When she hit the ground, stabbing pain shot through her arm and leg, then a sharp blow to her head stunned her. She tried to roll to one side, out of the muddy path and onto the verge.

The world seemed to spin before her eyes. She heard a horse's frightened whinny, felt the vibration as hooves struck the ground very close to her, then another blow to her head turned everything black.

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When Eve did not appear for dinner, James sent a footman to call her, thinking she might have fallen asleep in her chamber. The footman returned to report that the secretary's chamber was empty. James then sent for Mosely, who reported that he had not seen Eve since midafternoon, when he had passed her on the way to the stables.

The two men's eyes met in mutual apprehension, then Mosely ran from the drawing room. He soon returned, to inform James that neither Raspberry nor Eve had been seen since they rode out several hours earlier.

The quickly organized search party was hampered in its task by the rain, which had intensified toward evening, and by the gathering night. It was nearing midnight when one of the grooms, sent to inquire at all of the nearby farms and villages, rode in leading Raspberry.

A lad had found the mare near dusk, peacefully grazing alongside a path the other side of Oatlands. He took her home with him and did not tell his parents of his find. When his father discovered a horse in his cow barn, he had reported it to Sir William.

The groom, who had come from that same village, told James, "Randy's not got much in the brainbox. Never has. But he does love horses, and that's a fact."

James's stomach knotted in fear. "We'll start there, then. Perhaps we can backtrack." At last he could do something besides wait and worry.

Before he departed, he ordered that Mosely was to be located and sent to join him.

The prospect of Eve's having been injured worried him far more than it should. He could not deny that. Several times as they awaited word on the search, he had caught Ackroyd giving him a questioning glance.

And well he should, for James himself did not understand his strong apprehension. Eve Dixon was, after all, merely one of his employees. His concern for the young man's well being was perhaps greater because of his strong affection for Eve.

"He is like a brother to me," he muttered, wiping the damp from his face. "A brother."

For so young a man, Eve was so wise, so competent. And sometimes so outspoken, to James' secret delight. Too many of his employees were apt to toad eat him. He much preferred the independence of mind shown by Mosely and his youthful secretary.

Really, he had developed a fondness for Eve that went beyond that of friendship; he loved the boy like a brother, and would grieve as at a brother's death if he were to be taken from him. No. He would not think of it. Eve might be hurt, he might be unable to make his way back to Fallowfeld, but he was not dead. James clung to that thought as he rode through the wet, miserable night.

It was a full half-hour before he and the groom reached the farm, even though they foolishly galloped their horses along the dark lanes. A sleepy, tousle-headed boy led James to the place where he had found Raspberry.

Sending the groom back with the boy to the farm, so they could direct Mosely when he arrived, James rode back along the narrow track whence the horse must have come. He went slowly, peering into the rainy darkness, lit only poorly by his inadequate lantern; looking for a flash of white that might be Eve's face or shirt, wondering how long the lad had been lying unprotected in the rain and cold. Several times, when the track widened, he dismounted to search about the ground.

It was Regal who found Eve, not James. The horse shied at something lying in the track and James, looking ahead, saw a sodden bundle, muddy and crumpled. He pulled Regal up, backed him away from the shape on the ground, and dismounted. Kneeling, he ascertained that Eve still breathed.

Before moving him, James carefully felt of Eve's arms and legs. The left arm seemed broken, but his legs were apparently intact. In the lantern's inadequate light, Eve's half seen bloody face frightened him momentarily, until he saw that the blood came from a cut in the center of an ugly swelling high on his forehead.

One of Eve's hands was stretched out, as if he had been trying to crawl along the track. His effort was further evidenced by the mud that clung to his hands and the toes of his boots. He must have collapsed from the exertion, for now he lay prone, his face half-turned into the mud.

If he was able to crawl, surely he cannot be too badly injured.

Praying that he would not further harm Eve, James gently turned him onto his back and loosened his cravat. There was blood on his coat, mixed with the mud picked up during his struggle to crawl along the path. Blood had soaked his shirt, as well.

Fearing that Eve was bleeding from unseen wounds, James opened his coat and tried to pull his shirt high enough to reveal the source of the blood. But the shirt was caught under the lad's body, so James was forced to slit the linen.

To his surprise, Eve wore a peculiar shirt-like garment beneath, one with lacing holding it snugly around the chest. As James tried to untangle the wet strings, Mosely arrived, carrying a larger, brighter lantern.

After a quick examination, Mosely pointed out that the blood on Eve's coat had not come from inside

it. "All the same, Mr. Jamie, I'd like to see those lacings loosened. They're interfering with 'er breathing, it seems like." He pulled a knife from his boot. Quickly cutting the strings that held the undershirt tight to Eve's body, he pulled it open. His jaw fell.

James stared.

"Oh, my God!" Mosely whispered. "'E's a bloody lass!" He pulled the shirt together.

Stunned, James handed Mosely his cloak, never taking his eyes off Eve's slack-featured face. "Cover her. She's soaked and probably half frozen," he ordered.

Once the cloak was tucked protectively around Eve, the two men looked at one another.

"Well, here's a pretty coil. What are we to do now?" James was as furious as he had earlier been worried. "What the bloody devil could she have been thinking of?"

He rose to his feet and stood looking down at the slim body covered with his cloak. Cold rain seeped through his light broadcloth coat.

Mosely, still squatting beside Eve, laid his palm on her forehead. "She's a mite feverish. We've got to get 'er warm and dry, first off; else the fever'll worsen. Did ye check for broken bones?"

"Yes, I'm sure her left arm is broken. Her right ankle is swollen and may be broken as well. I found no other injuries beyond that knot on her forehead." Kneeling again, he touched the swelling. "What worries me is the blood. Where did it come from?"

Mosely ran his fingers through Eve's mud-coated hair. "'Ere," he said after a careful inspection. "A good-sized cut, but not deep, I think. And it's not bleeding no more."

Conscious of a vast relief, James said, "Well then, let's take care of what we can and worry about the other problem later."

Mosely nodded. "Do ye cut me some stout sticks, and I'll splint her arms and leg so's we can carry 'er without making the breaks worse." He handed James his knife.

All three cravats were needed to splint Eve's arm and leg. Although she moaned softly when Mosely pulled her forearm straight, she did not regain consciousness.

After gently poking and prodding at her ankle, Mosely offered the opinion that it was a severe sprain, rather than a break, but he splinted it anyway. While Mosely was binding the ankle, James used his handkerchief to wipe the blood from Eve's face. Her cheeks were pale and hot to his shaking hands.

Regal was obviously the better horse to carry a double load, so James mounted and received Eve's body, securely wrapped in his cloak, into his arms. Mosely led the slow way along the track; back along the way they had come. At the edge of the woods, he pulled up.

"Before we go any farther, Jamie, we'd better decide how we'll go on. We can't let everybody know she's a lass."

"Good God, no!" James agreed. "I have been thinking about it. You will have to nurse her, Mosely, for we cannot allow even a doctor to see her. We'd have no assurance of his being able to hold his tongue. Can you imagine the scandal? And we'll have to keep this from Penny and Miss Comstock, as well, for you know how Penny babbles. Can you manage?"

"Me? I ain't no nurse!"

"Nonsense. You told me yourself you'd assisted the surgeon that time half the crew came down with dysentery. If you can nurse a dozen shitting sailors, you can certainly tend a young woman through a bout of fever."

"Put that way, I s'pose I can. After all, there's not that much different 'tween a lad and a lass, not when they're sickly." He chewed his lip. "Of course, if she 'as a concussion, or if 'er fever gets real bad, we may 'ave to call in the doctor."

"Only if we must. I will help you, Mosely, as much as I am able. But it would look strange indeed for me to be nursing a sick employee."

Mosely nodded. "Still, I don't like it, Jamie. It just don't seem right, the two of us taking care of a lass."

"It isn't. But we haven't much choice, not unless we want to ruin her life. She's been living in the London house without even a housekeeper as chaperone. She wouldn't have a shred of reputation left."

"I'd give a pretty penny to know what put 'er up to such a skimble-skamble stunt," Mosely said, shaking his head. He nudged his horse into a walk. "I got me a feeling this ain't going to be the smartest caper we ever pulled."

"Just remember, Eve is still a lad, so far as anyone else knows. It would not do for one of us to make a slip."

"That it wouldn't. I'll keep a close guard on my tongue, never you fear."

James had sent a groom ahead with news that Eve had been found. So when they reached Fallowfeld after an hour's slow travel, most of the servants were still awake and about. Mosely took the responsibility of reassuring them that Mr. Quinton's secretary was injured, but not seriously, and urged them to find their beds.

Penny woke from her uncomfortable sleep in a chair in the drawing room when James carried Eve through the front door. She rushed into the hall and stopped, her expression stricken as she saw the pale, bruised face protruding from the wet bundle in James' arms.

"Oh, is he dead?" she cried in distress.

"No, nor is he seriously injured, I hope," her brother replied. "Just cold and wet. Get yourself to bed, Penny. Mosely and I will take care of Eve."

"May I help, sir?" Miss Comstock asked from the landing. "I have had some experience at nursing the sick."

"No, I think not. Mosely, here, is a fair jackleg doctor and he says he feels confident that he can do all that is needed. You can assist us most by getting my sister tucked into bed and keeping her amused for the next few days."

"Of course, sir," Miss Comstock replied somewhat frostily.

James was aware that he must have hurt her feelings, but at the moment all he cared for was getting Eve into a warm, dry bed. He sent Ackroyd, who looked not one whit less immaculate than if it had been midmorning instead of the middle of the night, to see that hot water and hot, wrapped bricks were immediately sent to Eve's chamber.

He waited in a chair before the fire in the library, still holding the girl, until all that he had requested had been delivered. Then he carried her upstairs.

Once Mosely had made sure the door was locked, James gently placed Eve on the bed and pulled his cloak from around her. His hands still shook, worse than ever, and he clenched them briefly into fists, willing them to do as he commanded.

Finally Mosely shouldered him aside and proceeded to cut away Eve's clothing. He curtly ordered James to pull here or hold there as he did so. The slim, strong body that was revealed was at the same

time boyish—and unmistakably feminine. Small high breasts, a curving waist, rounded hips, golden skin.

James wondered, staring at her, how he could have failed to discern her sex. Then he realized that he was staring and averted his eyes, ashamed of his momentary rush of desire.

Mosely seemed undistracted by the loveliness that was revealed as he cut Eve's soaked garments from her. He set James to washing the rest of the blood from Eve's face and hair as he examined her body and limbs carefully, seeking other injuries. Having ascertained that there were none, he covered her with quilts, except for her splinted arm and leg.

Mosely cautiously unbound the splint on Eve's ankle. He prodded gently from knee to ankle, then examined her foot with meticulous attention. When he sighed with relief, so did James.

"Only sprained," Mosely reported at last, "not but what that can't be as painful as a break and take as long to 'eal. I'll just bind it up so she can't flex it and cause it to 'urt worse." He suited his action to his words.

Then he gave her arm an equally careful examination, although he did not remove the splint. "This arm's broken, I'm certain, so I'll leave it be for a day or two, till the swelling goes down. Time enough then to put on a better splint. Now. Let's 'ave a look at the 'ead."

James had washed the dirt and blood from the purpling bruise on Eve's forehead so Mosely was able to examine it. The cut in the center of the bruise was small, barely half an inch long, and James commented that he had trouble believing that all the blood that had streaked her face could have come from it.

"Aye, but 'ead cuts bleed something fierce." Rolling Eve to her side, he probed at the wound that extended from just behind her ear to just above her nape. It was crusted with blood, and the hair around it was matted to her head. "Time enough later to clean this one up. We don't want her fussing about too much tonight."

Eve was still limp and unresponsive when James laid her back and pulled the quilt to her neck. "She ought to 'ave woke before now," Mosely said. He pried open first one then the other of Eve's eyelids, peering closely at her pupils. "She looks concussed, else she wouldn't 'ave stayed unconscious so long." His expression was grave. "Jamie, we ought to call in the doctor."

"Can we not wait until morning and see what happens?"

Mosely's nod seemed reluctantly given. At that moment, James came very close to agreeing to call the doctor and let the consequences fall where they might.

"What about the fever? Will it get worse?"

"Oh, aye, it could. Laying out there in the rain for 'ours didn't do 'er no good. Trouble is, I don't know what we can do, save keep 'er warm and force 'er to swallow as much as she will." Sliding his hand behind Eve's head, he lifted it slightly and held a glass to her lips. They remained closed even though he tipped the glass. Its contents ran down her chin. "Tickle 'er cheek, Jamie," he said, not releasing either glass or head.

"What?" James looked at him in astonishment.

"Tickle 'er cheek. Sometimes that'll make the mouth open."

James did as he was told and was surprised to see Eve's reaction. Her lips opened and her tongue darted to their corner. Mosely was ready with the water and managed to get some into the girl's mouth. She swallowed and her lips seemed to be searching for more. Mosely was able to get her to drink the

better part of a glassful before she ceased responding.

James sent Mosely to bed, knowing he himself would not sleep this night. He wanted to be with her when Eve awoke. He remained by the unmoving girl's side until well after dawn, occasionally sponging her flushed face, but he finally could keep his eyes open no longer.

Eve had still not awakened.

Summoning Mosely, he ordered that he be awakened about noon. When Mosely protested that he could manage for much longer than that, James silenced him. "I think the fever's higher, and it may take us both to combat it later. Give me four hours' sleep and I'll be fine. Or call me earlier, if she gets worse."

He stumbled into his bedchamber and threw himself face down on the bed. Within seconds, he was sleeping soundly.

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Mosely sent a footman to wake James just after noon. To his grateful surprise, a steaming tub awaited in his dressing room. He bathed quickly and dressed without assistance, donning well-worn trousers and an old shirt. As soon as he had run a brush through his red hair, he hurried to Eve's room. He tapped, then waited as he heard the door being unlocked.

"How is she?" he asked as he slipped into the room and locked the door behind him.

"The fever's burning 'er up, sir," Mosely answered. "We've got to get 'er cooled down. Do ye start sponging 'er while I fetch something that might 'elp." Mosely slipped out of the door, locking it behind him.

James pulled the quilts back and began drawing a damp cloth over Eve's body. His initial response to the sight of her body was quickly submerged in his concern for her. When he turned her to sponge her back, she moaned and moved in protest. Heartened at the first response he had seen, he continued to dampen her back and shoulders. The moisture evaporated almost as soon as it reached her skin, so feverish was she.

Mosely returned, carrying a small brazier, an iron pot, and a bundle. James raised an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Balsam, dried elecampane root, and mint," Mosely said shortly. "I 'ope it works like it's supposed to."

He set the brazier on the floor beside Eve's bed and the pot atop it. Filling the pot with water from the can on the hearth, he blew upon the charcoal in the brazier. James covered Eve lightly with a sheet, commenting that her skin felt slightly cooler after his ministrations.

"What are you about?" he asked, seating himself by the bedside, his hand against Eve's burning cheek. "Is this something you learned at sea?"

"My mother—God rest 'er—used this on my sister. I've never forgot."

It seemed to James that Mosely's eyes gazed at something unseen, something far away, perhaps long ago. "They died of the diphtheria, but Ma did her best to keep Mattie alive, long as she 'ad the strength."

This was the first time Mosely had ever volunteered anything of his past. James wondered if he'd done so in order to reassure, or because he was beside himself with worry.

The pot came to a boil. Pouring some of the water into a cup, Mosely returned the pot to the brazier. He crumbled the material from his bundle and scattered it upon the water's surface.

"Miss Comstock met me in the 'all, said that this would be good for fever." He dropped several pinches

of a dry, yellowish material into the cup. "Too bad we can't ask for 'er 'elp."

"What is it?"

"Dried linden flowers, she said." Once more Mosely checked the now-simmering water, gave it a stir.

Soon the room was filled with a cloud of astringent-smelling steam. Working together, James and Mosely were able to get both the linden-flower infusion and another half glass of water into Eve before she whined and turned her face away.

Eve became restless in the late afternoon, tossing and whimpering, trying to move her splinted arm. Encouraged at her activity, Mosely opined that it should be safe to give her a light dose of laudanum against the pain. He mixed the drug with a second dose of the linden-flower infusion. She swallowed readily this time.

Soon Eve was once more sleeping quietly, but her fever had not abated noticeably. They continued to sponge her burning skin throughout the afternoon. It seemed to have little effect.

Finally, about ten that night, her fever broke and her breathing gradually eased. Everything in the room was damp and reeked of balsam. Both men relaxed then, and sprawled in the chairs. They sat silently, sipping brandy, the remains of a cold supper on a tray between them. At a late hour, James roused himself from the doze into which the brandy had sent him and ordered Mosely to bed.

"I can sleep here as well as anywhere, and you have had less rest than I. Eve seems to be over the crisis, so I should be able to handle whatever arises until morning. No, don't argue. Get to bed!"

After Mosely had reluctantly left the room, James pulled the two chairs together and tried to make himself comfortable between them. He was not successful, but he did doze off and on through the night, between frequent checks to see that Eve was sleeping peacefully.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A cold gray light was filtering into the room when Eve awoke. At first she was only conscious of pain in her arm and leg, a throbbing ache in her head. She lay still for several moments, trying to remember why she should feel so wretched.

The rustling of cloth drew her attention to the two high-backed chairs silhouetted against the dying fire. She turned her head cautiously on her pillow. Why should there be someone sitting in her room, sprawled between chairs? She could not see a face, only one dangling arm and a stockinged foot resting on the hearth.

She attempted to pull herself upright, but stopped when the ache in her head turned to a stab of pain. Relaxing, she waited for the pain to subside. As it did so, she remembered the sudden whir, the explosion of movement from the shrubs along the track, Raspberry's bucking, and her own fall. A dimmer memory, of trying to crawl along the wet grass to seek help, came to her. She must have been unconscious when she was found and brought back to Fallowfeld.

A new pain, this one in her arm, troubled Eve and she tried to move it. Something prevented motion; something was binding her elbow. Reaching across to loosen the binding, her right hand brushed against her bare breasts. Stunned, she explored beneath the quilts. She was naked! Who had undressed her?

Panic stricken, she could only think of clothing herself before the sleeper in her chairs woke. She laboriously pushed the quilts back, becoming conscious as she did so of the tight bindings that confined her ankle and foot also. Gritting her teeth, Eve pulled herself upright and squirmed to the edge of the bed.

If she could only get to her wardrobe and find her dressing gown. She eased her left foot carefully to the floor and started to put her weight upon it. A wave of dizziness hit her as she tried to stand and she lost her balance, bumping against the table that stood by her bed. It tipped, sending glass, spoon, and brandy bottle crashing to the floor. Eve fell, then screamed in agony when she landed on her splinted arm.

James leapt from his makeshift bed as he heard the crash and Eve's scream. He knelt beside her and gathered her into his arms. "Careful, there. Don't move! Let me lift you."

Her fingers plucked weakly at his shirtsleeve. "No. Not bed..." Her voice was a thin sound, hardly above a whisper.

"Are you in pain?" He sat back in his chair, still holding her.

"Please...I...please...."

"Ah. Of course." James carried her behind the screen in the corner of the room and started to lower her onto the china chamber pot. At her inarticulate protest, he hesitated, then completed his arrested motion. In the most matter-of-fact tones he could summon, he said, "Do not try to rise when you are done, Eve. I will merely step out into the corridor and will come to take you back to your bed in a few moments." He ignored her sobs and removed himself from the room.

Once alone he cursed himself for his insensitivity. Waking in the night, pain-filled and half-drugged, to find that no one was at hand. Poor girl! Then to have him treat her with all the gentleness and sympathy one would expend on a sack of oats. No wonder she wept!

Yet if he were to hold her gently, as his body demanded he do, he would betray himself. He had been in a state of half-arousal every waking minute since he had seen her white body gleaming in the light from his lantern.

Best pretend you play nurse to naked women regularly, old man. Otherwise you will find yourself with complications you would rather avoid.

When he returned, James said only, "Did you hurt yourself when you fell?" Without waiting for an answer, he carried Eve to the bed and laid her in it, trying to avoid jarring her injured arm and leg. His motions were perhaps less gentle than he had intended, for he was being very careful not to let his eyes remain too long on her naked body, softly golden in the firelight.

He saw her wince as his hands tucked the quilts about her. "Now," he continued when she was decently covered. "Answer me. And why, when you wished to get out of bed, did you not call me to help you?"

Tears flowed silently down her cheeks from closed eyes.

His resolve dissolved by her evident distress, James leaned closer and laid his hand on her forehead.

"Eve, Eve, there is no need to cry. I am not going to expose your secret to the world. All you must think of now is helping your body to mend itself. We will speak of other things when you are no longer in pain."

His gentle voice hurt Eve more than angry words would have. She pulled her uninjured right hand from beneath the covers and took hold of his wrist. Her mouth worked, but she could not speak for the lump in her throat.

"No, child, do not try to speak. Let me go and I will get you some laudanum. We can talk tomorrow." He freed himself from her weak grasp and bent to fumble among the debris on the floor to pick up a dark bottle. Rinsing his brandy glass, he poured a few drops from the bottle into it, then added a little water from the nearly empty pitcher on the tray. Kneeling beside the bed, he slipped one arm beneath her shoulders and held Eve so she could sip.

She made a face at the bitter taste.

James tucked the quilts more securely about her and returned to his chair. Gazing into the fire, he reflected on the events of the past two nights.

His initial furious surprise at Eve's deception had been pushed aside by his concern when she seemed to be so ill. Now he had time to reflect on the ramifications of her deception. The thoughts that passed through his head did not please him.

Eve had been in his household for nearly six months, without a chaperone until their arrival at Fallowfeld. There had been no other woman in his London house at night, all those weeks they lived there.

He and Mosely would, of course, never speak of her masquerade, but many others had met his youthful employee. Eve's ancestry was of his own class, which made it so much worse. If she were ever to take her rightful place in society, sooner or later someone might recognize her as the young man who had worked for him.

A further complication was how to keep Penny and Miss Comstock from learning Eve's secret. James sat in the slowly lightening room and brooded on impossibilities until Mosely came to replace him at Eve's bedside.

Eve did not immediately sleep after taking the dose of laudanum, though she found her mind growing more and more clouded and confused. The thought that she must escape from Fallowfeld before her masquerade became widely known was the only one that she could hold on to. She finally drifted into a drugged sleep with it uppermost in her mind.

The sounds of someone moving about in her room roused her from her troubled dreams some time later, but she did not immediately open her eyes. From the brightness she could perceive through her

closed lids, she knew that the late morning sun must be streaming in. She lay quietly, trying to think.

How could she escape? Would Quinton prosecute her for her deception of him? Where could she go, where she would not be recognized? She wondered if Quinton would give her the part of the second quarter's salary that she had earned so far. With that and what she had saved from the first quarter, she would have nearly fifteen pounds, if she counted the money she still called her 'escape fund'.

Elmwood. That was it. She would go back to Elmwood, apologize abjectly to Alfred and Charlotte, and hide there for the rest of her life. Charlotte, at least, would be happy that she did not wish to meet any of their *tonnish* friends. Isolated there, Eve would be safe from having her secret discovered.

But what a price to pay for her dream of being independent! Eve knew now that she had not considered all the implications of her masquerade when she had conceived the plan.

Never mind, she told herself. It was worth it. I proved myself and I had a wonderful six months. I can live on my memories of that for the rest of my life.

Then the vision of a pair of pale gray eyes below a head of flaming hair appeared in her mind and she knew that the cost would be almost greater than she could bear.

Once she returned to Elmwood, she would never see James Quinton again.

When Eve finally decided that she could face the world and opened her eyes, she saw that Mosely was tidying her chamber. She licked her lips and essayed his name.

It came out as a croak, but he heard her and came to the bedside. "Well, there, lass, I'm that glad to see ye awake. Jamie told me ye'd waked in the night. Gave 'im all kinds of trouble, 'e said." He winked. "'E gave ye some laudanum. 'Ow d'ye feel?"

"Fine," Eve croaked. At his skeptical expression, she breathed a whispery laugh. "No, Mr. Mosely, I do not feel fine," she said, her voice growing stronger with every word. "I feel wretched—my arm and ankle hurt and my head seems lined with goose down or something equally fluffy and clinging. But I feel better than I did earlier, only I am so dreadfully weak and shaky."

She tried to lever herself up onto her right elbow, then stopped as the quilt fell away, exposing her bare shoulder. Heat flooded her face.

Mosely pulled the quilt back, as casually as if he were flipping a table cover back in place. "Lay quiet, Eve. Ye twisted yer splint last night when ye fell and I don't want ye to put any strain on that arm until I can replace it."

"But I must..." Eve stopped, appalled at what she had almost said to the man.

"Ah." He chuckled. "I know what ye need. Can ye wait a few minutes?"

Eve nodded, her cheeks redder than ever.

Mosely went to the bureau and picked up some white fabric. He seated himself and astonished Eve by extracting a needle from where it had been stuck into the fabric. He sewed, quite competently, for several minutes, then bit the thread off and stuck the needle into the arm of the chair. The valet held up, for Eve's inspection, one of her nightshirts. It was now open completely down the front, with ties at several intervals below its short, buttoned placket. He returned to the bedside and helped her to sit up, carefully holding the sheet before her as she did so.

"Can ye 'old on to that, while I 'elp ye to put yer left arm into the sleeve?" he asked.

Again she nodded.

"There, the split in the sleeve lets it fit nicely over your splint. Now, you just close your eyes while I

guide your other arm into this 'ere sleeve."

At her startled look, he explained, chuckling. "If ye don't see me 'elping ye, ye can just pretend I'm yer maid. Come, Eve, unless ye'd rather 'old the sheet between yer teeth."

Realizing how silly she was being, Eve dropped the sheet and allowed Mosely to guide her right arm into the sleeve of the altered nightshirt. His face was blank as he pulled the edges together and buttoned and tied her into the garment.

"Now, lass, let's take care of yer other needs," he said briskly, as he scooped her from the bed and carried her behind the screen. Carefully setting her on the floor, he asked if she could manage to balance herself. She replied that she thought that she could and Mosely left her, slipping out the door into the corridor.

Eve found managing a knee length nightshirt with one hand, while balanced on one leg, most difficult, but she managed to do so by holding the shirt in her teeth while she clung to the edge of the screen. She was able to stand up again, with even greater difficulty, before Mosely returned. But she was white and shaking when he carried her back to bed.

Once she was again tucked into bed, Mosely examined her arm. "This is apt to 'urt ye, lass." He removed the splint. His examination was brief but thorough. Warning her not to move the arm, he fetched a basin and cloth. After cleaning the dirt from her wrist and hand, he replaced the splint with one made from smooth, clean lath and strips of soft linen. "Feel better?" he asked as he completed the task.

"Much," Eve replied. "Thank you, Mr. Mosely." She watched as he gathered up the discarded splint material, recognizing her own cravat among the dirty cloths.

"Mr. Mosely," she said shyly, "may I ask you some questions?"

"Of course. Ask away," he said, moving a chair to stand beside her bed.

"Did you find me?"

"No, it was Jamie that found ye."

"Was anyone else with him? I mean..."

"I know what ye mean," he said, patting her shoulder. "No. Jamie was alone, and anyway, it was me that opened yer shirt."

To her surprise, his face grew bright red.

"But 'e was there when I did. Damme! Ye should've seen 'is look when 'e saw ye was a lass. Fair dumbfounded, 'e was. So was I, for that matter." Mosely chuckled again. "But don't ye worry yerself, Eve. No one else knows, nor will they, if Jamie 'as 'is way."

"Where is Mr. Quinton, now?"

"Sleeping, I'll wager. 'E was with ye all night and was fair exhausted when I come in this morning. 'E said to tell ye, if ye asked, that 'e'll come back this evening." With another wink, Mosely said, "'E promised me that 'e won't ask ye nothing for a couple of days. So ye can just put yer mind to getting better and not worry about facing 'Is Nibs."

"Is he very angry with me? I mean, for my having deceived him about..." She faltered and, blushing, gestured toward her body.

"Well, I won't deny that 'e's not any too 'appy. Sees all sorts of problems for the both of ye. But 'e's determined that ye'll not suffer for what ye done. And when Jamie Quinton makes up 'is mind about

something, things usually goes 'is way."

Eve wished she could believe him, but she could not. Life had never been that simple and she had no reason to believe it would become so.

"Now then, milady," Mosely said after she sat silent for several moments, "I've got a pot of good, thick soup keeping warm on the 'earth. Could ye maybe eat a bit of it?"

"Oh, Mr. Mosely, don't call me—"

"Ush, now. I was pulling yer leg, lass. Soup?"

"Oh, yes, that sounds wonderful. This empty feeling in my middle must be hunger, for I have not eaten since lunch yesterday."

"Make that the day before yesterday. Ye wasn't found 'til after midnight and ye were feverish all of yesterday. Both Jamie and me was afraid ye'd caught an inflammation of the lungs."

Mosely had been ladling soup into a plate as he spoke and he brought it to Eve. "There, now, if I hold this, can ye manage the spoon? No, ye need to sit up, don't ye?"

He lifted Eve, fluffed the pillows behind her, and inserted another so that her shoulders were raised.

"Now, then, when this is all gone, there's some tea waiting for ye as well."

The warm soup and hot tea filled the empty places in Eve's belly, but her heart still felt hollow. Agreeing that she would be all right for an hour or so while Mosely attended to other duties, she gladly saw him leave, locking the door behind him.

So Quinton was indeed angry with her. As he should be, for the deception she had practiced upon him was unforgivable. Eve discounted Mosely's avowal that her employer would protect her from any scandal that would occur. Why should he, after all? It was more likely that he would send her away in disgrace. If he kept her secret, it would be to protect himself from any gossip that could damage his business.

Eve thought that her employer had a mild fondness for her, perhaps considering her more in the nature of a nephew than an employee. But she doubted very much that his fondness would extend to keeping in his employ someone who had systematically and deliberately practiced a major deception upon him.

Even if that someone was, in Quinton's own words, the best secretary he had ever had.

Eve found she didn't wish to remain Quinton's employee. Oh, she would, if offered the opportunity. She had to support herself, after all.

But she wanted more. Now that she was unmasked, she might as well take off the blinders as well.

She was in love with James Quinton, had been since before they left London. For the past few weeks she had given free rein to her fantasies. One after another, she had dreamt of ways and means by which she could reveal both her sex and her devotion to James without arousing his anger, his disgust. Now she saw that they had, indeed, been fantasies. Foolish, impossible fantasies.

She would ask him to allow her to remain at Fallowfeld until she was well enough to travel. Then she would go to Elmwood and become a drudge to Alfred and Charlotte.

Eve pulled the sheet over her head and gave way to tears.

Mosely was in and out of her room several times during the afternoon, but Eve, sleeping under another light draught of laudanum, was barely aware of him. It was late evening when she at last came fully to her senses. Turning her head, she saw Quinton sitting beside her in the high-backed chair, his red hair gleaming in the light from a single candle. His eyes were closed and he seemed asleep. Eve gazed at

him, wanting to store up the sight of him for those long years ahead. As if he felt her gaze upon him, he stirred and blinked. As soon as he saw she was awake, his expression grew stern and his eyes glacial.

"Are you all right? Do you need anything?" he asked in the severe tone that Eve had not heard for many weeks.

"No, I need nothing. Where is Mr. Mosely?"

"Gone to his bed. He had little sleep the past two nights."

To Eve, his voice held accusation.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to be so much trouble to you," she faltered.

"Do not speak of it. I have promised Mosely that I will not rip up at you until tomorrow at least, and I am determined to keep my promise."

Eve saw his jaws clench, as if he were forcing them to remain closed.

"Damn it, Eve! How could you embark on such an idiotic scheme!" he exploded suddenly. "Why did you not come to me as yourself?"

"Would you have employed me then?"

He did not answer, but the muscles in his jaw worked.

"Mr. Quinton, I had been told that you so disliked women that you would not even allow a housekeeper to remain in your house overnight. Can you claim that you would have given me the post of secretary had I appeared in your library clad in sprigged muslin, no matter how impressive my credentials?"

Still he did not answer, but his glare prevented her from saying more. She lay back on her pillows and stared at the ceiling. How angry he was. She decided to say no more to him and tried to clear her mind for sleep. But she had slept nearly all day and felt no urge to do so again. In order to keep herself from glancing at James, she recited poetry to herself, then the multiplication tables. Anything to keep from thinking of him, from watching him. At last she could keep silent no longer.

"Mr. Quinton," she whispered, "Mr. Quinton, are you asleep?"

"No. One night's attempted slumber in this chair was quite enough for me. What is it, Eve?"

"Would you please call Mr. Mosely? I need his help."

"I told you he was sleeping. I am your nurse tonight. What is it you need?"

Eve gestured helplessly toward the table beside her bed. Quinton's manner was as detached and impersonal as Mosely's had been as he poured fresh water into the empty glass. He fluffed her pillow, tightened her sheet, and smoothed the wrinkles from the blankets that covered her, all without once looking into her face. Once he had her tucked in, he asked if she would like her toothbrush.

"Oh, if you do not mind, it would be wonderful," she replied. "My mouth is so dry and tastes so terrible." He brought the necessary items and waited while she scrubbed her teeth clean. Noticing that she winced as she tried to scoot lower in her bed, he asked if her arm was hurting her.

"I am afraid it is. And it itches!"

"Well, you cannot scratch it, but you can take some laudanum for the pain. In fact, Mosely told me to give you some if you woke after ten. It is almost that now." He tipped two drops of the drug into a glass and offered it to her.

Preferring a drugged sleep to the anger she could sense in the room, Eve took it gratefully and soon was asleep again. Once more her dreams were dark and hopeless.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"May I come in, Eve?" Penny asked shyly from where she stood in the open door. Mosely had answered the soft knock and now looked over his shoulder at Eve, his brows raised in question.

"Of course, Penny." Eve smiled at the girl, whose flaming face was nearly the color of her hair. "I have been hoping that you would come to visit me."

Mosely picked up the bundle of sheets that he had just removed from Eve's bed. "Now, then, Miss Penny, ye just sit down there and amuse Mis...ter Eve while I take these downstairs. But I'll be back in 'alf an hour, mind, and ye'll have to go then. He's still feeling pretty poorly." He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Penny slowly approached the bed and took the indicated chair. She sat silently, looking at Eve from under lowered lashes.

"I hope you are feeling better," she finally said. "Jamie said that I might come to visit you but that I must not stay long."

"Other than an occasional twinge in my arm and leg, I am feeling quite well. Only I seem to sleep quite a lot," Eve told her.

Penny fell silent again and Eve could see that the girl was chewing her lip, obviously ill at ease. Sure that she knew the cause of the girl's distress, Eve said, "Penny, we must not let one small, unfortunate incident mar what was becoming a comfortable friendship. Will you not forgive me for my insensitivity toward your feelings?"

"Oh, Eve, I am sorry!" Penny burst out. "I was so forward, so brazen. What a disgust you must have of me!"

"Nonsense! I am sure that you did nothing more than any other young girl in the throes of her first infatuation would have done. It is I who must apologize, for my behavior was less than graceful." Eve held out her hand to Penny, who looked at her for a moment, then took it. Giving the hand a squeeze, Eve continued, "There, now; we have shaken hands and become friends once more. We will not speak of it again. Tell me what you have been doing to amuse yourself these past few days. I could see that the weather has been delightful and have wished that I could be out in it."

"Oh, I have ridden, and practiced the pianoforte, and worked at my sewing. And I have been learning household management." The last was said with a grimace of distaste. "I cannot see why I should learn about choosing menus and ordering flour and managing a stillroom. After all, that is what housekeepers do."

"But Penny, a housekeeper is not the mistress of the house. And not all are honest," Eve said, remembering one housekeeper they had had when she was a child, one who had lined her pockets quite richly before her thefts were discovered. "If you are to be the mistress of a great house, and you will, for I expect that you will marry very well, you must know as much as your housekeeper about how to keep it running smoothly."

"Well, I do not like it. Estate management is much more interesting, and it does not keep one cooped up in a house all day long."

"That it does not. And neither should household management. But you said you had been riding, so you must not be incarcerated all the time. Who is instructing you?"

"Mrs. Grace, from Seabrooke. Jamie sent for her to come for a month. She arrived the day after your accident." Penny giggled. "Oh, and did she not give Jamie a fine scold when she arrived. She told him that he was living in filth, like a pig in its sty. She made him hire five extra girls from the village she is

having them turn the entire house inside out. Jamie is not pleased." Again a giggle. "But now that I have been helping her for a week, I can see that this house was never as well kept as Seabrooke, nor as clean."

Eve silently agreed, for she, too, had seen the signs of neglect that are only visible to a woman, gentlemen not being so aware of proper housewifery. She did not comment, but only asked, "Why on earth is Mr. Quinton displeased?"

"Oh, she and Ackroyd do not see eye to eye on how to keep house, and she ripped up at him something fierce. Ackroyd threatened to resign, for Jamie has given Gracie *carte blanche* to do as she wishes with the house—it was a condition of her coming here. So Ackroyd's nose is badly out of joint, for Gracie keeps making comments on how dirty the house is, and is sure to do so in his hearing. I think Jamie had to promise him a bonus to stay on."

So he heard what I said about giving Penny proper training in her future role.

Amused, but doing her best not to show it, Eve said, "With all her cleaning, when does Mrs. Grace find time to give you instruction in housewifery?"

"Oh, Eve, you would not believe it!" Penny cried. "She makes me help clean! Why, on Monday I had to polish all the silver. Then yesterday I applied wax to the dining table. Three times, for Gracie made me remove it the first two times—with nasty smelly stuff that burned my hands—saying that I had done it badly."

Penny made a face. "At luncheon, Jamie said that I had to obey her or go back to Seabrooke, until I was prepared to learn how to be a lady! Was that not cruel of him? Ladies do not clean like any common scullery maid! Look at my poor hands!" She held the afflicted parts before Eve, who saw that they were indeed reddened and rough looking.

"But a lady must know how it is done, so that she can oversee her own servants, Penny. At least that is what my mother always said."

"I suppose so, but I do not like housewifery. I think that I should much prefer to be a man."

"Being a man has its problems just as being a woman does," Eve said, from the depths of her own experience. "But tell me. Did you not go with your brother to Colchester the day of my accident? What did you there?"

Penny's attention thus distracted from her miseries, she proceeded to tell Eve of the bolts of fabric and the many furbelows that she and Miss Comstock had purchased in Colchester. "I am to have five new dresses, Eve, and one will be an evening dress. Jamie has said that we are to have a ball next month, one to which he will invite some of his London friends. And there will be waltzing. Oh, Eve, I do not know how to waltz! Is it so very difficult?"

"I have not waltzed for some time, for I was not welcome at the parties at Elmwood, my last place of employment. But I do not remember that it is so difficult. Has Mr. Quinton not engaged you a dancing master?"

"He said that he would, but he has been so impatient and crabby since your accident that I have not wished to remind him. Eve, do you know what had put him in such a pet? Is he angry with you and taking it out on all of us? Or have some of his investments done poorly?"

Eve knew Quinton's mood was her fault, but she could not admit it to Penny without explaining why. "You must remember that I have been unable to perform my duties for nearly a week. Have you asked Mr. Mosely?"

"No, for his mood has been almost as black as my brother's. Eve, could you remind Jamie about the

dancing master for me? I confess that I have never seen him so...so scowly. He quite intimidates me."

"I know what you mean," Eve said, remembering the stern, icy gentleman who had interviewed her in London. "I have not seen your brother since the day before yesterday, but I will ask Mosely if there is something amiss. Perhaps I might also mention to him that you will need to begin your dancing lessons soon so that you will be ready for the party."

"Oh, would you please?"

Was I ever so young and innocent that dancing lessons would have seemed like a great treat?

Then Eve remembered Leander, and smiled indulgently. "I will," she promised, "the very next time I speak with him."

Mosely returned at that moment and chased Penny from the room, saying that Eve must rest.

Eve mentioned the dancing master to Mosely when Quinton did not visit her for yet the fourth consecutive day. Her reminder must have reached the proper ears.

The next morning Penny returned.

"Oh, Eve, I am so excited!" she said as she flung herself in the chair beside Eve's bed. "I am to have my first dancing lesson this morning. I must not stay with you above a few minutes, for he is to be here at eleven. I know you must have mentioned my lack of skill, for Jamie apologized at breakfast for neglecting me."

"Perhaps he had other things on his mind," Eve answered noncommittally, for she wanted no credit for Quinton's kindness to his sister. "You must come and tell me all about the lesson when you are done."

"Oh, I shall. But it will probably not be until tomorrow, for Jamie told me that I must apply myself more to my lessons in housekeeping. I will also have lessons in deportment."

Her giggle showed that these lessons, at least, appealed to her. "Miss Comstock says that that means that I must learn how to write invitations and notes of regret and thank-you's and all other sorts of polite correspondence. So this afternoon I will begin on the invitations to the ball."

Leaning forward, she said in a loud whisper, "Did you know that precedence must be observed when seating dinner guests? I never did, for Fa only entertains the neighbors and never worried about such things. Miss Comstock says that there are even rules about how to curtsy to different gentlemen, depending upon their rank. It all seems so silly, you know, but I suppose it is necessary, if one is to go on in Society." She sighed.

"Miss Comstock is instructing you in these things?" Eve said in some surprise. "I had not realized that she was so well versed in Society's ways."

"Well, neither did I," Penny said. "It turns out that Fa would not allow her to teach me anything other than music and sewing and subjects like geography." Her wrinkled nose showed what she thought of those subjects. "He did not want me to learn to 'behave like a Society tart' like my mother. Those were his very words, but I do not believe I was intended to hear them. So he forbade her to include such subjects in my curriculum. But Jamie has said she must do so now, and promises to answer for it to Fa."

"I am so glad that he is doing so Penny, for now you will be prepared for the life you will be leading during your Season," Eve said, aware of a glow of satisfaction that Quinton had taken her advice. "Has your brother said anything of who will chaperone you in London?"

"Why, Miss Comstock will do so! Did you know that she was gently born and that her mother was the daughter of a baronet? She learned all these things when she was but a child, but could not teach me

them because of Fa's prohibition. Her father was only a poor country parson and when he died, she had to support herself and her mother, for there was no estate. Is that not tragic?"

"Indeed; but not uncommon, I understand. Women are often left so, and have few ways in which they can earn a living. Miss Comstock is fortunate that she was able to go as a governess," Eve answered, somewhat bitterly.

At least Miss Comstock had found a comfortable position that gave her a decent living and a semblance of security.

Eve still had reservations about the older woman's being the proper person to oversee Penny's debut, but did not feel she should express them to the girl, who was obviously fond of her governess.

"She told me that it was fortunate that she was so plain," Penny went on, "for had she been pretty, she would not have been taken seriously. Is that not the most unfair thing that you have ever heard?"

Eve agreed that it was indeed unfair, and reminded Penny that she had said she could not stay long. She found that a discussion of the problems of being female in a man's world brought unwanted thoughts to the forefront of her mind.

Penny ran from the room, leaving Eve alone with her regrets.

Yes, a woman without funds had few alternatives, as she knew from harsh experience. She could go into service, become a governess, enter trade as an underpaid and overworked shop girl or seamstress, but she could not aspire to anything more. Or, if she were beautiful and desperate, she could sell herself.

Since none of these alternatives appealed to Eve, she had chosen to flout convention. And now she would pay for her folly, for surely Quinton would cast her out as soon as she had recovered from her injuries.

Tears stung her closed eyelids as she thought yet again of her employer's all too evident anger the last time he had spoken with her. Was he still angry, she wondered? He had not been to visit her once these past days, though she had heard his voice in the corridor many times, had heard the faint sounds of his movements through the wall separating her chamber from his dressing room.

He must despise her. And how she loved him. Eve allowed the tears to run down her cheeks as she thought of how empty her life would be away from James Quinton.

Stop that, you ninny! What a watering pot you have become. You played the game, as Papa would say, and now you must pay the piper.

And what a game it had been! She had memories to last a lifetime.

~*~

After luncheon, Mosely unwrapped Eve's ankle and examined it. She watched him closely, hoping to discern from his expression its condition.

As he bound it up again, he smiled. "Well, Eve, ye ought to be able to put yer weight on that ankle now, so long as ye don't overdo it. The swelling's gone and it moves well enough. We'll keep it bound as long as it pains ye, but I'd say that it's nicely on the mend."

"Oh, what a relief," Eve said. "How soon will I be able to be up and about? I have had quite enough of invalidism."

"As to that, 'Is Nibs 'as said that I'm to 'elp ye dress and bring ye to the office this afternoon. He wants a word with ye."

"More than one, I'll wager. Is he still so very angry with me, Mr. Mosely?"

"Afraid 'e is, lass. I've tried to talk to 'im, but 'e won't answer me. When 'e takes a bee in his bonnet, it takes him a long time to get rid of it."

Eve saw that Mosely was taking her masculine garments from the wardrobe. "Ye're to be a lad, still, Eve. Mr. Jamie does not want it known that ye're a lass. D'ye mind?"

"No," she answered, as Mosely pulled her nightshirt from her shoulders. She had never quite got over her embarrassment at his helping her to dress and undress. So she followed his advice of closing her eyes when he did so, and found that she was able to endure her embarrassment.

"I confess myself to be frightened out of my wits at having to face him." She opened one eye and saw that that Mosely was holding her laced undershirt out to her. The laces looked new and she remembered that he had told of cutting them.

"How I hate that garment!" she protested. "It hardly allows me to breathe. But I must wear it, I suppose, if I am to continue my masquerade."

"I don't think there's a need to lace it so tight as I found it the other night," he said, with a slight smile. "I doubt that Miss Penny or Miss Comstock will be looking at ye all that close. Besides, ye'll be wearing yer coat when ye're downstairs."

As Mosely held a glass for her to comb her hair, Eve said, "Might I hope that you include hairdressing among your many accomplishments, Mr. Mosely? I had not noticed how long mine had grown."

"Well, I can shear ye a bit, but it'll not be what ye'd call stylish. Remind me tomorrow before we dress ye." He picked her up and carried her out the door.

Quinton was seated behind his desk, waiting for them.

"Good morning, Eve," he said, tonelessly. "That will be all, Mosely. I will ring when I need you to take Eve back to her...his room."

"Well, Eve," he said, still in that flat voice, once she had been comfortably settled in her chair, "we must now discuss what is to become of you." He raised one eyebrow at her.

Eve's heart had all but stopped at the ice in his tone. *Courage!* She raised her chin and looked him straight in the eye, hoping her nervousness did not show on her face. "I will return to Elmwood as soon as I am able, sir, for I doubt that you will wish me to remain here. But Mr. Mosely tells me that my arm will not be mended for another month or more."

"What makes you think that they will welcome you at Elmwood? Sir Alfred, from what I have heard of him, is not the sort to take in someone who has left his employ, simply out of the goodness of his heart." He raised his hand as Eve opened her mouth to speak. "That is of lesser importance than another matter. I wish to know how you persuaded Chas to write your reference. Or did you forge his hand?"

"I did not," Eve protested with some heat. "Chas was glad to recommend me."

"I doubt that. He would not prepare such a tissue of lies. No, I believe that you must have forged it. And what other crimes have you committed, I wonder?"

"Mr. Quinton, you must believe me when I tell you that Chas wrote that letter of his own free will. I had been Sir Wilfred's secretary for nearly five years, and I was Sir Alfred's as well, until I left Elmwood."

"Ha! Now I know that you lie. Five years ago you were only thirteen, and newly come from Europe. Even Sir Wilfred could not have been persuaded to employ a lad so young as a secretary." If anything,

his glare had grown sterner, angrier. "Come, Eve, tell me the truth," he demanded. "I've had enough of your lies."

Angry now herself, Eve burst out, "Very well, if you must know. Sir Wilfred is...was my grandfather and Alfred is my uncle. My father was the second son."

"How clever of you. With Chas in Portugal, there is no one else who can prove you lie, short of Yorkshire."

"I do not lie!" Clapping a hand over her mouth, Eve forced herself to take several deep breaths. In a calmer voice, she said, "I am telling you the truth, Mr. Quinton. You must believe me."

Quinton leaned back in his chair, staring closely at her. "Assuming you did persuade Chas to write that letter—and mind you, I am not admitting that I believe you—how on earth did you do so?"

"Chas wanted me away from Elmwood. He and I have been close ever since I came to England, for we are nearer in age than he and his brother. When I first asked him to write the letter for me, he resisted, but then I...I promised to seek a position as a governess if my quest for a secretarial position should prove fruitless, and thus he wrote it." She remembered how he had protested, and finally had given in grudgingly.

"I admit I falsified my age. I am almost twenty-one, not eighteen. I only told you I was younger so that you would not wonder at my beardless cheeks."

"I did wonder, you know," Quinton said in a slightly more friendly tone, his surprise at Eve's disclosures showing plainly on his face. "Most young men of eighteen have been shaving for some time."

He looked closely at Eve. She stared back, her face showing nothing.

"So you are Chas's niece Eve. He told me of you, of his concern for you, that night before he shipped out for Spain, but he did not mention your name. There is a distinct family resemblance. I wonder how I missed it before."

"Perhaps you were not expecting to see it," Eve ventured, then jumped as his palm slapped resoundingly on the desk.

"Just what, in the name of all that's holy, ever made you embark on such an insane course as you did? Do you not know that you could have been discovered at any time? Not everyone would have been so kind to you as I. You could have been ruined. You may already have been; for many of my friends and business associates have seen you, dressed as a man, living unchaperoned in my house. By God, Eve, you make me want to beat some sense into you!" The angry expression had returned and his face was set in harsh lines. "And now you tell me blithely that you will return to Elmwood where, according to Chas, you were treated like the lowest of servants."

"There is nowhere else for me to go," Eve told him, keeping her voice firm for all it threatened to quiver like a baby's. "I have a small inheritance, but it will not allow me to keep household. And I am not suited for anything but a secretarial position, for I have few other skills."

"What of the governess position you promised Chas you would seek?"

"Oh, I did make some inquiries. But they came to naught, for I am young and without experience. There was one position in a school, but it paid a pittance and by then I had conceived the notion of..." She paused, unable to keep the hot flush from her face. "Anyway, I would not be a good teacher, and doubt that I would be able keep any such position for any time."

"What gave you the notion of disguising yourself as a man and making a fool of me?"

"I did not do it with that intention! You said yourself, I am the best secretary you have ever had!"

Again his hand slapped the desk with a sound like a shot. "*Enough!*"

Eve cowered back in her chair. She had never seen him so angry, not even with his mother.

"So you will return to your uncle's house to be an unpaid drudge?"

Screwing up her courage, Eve said, "Unless, sir, you would consider allowing me to continue as your secretary. Oh, please Mr. Quinton!" She rushed on, ignoring the look of astonishment on his face and not wanting to give him an opportunity to argue until she had had her say.

"No one else need know that I am not a man. You said that you were pleased with my work. My sex should make no difference to you, and as long as I will continue to disguise myself, we could go on as we have been. Oh, sir, I do not want to go away from you. Please say that I might stay." Her words slowed and stopped as she saw astonishment revert to anger.

For a long time Quinton kept his head bowed over steepled fingers.

Eve sat, unmoving, hardly breathing, as he considered.

At last he spoke. "It is out of the question, Eve. Mr. Evelyn Dixon must disappear, never to be seen again, as soon as your arm is mended. As to what is to become of Miss Eve Dixon, I must confess that I care not a whit. You have betrayed my confidence in you and deceived me."

His face, when he looked up at her, could have been carved in marble. "Despite my friendship for Chas and my reluctance to cause him additional concern over your fate, I must tell you that you will leave my employ within a month. Since you have a home at Elmwood, you must return there, distasteful as it will be to you."

Not surprised at his reaction to her pleas, Eve bowed her head. "As you wish, sir. But in the meantime, what is to become of me? I cannot stay in my bedchamber until my arm is healed. Mr. Mosely tells me that I will be able to walk about within a few days."

"Why, since you were employed as a secretary, you will naturally continue to discharge your duties as long as you are here." Quinton's smile was sardonic, his left eyebrow elevated. "It is your left arm that is broken, so surely you will be able to write. There still remain several weeks until the end of the quarter and I expect that you will wish to earn a full salary, so you will have some funds about you when you depart."

Unsure whether to laugh, weep, or scream, Eve bowed her head. "As you wish. Thank you, sir. I will endeavor to complete my assigned tasks to the best of my abilities. Shall I begin at once, sir?"

She was relieved at being allowed to stay for a while longer and determined not to anger him more. Besides, this brief reprieve would let her store up more memories of him for the years ahead. Hampered by her splinted arm, she took the pile of papers he handed her and began sorting through them, her movements awkward.

They worked together for the rest of the afternoon, the silence broken only by his occasional curt instruction to her and her subdued responses.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eve's discomfort at working again with Quinton lessened over the next few weeks as his coolness gradually gave way to a cautious and somewhat formal ease. She never allowed herself to hope that he had forgiven her, or that his determination to see the last of her had altered. Instead, she contented herself with enjoying the warm feeling of companionship that filled her soul when they worked quietly together in the office.

He was almost constantly within her view, for the arrangement of the desks was such that she could watch him from the corner of her eye as she worked. And watch him she did, storing up in her memory his fleeting expressions of pleasure, satisfaction, irritation, or frustration as he perused his correspondence or instructed her as to how he wished his replies to read.

At night James walked through her dreams, always distant, but ever present. She often dreamed that she was reaching for his hand, to clasp it in hers so that they might go along together, but it was always just beyond her reach. The dreams occurred every night and, though her arm and ankle were healing well, she developed dark smudges under eyes that looked more haunted every day.

Eve was pronounced able to walk within a fortnight of her accident. The ankle, though able to bear her weight, was weak and still painful, so Mosely suggested she stroll in the garden, going just a bit farther each day, so that it would be gradually strengthened.

Penny sometimes joined Eve on her strolls. She chatted happily of her new clothing and the ball, which was planned for the next full moon. Sometimes she complained about some fresh indignity visited upon her by Mrs. Grace, who required that Penny accomplish one unfamiliar household chore each day.

Eve sympathized, but frequently chuckled to herself at the often-impatient girl being made to repeat chores over and over until they were done to the housekeeper's stringent standards.

"I do hope that the skies will be clear that night, Eve, for Jamie says that some of those whom we have invited might cry off if it were to be cloudy," the girl commented one afternoon as they slowly made their way to the rose garden. "It is really too bad that Fallowfeld is so small, for if it were as large as Seabrooke, then all our guests could spend the night here and not have to drive home or to Colchester in the dark."

"You have not told me who will be at the ball, Penny. Has your brother invited many young people?" Eve asked curiously, for she had not assisted with any plans for the fete.

"No, he has not. Except for Miss and Mr. Oatfield and the two Thompson boys. Jamie knows no other local families who have members near my age. But he has invited Lord and Lady Marsten—she made her comeout just last Season and is only nineteen. The Marquis of Arduin will bring his secretary, a young man of about five-and-twenty. I understand that he is gently bred, for all he is employed as a secretary."

Her hand flew to cover her mouth. "Oh, Eve, I did not mean that as it came out! I sounded so snobbish. Please do not take offense."

"Silly," Eve laughed. "Of course I am not offended. And yes, Tom is gently bred, for his father is a minister and the younger son of a baronet."

"Oh, are you acquainted with him? Tell me of him!" Penny was excited, for after growing better acquainted with them—and following her brother's lead—she had admitted to Eve that she did not particularly care for the Oatfield and Thompson families. She had gone so far as to protest their being sent invitations, whereupon Quinton had informed her that she was to be polite to them, no matter how she disliked them. They were neighbors, he reminded her, and he did not wish to offend them.

"Tom is about my height, with very broad shoulders and curly brown hair. He is somewhat of a fop, leaning toward the more extreme fashions that your brother eschews. He has a puckish sense of humor and his ambition is to enter government at some future date. His understanding of economics is superior and I think that he will be very successful if he should ever achieve that ambition. I think you will go on very well together." She smiled at Penny's excited exclamation.

"But, Penny, as your friend, which I hope I am again, I must warn you. Do not develop a *tendre* for Tom Patterson. He is in no position to marry and will not be for many years. You must wait until you go to London and meet young gentlemen of the *ton*." Eve took Penny by the shoulders and forced her to look up. "You are very young yet, and there are many gentlemen in the world; you must not fancy yourself in love with each one of them."

"Whatever must you think of me, Eve?" Penny protested, primly. "I hope that I have learned my lesson. I do not ever intend to behave so foolishly again."

"It was not foolish behavior, my dear. You acted no differently than would any girl who had never before been in contact with a young man. But if you were again to believe yourself infatuated, that would be foolish. Once a lesson is learned, to repeat the behavior that led to it does constitute foolishness."

"Do not preach at me, Eve. I will behave myself, I promise."

Abruptly as always, her mood changed. "Did I tell you that Miss Comstock and I are making the arrangements for the ball all by ourselves? Jamie says I must take responsibility for it," she said with hesitant pride. "And Miss Comstock will not make suggestions for the dinner menu, for she says that the experience will do me good. Only...only what if I should choose badly and the dinner were inedible? I confess I am filled with trepidation. And I have been made to choose the decorations for the tables, and the blue saloon, where we will dance, and...and everything."

"It will all be quite lovely, Penny, for your taste is all that is gracious. Besides, if you have any doubts, you may come to me. I have had some little experience in planning such things."

"How could you have? Young men are not skilled at housewifery!"

Eve recovered from her gaffe quickly. "Oh, but at Elmwood, where I was employed before coming to your brother, I was required to assist in planning a number of evening entertainments, since I was Sir Wilfred's secretary." She hoped that Penny would not ask about her grandfather's housekeeper, for she did not wish to explain that it had been Charlotte, too lazy to fulfill her duties as mistress of the house, who had turned all preparations for dinner and dancing parties over to Eve.

They strolled among the roses, still blooming in the warm St. Martin's summer, until Eve's ankle protested its unaccustomed exercise. Eve was able to give Penny some subtle suggestions concerning the dinner menu, for the inexperienced child had planned much too lavish a menu for the twenty or so guests who would dine at Fallowfeld.

As they were returning to the house, Penny suddenly asked Eve, "Will you be able to dance at the ball, Eve? I mean, will your ankle be comfortable enough for you to do so?"

"No, I will not dance. In fact, I will probably not attend at all, for you know that I still tire easily." Eve did not wish to join the merrymakers, for to do so would expose her even more to the scrutiny of Quinton's friends. And, too, she did not want to have to play her masculine role while she watched Quinton dance with other women. Penny argued the point, but Eve remained adamant that she did not plan to attend.

That night, after Eve had finished her solitary dinner, she removed her shirt, loosened the laces on her

undershirt, and donned her dressing gown against the slight autumnal chill. She was writing a letter to Mrs. Storridge when she heard a light tap on her door.

Quinton had required that she remain in her room each evening, not wanting her to spend too much time in Miss Comstock's presence and even restricting her contact with Penny to an occasional walk in the gardens. Despite Eve's protest that she had been able to maintain her masculine persona for seven months without anyone having become suspicious, he refused to allow her to be seen too frequently by other members of the household. Mosely continued to serve as her valet-cum-maid.

She walked to the door on an ankle that ached from the long stroll in the garden. When she turned the key, it swung immediately open. Quinton moved quickly, brushing past her into the room and pulling the door shut behind him.

"Sit down, Eve. I wish to speak with you," he said.

He waited for her to seat herself and then took the chair on the other side of the fireplace. "Now, what is this about your attending the ball? You must know that I do not want you to be seen other than by members of the family, and even those you should avoid as much as possible."

"I told Penny that I would not attend," Eve assured her employer. "Although I would like to see Tom." "Tom?"

"Lord Arduin's secretary. You may recall that it was through him that I learned of your needing a secretary," she reminded him.

"Ah, yes. Your partner in crime, I presume?"

Eve blushed but did not reply.

"Very well, you may see your friend, but only here, in the privacy of your room." Quinton stopped, his brows drawing together. "No. That will not do. You must not receive him unchaperoned in your bedchamber."

"Do not be nonsensical, sir!" Eve exclaimed. "Tom is fully cognizant of all that is proper. His behavior always has been above reproach. Although it was in fact he who obtained my clothing, he never behaved as anything other than a gentleman. What earthly harm could there be in his coming here to visit me?"

Quinton's scowl grew, if possible, more fierce. "What is this young man to you, Eve?"

"A friend, sir. Only a friend."

"You have not a *tendre* for him, or he for you?" Quinton persisted.

"Of course not," Eve said, letting her exasperation sound plainly in her voice. "Really, Mr. Quinton. You are, I think, overly concerned with my reputation. I am to depart in less than a fortnight for Elmwood, and will probably never be seen by members of Society again. I will not be compromised by Tom's coming here to visit. It will not be the first time."

"And what did you do together, when you invited him to join you in your bedchamber?" Quinton said. "Did you repay his assistance with your, ah...your favors?"

"You insult me, sir! You may be my employer, but you are not the keeper of my conscience, nor are you my parent or guardian." Eve was suddenly furious. How dare he think thus of her! "My relationship with Tom Patterson is none of your business."

"Your behavior is indeed my concern, so long as you are beneath my roof. I will allow no wanton activities here, my girl. If you wish to visit with Mr. Patterson, you will do so in the office, and with the

door standing fully open. Do you understand?" He stood, towering over her threateningly as he awaited her reply.

She also stood and, for a moment, they were almost nose-to-nose. Eve felt her breath catch in her throat at the nearness of him, the warm touch of his breath on her forehead.

She stepped back quickly. "I understand that you do not trust me to know how to behave with propriety, sir, and I am grossly insulted. Now, if you do not mind, I wish to retire. I find I am fatigued."

His eyes narrowed. "Of course, ma'am. But remember, I will have no wanton behavior under my roof. Good night." He turned and left the room, nearly slamming the door behind him.

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Not feeling able to face more of Penny's excited chatter about the ball, James went to his own bedchamber. Once he had rung for his valet, he stood staring out the window into the moonlit gardens.

Impudent chit. Telling me to leave a room in my own house. And refusing to admit that the relationship between herself and Patterson was anything beyond friendship. How can she expect me to believe that? She admitted that he obtained her clothing for her. Was she his mistress?

James had met Arduin's secretary, but could not remember the young man, beyond an earnest face and a bushy head of brown hair. What sort of man was he, to so forget his station that he would enter into an affaire with a gently bred young woman?

Mosely's entrance interrupted his mental ruminations against Eve's character.

"A bit early for ye to be retiring, ain't it, Master Jamie? You feeling all right?"

"I am quite well," Quinton growled. Turning from the window, he said, "What are you doing here? I thought I rang for my man."

"Told 'im I'd see to ye tonight. It's time we had a talk about Eve."

"Did you know that Eve had a—call it a *relationship*—with Arduin's secretary?"

"Aye. Seems 'e was the only real friend she had in London. 'E helped 'er get proper clothing so she could come to ye. Said 'e was in a real taking when she told 'im what she planned, but she convinced him to 'elp 'er anyhow."

"I received the impression that they were more than just friends," Quinton said shortly.

"Can't see where ye got that idea. All ye have to do is listen when she speaks of 'im. Like a brother to 'er, 'e is, and she's fond of 'im in just that way." Mosely knelt to remove James' boots. "Jamie, ye were hearing more'n Eve said if ye thought she had warm feelings for the lad."

"Well, she did deny it, but how could any young man remain indifferent to Eve? I mean..." James stopped in confusion. What had he been about to say? He silently cursed his unruly tongue.

"Ye ought to be 'shamed that ye'd even think for a moment that Eve's anything but a lady."

Mosely's disapproval was evident in the rough way that he removed the second boot. His lips were drawn into a thin line as he assisted James from his coat and held the dressing gown ready.

"Put yerself to bed. I got things to do," he said.

James was speechless until the door closed nosily behind Mosely. Then he cursed.

So she's captured your heart too, you old reprobate.

He poured brandy from the decanter on his dresser and sat in his chair, staring into the fire.

Mosely was as close to a real friend as James had, despite the difference in their stations. Though the scarred ex-sailor pretended to be a servant—groom one day, valet the next, and God-knew-what the day after that—he was a full partner in several of James' trading ventures.

"Probably richer than I am," James muttered, not sure whom he was angry with, himself or Mosely. Because he was a friend, James felt betrayed by his defection to Eve.

I am right, by God! She had no call to embark on such a lunatic prank. How could it result in anything but disaster?

Discovering his glass to be empty, James poured himself another healthy tot and threw himself back into his chair.

You have well and truly done it this time. Insulted Eve, outraged Mosely, made a complete fool of yourself.

What had made him suddenly assume that Eve's relationship with young Patterson was sexual in nature? She had certainly never given him any indication that her morals were less than the highest. And why had he, when the idea presented itself to him, reacted with such anger, such lack of manners?

To accuse a respectable young woman of bestowing her favors upon an equally respectable young man was outside of enough. Other than her ill-conceived masquerade, Eve's behavior had always been blameless. James had heard nothing from Arduin but praise for Patterson.

Eve had had a right to be furious, to tell James in no uncertain terms to remove himself from her presence. On the other hand, the little fool had taken an incredible chance when she donned trousers. She had no idea of what sort of man she was seeking employment with. Why he could have been a rake, a wastrel, any sort of vile, unspeakable cad.

His glass was empty again. He splashed more brandy into it.

What right-thinking young gentlewoman would indulge in such outrageous conduct as to masquerade as a man, unless she were less than virtuous?

Certainly among the females known to James, there were only two sorts. Some dispensed their favors and their bodies in return for some sort of recompense, be it monetary or in the form of services.

Others never by so much as a word or gesture violated the very strict precepts of society.

Eve was certainly not of the second sort. She had too much spirit, too courageous a nature. Therefore, she must be one of the first. As his mother was.

No, James told himself, never like his mother. Eve's nature was kind, generous, and loyal. If she gave her body to a man, she would do so out of that very generosity that made her so fine a person. She would never exchange her favors for gold or jewels, as he suspected his still-beautiful mother had done on more than one occasion. Despite his isolation from the *ton* for several years, James had never been unaware of its more common gossip, for he knew that rumor often carried with it more than a few nuggets of truth—valuable information he could act upon to increase his own fortunes.

He reached for the decanter again. When he saw the level of the liquid inside, he took stock of himself. The end of his nose was numb and his head felt light.

"Good grief! Have I really drunk a third of that bottle?" he said aloud.

Despite the late hour, he slipped into a hunting jacket and brogans and went downstairs. A walk in the garden was just the ticket. Get his blood flowing and clear the cobwebs.

Perhaps he could clear thoughts of Eve from his mind at the same time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Eve, I heard that you had been injured! Are you feeling quite the thing again?"

Tom Patterson strode into the office where Eve was just completing the draft of a letter to Quinton's agent in Venice. She hobbled around the end of her desk and, instead of walking into Tom's outstretched arms, held out her hand for him to shake.

"Of course, Tom. Oh, how good it is to see you!" She smiled widely, hoping Tom would realize that she had refused his embrace out of discretion rather than rejection of his affections. "Come, sit down and tell me what you have been up to these weeks since we last spoke."

She urged him into a chair and went to pull the door open widely. *There! Just let James accuse me of improper conduct!* As she sat, Eve stared meaningfully at the open door and held a cautionary finger to her lips. Tom immediately understood her warning.

"Oh, I have been my usual wastrel self. Arduin was in the country most of the summer, and I had little to do but play until he returned last month. But it was not the same without you, Eve, for I have no other friends who so completely enter into my interests as you."

"Nor others who will go along with so many of your pranks, either, I'll warrant," Eve replied with a laugh. "But have you seen Mrs. Storridge? Is she well?"

"I knew that you would ask, so I went to see her a day or two ago. She is in the best of health and sends her love. She asked me to deliver this note to you." He handed Eve a folded letter. "So tell me how you have contrived to put your arm in that sling? Horse throw you?"

Eve blushed. "I am ashamed to admit that she did, Tom. Mr. Mosely tells me that it must have been a grouse that rose just under her nose and startled her. She bucked and I was thrown. That will teach me to mind what I am about when on horseback. Do you know, I never realized what great noise birds can make. I was as startled as Raspberry."

"They can alarm one. I remember the first time I flushed a grouse as a lad. I was startled out of my wits." Tom leaned forward across the desk. "Are you really all right, Eve? There are circles under your eyes, and you look tired and thinner. I sensed some restraint when Quinton spoke of you. Do you go on well with him?"

"I assure you that I am fine," Eve said, forcing her voice to be light and unconcerned. "It is only that this arm has been so uncomfortable that I do not sleep well. And Mr. Quinton is a kind and considerate employer. I am really quite content to work for him."

Reassured, Tom turned the conversation to other subjects. They chatted for nearly an hour, until a footman came to remind them that Tom must ready himself for the ball. Informed that Eve would take her dinner alone in her room, Tom stated that he would much rather eat with her than be among so many people with whom he was not acquainted.

"No, Tom. You must go to dinner. And you must promise me that you will dance with Penny afterward. She is a very sweet young girl and there will not be another partner for her with your youth and poise and address. She would be heartbroken if you were to be absent, particularly after I have filled her ears with praise of you."

"But confound it, Eve, why are you not invited?"

"I was invited, but begged off, Tom. My arm still pains me a little, and my ankle tires easily. By this time of day, I am too fatigued to be very good company. I assure you that Penny understands."

"Well, I don't," Tom said, his voice hard. "It is outside of enough that you should sit alone in your

chamber while the rest of us are enjoying ourselves. I don't think much of Quinton for allowing you to do so. He could have let you free to rest this afternoon so that you would be fit for this evening."

"Tom, Tom. This was *my* choice. Mr. Quinton would have allowed me to rest if I had so requested. And he would never forbid me such a pleasure."

Eve lied, for Quinton had indeed forbidden her to be present at the ball.

"Why, just last month I was at table when he entertained his neighbors. He is not nearly so high in the instep that he would not make his secretary welcome, I promise you."

"Well, I still think it's a rum go," Tom muttered, as he let himself be urged out of the office. "I tell you what. I will come upstairs halfway through the evening, bringing some champagne, and we will have a party of our own."

"I beg you not to do so. I am tired and will no doubt retire early. But you may breakfast with me in the morning before you depart. That is, if you do not mind coming here to do so. I usually breakfast at my desk."

Not *quite* a lie, for Quinton had also forbidden her to appear at breakfast while the guests were present.

"What a slave driver he must be. I am glad that I did not make a try for your position. He and I would have never gone on together. Very well, I will join you for breakfast. At nine?"

Eve agreed and pushed Tom out the door. As she stood looking after him, she saw Mosely watching her from just outside Quinton's door. The man winked and nodded his approbation at Eve's handling of Tom's questions and protests.

Later, when he brought her dinner tray, he said, "I won't say that I agree with 'Is Nibs that ye should stay hidden away like this. Ain't much I can do about it, though. 'E's master 'ere, after all, and it's our place to dance to 'is piping. But I gave 'im a piece of my mind about it, ye can be sure."

"I truly do not mind, Mr. Mosely. In fact, I think that I will be more comfortable here than in the dining room. I find that this masquerade is growing tiresome, much as I like my position. In some ways, I will be glad to be done with it and don my skirts again."

"Now that don't sound like the spirited Eve I know. Buck up, lass. All will come right, sooner or later."

Eve sighed. "If only I could believe that, Mr. Mosely,"

"I can see ye need something to cheer ye up. What would you say to a ride tomorrow afternoon? Yer ankle's 'ealed right and tight, and ye've been indoors too long. Enough to give anyone the megrims."

"Oh, could we? I should like that above all things." Eve's gloomy mood lightened immensely at the thought of getting on Raspberry's back again.

"I'll fetch ye directly after luncheon. Now, I best get me back to the kitchen. Ackroyd 'as the knack of raising the girls' 'ackles. It's up to me to keep the peace until dinner's over."

"I always thought that Ackroyd, for all his stuffiness, was as big a misogynist as his master."

"If that means 'e don't like the ladies, you're in the right of it. It's a good thing we don't have the girls 'ere regular, or we'd always be replacing maids and such. I'll see you tomorrow."

Eve remained in her bedchamber all evening, listening to the music from the small orchestra waft through her open window. She was lonely and downcast, and admittedly immersed in self-pity.

It is not that I wish to dance, but that I miss the company.

On the heels of this assertion, she admitted to herself that she *did* wish to dance, to laugh, to flirt, to

behave exactly as a young woman of her age and birth should.

She wanted a silk ball gown, an ivory fan, and satin slippers.

She wanted a handsome gentleman to bow over her hand, his eyes alight with admiration for her loveliness.

Most of all, she wanted to be in Penny's place, a young girl at her first grown-up party, eyes sparkling with excitement and cheeks warm from the compliments on the lips of her waltz partner.

Eve stood at the moonlit window with tears streaming down her face. Not even the soothing strains of a waltz calmed her.

"Fool!" she whispered. "You chose this path. You wanted to be independent. Now you must pay the price of your independence."

She stared out at the silvery landscape. "But it hurts! Oh! It hurts so much!"

~*~

Breakfast with Tom was nearly as uncomfortable as the previous afternoon's visit had been. He was still convinced that Eve was not being treated as he thought she should, that she was overworked. He promised her that if her treatment had not improved by the time the Quinton household returned to London, he would have something to say about it.

At Eve's query as to what gave him the right to say anything about her relationship with her employer, he stammered, then burst out with, "Damn it, Eve! You have no more sense than God gave a goose. You have no family, no other friends. If that don't give me the right to concern myself with your welfare, then nothing does. Now take care of yourself and I will see you in a month or so. And no more falls, you hear?" He shook her hand in farewell.

She wished with all her heart she could hug him. He was such a good friend. And so protective.

Mosely, again standing watch in the corridor outside, remarked softly, "That's a fine young man."

"I know it, Mr. Mosely. How I wish I could have told him that he will never see me again. I shall miss him." She went back into the office and picked up some letters, but she might as well have been holding blank sheets, so blinded was she by tears.

Through diligent effort, she had pulled herself together by the time Penny came bursting into the room, full of news.

"Oh, Eve, it was so wonderful! Lord Arduin danced with me twice and called me a 'taking little thing'! He is so handsome. And Lady Marsten said that I should take nicely when I make my comeout. She is very nice, but her husband is awfully quiet. Oh, and Mr. Patterson was so very amusing. He has promised to take me to a balloon ascension when I come to London."

"So you like him, Penny," Eve said. "I am glad, for he is a fine person."

"Oh, yes, I do. I can see why you warned me not to develop a *tendre* for him, though, Eve. He is so very handsome. And so nice too!" She pouted. "But he acted just like a brother! Not a single compliment."

The pout turned to a giggle. "Now Mr. Thompson, he was full of compliments—my hair style, my gown, my eyes, my dancing." Penny fell silent, her usually vivacious expression changed to a thoughtful one. "Do you know, Eve, I know I am not the paragon that Mr. Thompson would have made me believe. I know that I am not beautiful. My mirror is all too honest. And surely there are many prettier girls among the *ton*. But Mr. Thompson insisted that I would put them all in the shade when I

come to London."

"You will meet many like him there, Penny. I believe it is not uncommon for gentlemen to believe that compliments are the only conversation desired by young ladies."

"Well, and I wish they would not! I enjoyed Mr. Patterson's conversation much more. He had something to say!"

"Hold to that opinion, Penny, and you will go on well during your season. And you will not be likely to be taken in by fribbles and fortune hunters, for it is a certainty that you will encounter all too many of them," Eve advised, relieved that the girl was beginning to show good sense about her relations with gentlemen.

"Fortune hunters? Surely a fortune hunter would pass me by, Eve? Seabrooke is well known to be a meager estate."

"And your brother is well known to be disgustingly rich, young lady. That will make you a target for every gazetted rake and would-be fortune hunter in London."

"Is Jamie really all that rich? I knew he was successful, but..." Penny's face showed her disbelief.

"Very. I suggest that you have a talk with him. He has told me that he intends to dower you well. You should know your worth to a prospective husband so that you will not be tempted to throw yourself away."

"Jamie, rich! I can scarcely believe it. And all along I had thought I would be forced to marry for money and never for love. I must go and speak with him immediately."

Eve watched the girl dash from the room, hoping that she had not done badly to let Penny know how well she was fixed. It was none of Eve's concern, after all.

No, a girl should be aware of her circumstances, be they rich or poor. It had been irresponsible of Quinton not to have told her.

Mosely came shortly after luncheon to fetch Eve for the promised ride. Raspberry was waiting by the front door—but so was Regal.

Eve looked at Mosely in surprise.

"Is Nibs, 'e has a notion to ride with ye, Eve. You and me, we'll go out another day."

Eve could not mount Raspberry without assistance, for her ankle was still weak and her arm useless for pulling herself into the saddle. Mosely lifted her until she could swing her leg over. As she settled herself, Quinton came out the door.

"All ready?" he asked. At Eve's nod, he mounted and led the way down the drive. "I thought that we would ride in Oatfield's woods if you do not think it is too far. I would prefer that you not be seen on the more public roads."

Eve found herself wishing to stick her tongue out at his blue clad back. Such stuffy concern for proprieties, and for someone who was to depart forever in less than a week. Sometimes she wanted to do violence to his person, so angry did he make her.

She soon forgot her pique as they rode slowly along a shaded lane and into the Oatfield wood. A number of narrow trails wandered among the oaks and beeches there and Eve thoroughly enjoyed her surroundings.

Quinton was forced to ride before her most of the time, due to the narrowness of the lanes, and he spoke but seldom. They had been riding for about an hour, following first one path then another, when

the woods opened and they found themselves in a small, sunlit glade. Eve exclaimed at its beauty.

"Do you think, sir, that we might stop here for a short spell? It is so lovely, and I must confess that I am tiring."

"Of course." Quinton obligingly turned his horse aside and Raspberry followed. "Shall I help you dismount?" he asked when he had tied the horses' reins loosely to a tree.

"If you please," Eve answered. "I do not think that I can do so without assistance. My arm..." She stopped as Quinton's arms reached toward her. He grasped her about the waist and pulled her from Raspberry's back. But instead of releasing her, once her feet were firmly upon the ground, he continued to hold her, his hands under her coat, tight upon the waistband of her trousers.

Eve looked into his eyes and was surprised at the glow in their gray depths. They drew even closer to her own, until his lips met hers, softly at first and gentle, then with increasing pressure.

Her own lips parted as his kiss grew ever more insistent. His probing tongue teased her teeth apart and entered. Eve responded, hesitantly at first, then with passion, until her own tongue played with his as it sought the depths of her mouth. She pressed herself against him, wanting to be closer, much closer. His hands slid lower to grasp her buttocks, pulling her against his hard body.

An eternity later, he raised his head, pulling his lips from hers. Eve's eyes slowly opened and she looked up at him, still lost in the ecstasy of his kiss.

An instant later he was holding her away from him, his hands painfully hard on her upper arms. "Damn it, Eve!" he almost shouted. "This cannot be! I should not have done that."

"Oh, be quiet!" she yelled back at him. "Had I not enjoyed being kissed, I should have struggled. As I did not, you need not apologize."

She jerked herself free and staggered backwards several steps. "Furthermore, I am getting very tired of gentlemen saying 'Damn it, Eve!' to me. It was beyond enough coming from Chas. Then Tom started saying it. And now you!"

Losing her balance, she fell on her bottom on the leaf-strewn ground. Her legs stuck out in front of her gracelessly, and she had a mental picture of how ridiculous she must appear. The vision increased her anger. "You'll be rid of me very soon, and in the meantime you will never, never say that to me again! Do you hear me?"

Hearing how her own voice had risen in pitch and volume, she clapped both hands over her mouth.

What a fool I am! Now he will know I am as much a shrew as his mother.

Quinton went to one knee beside her. Gently he took her chin in his hand and forced her to look up at him.

"Eve, I should not have kissed you. You are an unmarried female under my protection and I had no right to force myself upon you. That was why I cursed at you." His eyes no longer glowed and his voice was cool and somewhat impersonal. "A gentleman never offers such an insult to the ladies of his household. Will you forgive me?"

Eve looked deeply into his eyes, hoping she would see something other than concern and regret.

She was disappointed.

With his assistance, she stood. Leaves stuck to her riding breeches and the tail of her coat, but she ignored them.

He made a motion as if to brush the leaves away, then drew his arm back.

I should not have kissed him back. He cannot bear to touch me now.

"No apology is necessary, Mr. Quinton," Eve said, determined that he should not outdo her in icy politeness. "Nor should you dwell upon your actions. I assure you that I took no offense." She hobbled to Raspberry, for she must have twisted her still-weak ankle when she lost her balance. Loosening the reins, she attempted to mount but her splinted arm prevented her from doing so.

Hating the necessity, she turned to face him. "Sir, if you would be so kind as to lift me onto my horse, I will return to Fallowfeld." Her heart was cold in her breast, for he clearly regretted giving in to momentary lust.

And lust it was, my girl. You will do well to remember that. What else could he feel for you, a woman who's shown herself to be entirely without principles?

James assisted Eve to mount and watched her as she rode away down the narrow trail.

Why had he kissed her? And having kissed her, what demon had possessed him that he'd treated her like a common doxy? He had brought her out today in hopes that the constraint that had been between them for the past weeks would be eased. While he had not changed his mind about sending Eve away, he sincerely regretted the loss of his friendship.

"Her friendship, you simpleton," he muttered. "Eve is a girl."

A woman! his mind corrected.

"And therein lies the problem," James admitted.

He had intended to apologize to her for accusing her of more than a simple deception, motivated by her need to make her own way in the world. God knew, he didn't blame her for preferring the well-paid and far more prestigious position of secretary to that of governess.

Look at poor Miss Comstock, some sort of a distant relative. James knew that she had rarely dined with family at Seabrooke, yet she was a lady born.

And that is the fate you believe Eve should have accepted?

This morning he had decided to ride with Eve so that he might deliver his apology in private. Instead, he had mauled her and kissed her.

And such a kiss. It had shaken him to his very core. But Eve...such an innocent. Her initial response to the kiss had shown that she was as lacking in amorous experience as the merest babe.

An errant thought, that her subsequent response had been anything but innocent, he quickly quelled. James knew that he had offered unforgivable insult to her. She would never wish to see him again. Vowing that he would avoid her company during the remainder of her stay at Fallowfeld, James mounted Regal and turned his head toward home.

He indulged in mental self-recrimination all the way home.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eve was lying on her bed, half-asleep, when Mosely delivered her dinner tray. Her eyes were stuck shut with dried tears and her throat was raw. She had wept more in the past few weeks than in the entire rest of her life, she believed. Certainly she seemed to dissolve into tears at the slightest provocation.

Her reply to his cheerful greeting and inquiry about her ride was quiet and unenthusiastic. He was the last person she was inclined to confide in, since he and Quinton seemed to have few secrets between them. He left the tray, advising her to make an early night of it, and went away, leaving her alone again.

Eve was tired, and depressed as well. She had returned to her room following her escape from Quinton, full of anger at his so casual treatment of her. How dare he kiss her as he had, without caring for her? Her lips still burned from his kiss and she was overcome with longing for him. But she also felt used and cast aside.

She loved him so much, yet he seemed to be irreparably angry with her. She knew he held her in such a degree of disrespect that he thought nothing of mauling her about. He had kissed her with an abandon that, in her opinion, should have been reserved for his mistress, not for one he cared nothing for.

After picking at her dinner, Eve sternly took herself in hand and delivered a harsh self-scold. She reminded herself over and over that she had always known her love for Quinton was destined to remain ever unrequited. Now she must put him out of her mind, where she had put all her dreams that could never come true.

It was time for her to put aside all childish hopes and ambitions and resign herself to a life of servitude and boredom with Alfred and Charlotte.

You are not being forced to return to Elmwood. You have enough put by that you could go back to London. Mrs. Storrige would give you a place to stay until you find a post at a school or as a governess somewhere.

Somehow she had not the energy to even consider such a move. Elmwood, right now, seemed a refuge, where she could merely exist and never have to determine her own fate again.

Mosely returned to pick up her tray. Eve exchanged pleasantries with him, but was grateful when he hurried away. She was restless.

As if there were something she had forgotten to do.

Eve felt somehow confined in her tight undershirt and trousers. Although it was early, perhaps she should retire. Her day had been long and trying, after all. Moving slowly, for she had little energy, she disrobed and slipped into her nightshirt. The prospect of sleep appealed to her more than did sitting awake with her confused thoughts circling round and round in her mind.

But blessed oblivion eluded her. After an hour of turning and twisting, of winding the sheet about herself, then having to unwind it, she gave up. The room had turned chill, so Eve built up the fire and sat on the hearthrug. Soon the leaping flames made her heavy robe oppressive, so she removed it and returned to the hearthrug, clad only in her light cotton nightshirt. She deliberately blanked her mind, finally finding a measure of peace as she stared brooding into the leaping fire.

The red and blue flames seemed to be forming a picture. Gradually she made out Quinton's face in the midst of the fire, his red hair glowing as if in sunlight, his gray eyes gleaming with the passion they had held that afternoon. His thin, mobile mouth was quirked in a smile. Would she never be free of the man?

Not if I were to live a century or more!

James Quinton was lodged firmly in her heart. To try to dislodge him would be like excising part of her very soul.

How could she bear life without him? Was there not some way she could be with him?

Even though she knew such thoughts were futile, Eve mused upon possibilities. Her first fantasy had him bursting into the room, crying that he could not live without her. She must marry him immediately, tomorrow!

Then she envisioned herself weeping as she mounted into the stagecoach at Colchester, bound for Elmwood. Suddenly Quinton came dashing up on Regal and tore open the door. He pulled her out of the coach, shouting that she must not leave, but would marry him.

Once again she saw the smug smile when he had spoke of his mistress, but now he gazed lovingly into her eyes as he presented her with a magnificent collar of diamonds. Eve was the most delightful mistress he had ever had.

Mistress! Would he have her as his mistress? Could she bring herself to sink so low?

Perhaps she could...if the reward were to be with James.

Eve had always believed implicitly in the sanctity of marriage. She had never approved of the common practice of keeping a mistress, which so many married gentlemen indulged in.

Since learning of Prudence, she had found herself holding similar views for *unmarried* men.

So how could she even consider doing such a thing?

A short, harsh laugh burst from her. How could she not, if it were the only way that she could have James? He would never consider marrying a woman so sunk beneath propriety as to masquerade as a man.

Eve was not uninformed about the physical relationship between man and woman, for she had observed the matings of horses and cattle, dogs and cats. She had listened unwillingly to Charlotte's frequent whining complaints about Alfred's thoughtlessness in demanding his connubial rights, when he knew that to her it was merely an unpleasant and distasteful duty.

Yet Eve knew, from observing her own parents, that marital relations could be both pleasant and satisfying. How often as a child she had seen, without understanding, the soft, slack expression on her mother's face when her father had kissed her.

In fact, she told herself with a rueful smile, if her body's involuntary responses to Quinton had been any indication, the words *pleasant* and *satisfying* drastically understated the case. She felt her breasts tighten and a warm glow in her middle at the memory of the emotions that she had experienced that afternoon.

~*~

James excused himself from further intercourse with Penny and Miss Comstock after dinner, saying that he had business concerns upon his mind. He intended to retire to the office and spend a few hours at work, for he had found concentration difficult the past few days.

Instead he went to his bedchamber. Carrying a brandy decanter with him, he slowly climbed the stairs and walked along the hall. Briefly hesitating at Eve's door, he shook his head and passed beyond to enter his own. The fire was dying, so he tossed a few fresh logs upon it and kicked at them to stir up the flames.

Two hours later he still sat in his wing chair, staring into the fire, the snifter of brandy standing

practically untouched upon the table at his elbow. For all of those dragging two hours, the scene in the glade this afternoon had replayed itself in his mind. What demon had taken possession of him, that he should have behaved so to a dependent female?

What must Eve think of him? Disgust? Fear? Hatred? He was no nearer to answers than he had been when he first threw himself into the chair.

Her reaction puzzled him. She had seemed almost angry at his apology, rather than at the actions that prompted it. He knew now that she was completely innocent, sexually inexperienced, despite the accusations he had flung in her face a few days before. Her first response to his kiss had proven that to him without a shadow of a doubt.

Yet she had responded with passion.

Or had she? Perhaps she had been so overset at his presumption, so distressed at the unmistakable evidence of his desire...which he had, admittedly, ground against her soft belly...

James considered that possibility. Eve was still very young, in years if not in experience. Perhaps she was infatuated with him, as Penny had been with Eve's masculine persona? Might not that have influenced her reaction to his assault on her virtue?

In memory he tasted her mouth, felt the softly hesitant touches of her tongue to his.

How I hungered for her then!

He still did, though now the need was a steady smolder, rather than the hot fire he'd felt this afternoon.

Knowing that he could not sleep until he had resolved his dilemma, James decided to go to Eve, to repeat his apology and to make her understand why he had offered her such an ignoble insult. Stepping next door, he lifted his hand to knock. But there was no bar of light beneath the door to show that she was still awake.

His quiet rap went unanswered.

Discouraged, he turned away, then decided that he should check her to make sure that she was not weeping in the darkness, still distressed at his behavior. He would just look in upon her to assure himself that she was all right.

He turned the knob and slowly, quietly pushed the door open.

Eve was sitting on the floor in front of the fire, head bent. Her nightshirt, lit from behind by the flickering fire, scarcely concealed her slender curves. She did not move, did not even seem to realize he was there.

James stood quietly, gazing at her...burning for her.

Her fair hair, tousled as if she had repeatedly run her fingers through it, shone like a golden radiance about her head. Although her face was in shadow, the sweet curve of her cheek and the droop of her head infused in him an almost overpowering feeling of protectiveness toward her.

He took a silent step into the room and eased the door closed behind him. She remained apparently unaware of his presence, and he stood still, drinking in the sight of her. Finally he could stand it no longer. He took two more steps and fell to his knees beside her.

She started, gave a small cry, hardly more than an indrawn breath.

"Eve. Oh, Eve," he murmured and took her into his arms. She sat passive in his embrace as he rained kisses over her hair, her sweet face. His hands moved to her shoulders and he held her away from him, looking into her eyes. "You are so lovely, so desirable," he whispered hoarsely.

Still she did not respond, but only sat staring, her face vacant of emotion. He buried his face against her throat, his hands moving slowly, sensuously over her back. The thin nightshirt let him feel the warmth of her body and its delicious curves. Grasping the thin material, he pulled upwards. It moved only a little, for she was sitting on the tail. Frustrated, he lifted her body toward him and tugged again. Relieved of her weight, the garment slipped free.

As if awakened from a daze, Eve moved then. Her eyes opened wide, staring straight into his.

"Oh, no!"

She had not been dreaming! James was here. And he was trying to undress her.

Instinctively she wriggled from his embrace and scrambled to her feet. Backing away from him as he also rose, she came up against the edge of her bed.

"No, please! You should not be here! Please, Mr. Quinton, go away."

As if he had not heard her words, Quinton continued to advance. The expression on his shadowed face was fierce, relentless in the dim light.

Eve climbed up onto the bed, still backing away from him. Not quite frightened, she was wary, nonetheless. His advance seemed so relentless, as if he were in the grip of an irresistible force. When his thighs encountered the edge of the bed, he bent forward, looming over her, his hands indenting the mattress on either side of her bare legs.

Trapped!

Exactly where she wanted to be, she realized. What would happen if she threw herself into his arms? She wanted to. Oh! How she wanted to.

Before she could move, Quinton grasped her uninjured ankle and pulled her across the bed towards the edge. Her nightshirt stuck to the quilt and remained where it was as she moved slowly but inexorably closer to him.

Helpless within his grasp, Eve simply watched him, memorizing the fierce need writ on his features, the blazing heat of his gray gaze. This moment had been inevitable, she admitted, since the day she decided to don trousers and become his secretary.

Strangely, she was not frightened. He would not harm her, no matter what he did to her. And had this not been the most compelling of her fantasies? She was in his arms, exactly where she most wanted to be.

To be his, if only this once. To belong, however briefly, to this man for whom she felt such overpowering love. She wanted one memory to cling to through the long cold nights in her attic room at Elmwood.

No longer fighting against him, she tried to free her hands so that she might touch his face, stroke his strong shoulders and chest. But he only held her all the more tightly. His mouth explored her face and neck. Eve was aware for the first time of his tremendous strength. With what appeared to be little effort, he heaved himself astride her thighs and transferred his grip on her hands to one of his own. With his free hand he took hold of the placket of her nightshirt and gave it a great yank. The ties parted and the rest of her body was exposed to his view.

She froze. Although he touched her nowhere but at wrists and thighs, her skin burned, as if his hungry gaze were a tangible force.

James looked at Eve, as she lay motionless under his hands. Her body was pale against the dark bedspread, long and slim, with narrow waist and small, high breasts. How had he missed seeing the

delicious curve of her unmistakably feminine hips?

She must have lost weight during her convalescence, for her hipbones were evident, her belly an exquisitely concave curve between them. His taste had always run to voluptuous women. Now he wondered at how he could have desired so much soft flesh.

Her eyes were enormous as she stared unblinking into his face. James ran his hand gently along the smooth curve of her shoulder and down between her high, rose-tipped breasts. As his fingers trailed across her belly, she shuddered.

"Oh yes, James," she whispered, so softly that his ears barely caught the words. "Yes, please." Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

Eve's words were like cold water dashed into his face, even as his body responded to her invitation. He jerked his hands from her as if they burned. He pushed himself upright and turned away from paradise.

"Cover yourself," he told her hoarsely.

An implacable expression turned his face into an austere and pain-filled mask. Eve pulled her nightshirt around her as she sat up, crossing her arms under her breasts to hold it.

"I was not asking you to stop, James," she told him, marveling at her own boldness.

He kept his back to her. "I came to beg your pardon for my inexcusable conduct this afternoon, Eve, and now I must do so doubly. Please accept my apologies for forgetting that, as one of my dependents, you should be free of my...ah, my attentions."

"No!" Eve was determined not to let him retreat into his habitual formality. "I do not accept your apology, James. I will not forgive you."

"Why..."

"Hush. Let me speak." She held up her hand. "I tried to tell you this afternoon that I welcomed your kiss. Tonight I welcome your...your attentions. I shall be leaving you soon, James. Let me have this brief time with you to remember."

Jerkily he turned; stared at her, evidently stunned by her words.

"If I were to accept your apology and let you go away now, I could forgive neither myself nor you." She shrugged her arms free of the remains of her nightshirt, held them out to him. "Come to me, James. Make me yours, if only for tonight."

James heard her words and read her desire in the tremble of her mouth, the longing in her gaze. It was the final straw.

With a groan of surrender, he threw himself on the bed and clasped her to him.

"Eve. Eve. My lovely Eve," he whispered into her ear before his tongue tasted its convolutions.

Her hands scrabbled at his back, pulled his shirt free from his trousers. Her hips pushed against his, driving him into a frenzy of desire. Somehow, together they managed to disrobe him.

No gentle foreplay preceded their coupling as they came together in mindless passion. His need was so great that he thrust himself within her without thought for her maidenhead. When he felt her wince, he was beyond stopping.

Eve clawed at his back as her body stiffened. He felt her spasms of completion even as he emptied himself into her.

Together they had soared into passion.

Together they fell into satiation.

The fire was a mere glowing of coals when Eve again came to her senses. She was conscious of a feeling of lassitude. It was just as intense but quite unlike that she had felt earlier, for it was induced by the delicious warmth permeating her whole body.

James's hand stroked along her spine, moving slowly, making her want to arch her back against its strength. She could feel the hairs by her ear moving in the slight breeze from his nostrils as his breathing slowed to its normal rhythm. When his soothing hand moved once again over her buttocks, she moved, snuggling closer and stretching her free arm across his chest. A long sigh of pure delight escaped from her lips. His hand stopped its movement.

"Ah, Eve," he murmured, "how could I have escaped seeing what loveliness was hidden in those baggy, drab garments you wore?"

"Mmmm," she answered, not wishing to speak, afraid that the spell would be broken.

"I am not in the habit of ravishing virgins, you know," he said, his voice soft. "Did I hurt you, love?"

"Hush, James. Do not speak." She reached to lay her hand over his mouth, afraid that his words would bring reality back to them. His tongue moved against her palm, sending a thrill down her arm. She moved her hand lower, her fingertips trailing gently across his chin and down his chest. Scribing small circles along his breastbone, she explored the thick tangle of hair there, wondering if it was as red as that on his head, but not caring enough to look. After eliciting small gasps of pleasure from him when she toyed briefly with his tiny male nipples, she explored further.

He inhaled sharply as her fingertips played about his navel then moved even lower to tease the hair at his groin. Amazed at her own daring, Eve withdrew her hand a moment. Emboldened by his lack of resistance, she resumed her teasing. Her hand slipped to the inside of his thigh and she drew her short fingernails along it until she could reach no lower.

His hand on her back stopped its stroking. His breathing had become shallow. Eve continued to stroke and tease, each circle of her fingertips coming ever closer to their goal. But she had scarcely touched his hard, swollen manhood when, with a grunt of effort, he grabbed her waist and swung her above him.

A moment's awkwardness, then Eve found her position astride his hips. As he entered her, she lost herself in the incredible sensations that radiated again through her body from the point of their joining.

This time there was no urgency, no haste. He worshiped her body with hands and mouth, led her again and again to the edge of culmination. At last he took her to the peak and, with a joyous shout, followed her down the other side...

Eve awoke to sunlight. Her first thought was that she would be late to breakfast and that Quinton would frown at her for her tardiness in coming to the office.

Then she remembered. He had come to her, had made her his. Once in desperate, mutual need. Once in slower, more teasing luxury. And a third time, when both woke briefly from deep sleep, in quiet, gentle tenderness.

At the first gray light of dawn he had kissed her and whispered that he must leave, that it would not do if they were to be discovered.

She had watched him gather up his strewn garments in the dim light of her bedchamber, admiring his slim, well-knit body. But she had not spoken, still afraid that if she did so the magic spell that had surrounded them both for a few hours of wonder would be lost. When he had slipped silently from her chamber after one last kiss, she had fallen into a deep, satisfying, dreamless sleep.

Eve jumped from bed, feeling better than she had for weeks. Even the splint on her arm no longer irritated her, despite its clumsiness as she washed herself. What a wonderful morning! She awkwardly clothed herself. As she quickly brushed her hair in front of the mirror, she saw that her eyes had not lost the faint purple shadows that had lain below them since her accident.

She looked closer and saw that her lips were swollen slightly. No wonder, for he had returned to her mouth again and again, kissing her as if he could not stop, nibbling, suckling, invading her mouth with his tongue.

At the memory, Eve's body shook with a brief *frisson* of desire. She laughed shakily.

This is no way for a lady to feel, she told herself sternly.

"But I am not a lady," she spoke aloud. "I am a young gentleman, and gentlemen are allowed to admit their passions and even to indulge them."

She sketched a quick bow to the tall, golden haired gentleman whose reflection she saw, and came very close to skipping from the chamber.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Quinton was just leaving the breakfast room as Eve arrived. He greeted her quietly, his face expressionless. He did not look directly at her. A clammy feeling of fear spread through her chest.

"Good morning, sir," she said, forcing a suddenly false cheerfulness. "I am late, but I will eat quickly and come to the office as soon as I am finished."

He nodded curtly and brushed past her.

"Grump. He must have gotten foxed last night." Penny cast a disgusted look at her brother's departing back. "Eve, you look tired this morning. Did you not sleep well?"

Penny smiled over her cup of chocolate.

"Or was your ride yesterday too much for you?"

"I imagine that it was, Penny, for I was exhausted when I returned," Eve replied as she carried her plate to the sideboard. None of the many dishes there looked appetizing, but she took a rasher of bacon and a boiled egg. Penny passed her a covered basket of rolls as she seated herself at the table.

"My brother probably led you to ride farther and faster than you should have. Sometimes he is thoughtless of others. You should have left him and returned to the stables when you tired," Penny said in maternal tones.

Eve could not help but chuckle. "Oh, Penny, you sound just as if you were my mother. Do not be concerned. I am nearly recovered and the ride did not hurt me." At the girl's doubtful expression, she continued, "As a matter of fact, I did leave Mr. Quinton and return alone, so I was not neglectful of my own health."

But her health was not why she had left him in the glade.

Eve fought to contain the smile hovering about her lips.

Still, the chill was back in her middle and breakfast sat in an indigestible lump when she slowly climbed the stairs to the office.

Why had he looked at her so coldly, she wondered, when his last kiss had been so tender and loving?

The stairs had never seemed so high before, nor had the corridor to the office seemed so long. Eve paused in the doorway when she saw James already at his desk. He did not look up from the papers he was perusing.

She went to her own desk. There were none of the papers on its surface that usually awaited her. Could he be as distracted as she this morning?

She folded her hands atop the leather-covered surface and waited expectantly, her eyes on his beloved face.

How handsome he is, even when he is scowling. But he was not scowling last night.

A vision of his passion-filled face swam before her eyes and Eve shivered.

Minutes dragged by as James gave all his attention to the papers in his hands. Finally he laid them on his desk with a sigh. His chin lifted and he looked across at Eve for a long time. The longer he stared at her, the more cold the feeling within her chest. She could not think, but only sat, returning his stare and feeling the color rise in her cheeks as she did so.

"Well, Eve, this is a fine coil," he said in a toneless voice. "What are we to do now?"

She did not trust her voice to be steady, so she shrugged and bit her lower lip. Why did she feel so

much like he was about to rip up at her? Did he not realize that she had given herself to him from love? Tears stung her eyelids, so she lowered them, not wishing to let him know how she was hurt at his coldness.

"Look at me!" he commanded.

She did. What she saw in his face caused the chill in her chest to expand, freezing her entire being.

"I should apologize again for taking advantage of you, but I will not. I am not sure I did." Rising, he began pacing the length of the room.

After several laps, he came to lean across her desk, looming over her. "You, madam, have been the one to take advantage of me. You inveigled yourself into my employ by means of a masquerade, and one that shows that you have none of the sensibilities that one would expect of a woman of our class. Your behavior since then has proven that you lack all the qualities of a lady, that your morals are as low as those of any woman of the streets. Nay, lower, for they, at least, are honest in their profession. You were not. You cheated me, madam, and that I cannot forgive."

As Eve opened her mouth to protest that she had earned her salary, he held up a hand. The implacable expression on his face silenced her.

"To add insult to injury, madam, you said yourself that you were not offended by my lamentable lapse of manners yesterday in the woods. I can only assume that you enjoyed my actions, reprehensible though they were. Why else did you seduce me last night?"

Eve shook her head, stared down at her hands. They were so tightly clutched together that her fingertips were white and bloodless.

Why was he hurting her, doing his best to break her heart?

"I have said that it is not my habit to ravish virgins, but 'pon my word, Eve, I am amazed that you came to me one. The entire pattern of your behavior shows that you place little value upon your virtue. Was Patterson not wealthy enough to please you? Is that why you withheld yourself from him, so that you could ensnare a richer prize?"

Words of denial sprang to her lips, but before she could voice them, James spoke again.

"Yes, that must have been it. You knew of my wealth and you set yourself out to capture me. But I wonder, Eve, how you meant to do so? Did you think that I liked boys? Or were you planning to creep into my bed some night, to force me to compromise you?"

Eve shook her head dumbly as she looked up into his angry face. How could this be the same man who had so passionately, so lovingly, caressed and kissed her just a few hours before?

"I consider myself an honorable man, madam, but in this instance, I do not feel that my honor demands that I make recompense. You, as far as the world knows, are a young man and there is no thought of your being compromised. I do not think that you will tell anyone of this and you may be assured that I will not."

"No, I will not tell anyone," Eve whispered. "But it was not as you think, James. Truly it was not."

His fist hit the desk. "Hah! It could be no other way. You lied to gain employment with me. You accepted my advances without protest. You cooperated in your own ruin, when any virtuous lady would have fought most fiercely to protect her virtue."

Bending forward, he stretched across the desk until Eve could feel the heat of his breath on her cheeks.

"You, madam, took advantage of my honor to trick me into an impossible situation. Well, it will do you

no good. I am not one who will do the honorable and make you my wife. In fact, Eve, I should be very happy to see the last of you as soon as possible."

Eve stood up. "That is enough! I will not listen to any more of your insults. Yes, I lied about my sex, but only to obtain employment. What has happened since then was none of my doing."

She took a deep breath and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "You kissed me first. Struggle? No, I did not struggle, for 'twould have done me little good, with one arm in a splint and my body still weak from lying about for a month."

Another breath, this one catching in her throat.

"And yes, I enjoyed your kisses. I had, may God forgive me, developed a fondness for you and wanted you to kiss me. But it was not I who came to your chamber last night. No! Not I! You stole into mine."

"Damn it, Eve!" Quinton roared. "Be silent!"

"I will not. Yes, I cooperated last night. How was I to do otherwise? Was I to scream, like any innocent girl, and wake the house? What would the servants have thought?"

"What of Penny? Yes, Penny, who is foolish enough to worship the very ground you tread upon! Her admired brother in his secretary's bedchamber, intent upon rape. And the secretary not the young man that Penny thought, but a woman!"

She forced herself to laugh. "What would your adoring sister have thought then? Oh, no, James Quinton, you were not at all at fault."

All desire to weep, to beg, all were forgotten in her anger at his injustice. She moved around the desk and came face to face with him in the center of the room. "Although you may not believe it, sir, I had no plans to seduce you, although I will admit that last night I wanted you as much as you did me.

"I had decided I must leave, even before you...you came to me, last night. This morning my resolve was even stronger. How could I stay here, where I could not be safe from your advances?"

As she spoke, Eve congratulated herself on her manner. Chas had once told her that the best defense was offense. She was determined to be as offensive as possible, for she could stand no more of his bitter words.

Before James could respond to her tirade, she said, keeping her voice cool and unemotional, "Now, sir, I believe that today is the end of my second quarter's employment. Will you be so good as to have my salary ready for me tomorrow morning, for I intend to depart early?" She straightened and smiled slightly, though to do so cost her deeply. "Do you have letters to dictate this morning? I should not wish to leave you with the impression that I am unwilling to discharge my duties as usual on this, my last day in your employ." She went back to her desk and sat, looking expectantly at him.

"Damn it, Eve!"

"I am sorry sir, but I do not wish to engage in further altercation with you this morning. Shall we consider all the angry words as spoken and get on with today's tasks?"

Quinton slammed his fist on his desk. "Very well, if you will have it this way. Yes, I do have some letters to dictate. When they are finished, you may take the rest of the day off to pack your things."

Eve was able to maintain her composure while he dictated three letters, but she was glad to see the back of him when he stamped out of the room after doing so. She quickly finished the translations of two of the letters and copied the third in her best hand. Then she cleared her desk and ran from the room.

Once in her bedchamber, she threw herself onto the bed, expecting the tears that had threatened for the

past two hours to come at last. But they did not.

She lay there, dry eyed, for nearly an hour, her mind going over and over his cruel words. How could he have come to such erroneous conclusions? Could he not see that she loved him beyond all belief? She knew he'd had a fondness for her, even when he still believed her to be a young man, so how could he believe that she could be so dishonest and scheming? Did he trust no one?

"This is ridiculous," Eve told herself, when she had relived the scene in the office over at least a dozen times. "You had no reason to hope, girl, and you have only received what you deserved for your wanton behavior. Get busy."

She rose from the bed and started to pull her clothing from her bureau, preparatory to packing her shabby trunk. As she lifted the well-pressed cravats from the drawer, she wondered what she would do with them. They were made of fine linen, albeit a trifle worn. But they would have no place among her feminine attire, no matter where she went. Still, she laid them in the trunk. Perhaps the housekeeper at Elmwood might find a use for them. She was certain that, no matter what plans Quinton had made for her, she had no choice but to return to the only family she had.

No matter how unwelcome she might be.

A soft tap on her door startled Eve as she was folding her last shirt. At her call, the door opened and Mosely slipped inside.

"Well, lass, so yer going. It's probably all for the best, for we could not 'ave 'oped to keep up this masquerade forever. But I'll miss you." The man's face was mournful as he held out his arms. Eve stepped into his hug and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Mr. Mosely, I do not wish to leave. You must know that. But Mr. Quinton has taken me in disgust and I cannot stay."

"Not disgust, lass. 'Is Nibs could never feel disgust for you. Oh, 'e's furious enough, I'll warrant, but 'e's that fond of ye." The burly old sailor patted her back. "Here, now, ye can't be so gloomy. Jamie, 'e's got a plan so ye won't 'ave to go back to those relatives of yers. 'E sent me in here to get ye, so's 'e can tell ye about it."

"I cannot see him, Mr. Mosely. Not now. I should disgrace myself with these tears. Can you not persuade him that I am busy packing and will speak with him later?" Eve did not want to have to face James until she was once more in control of her unruly and fragile emotions. "Would you ask him to wait, please, until I have finished packing?"

"I'll do me best, lass, but don't make 'im wait too long. 'Is Nibs ain't a patient man at the best of times." He winked. "And these ain't them."

Later Mosely returned to tell her that James had been called away. He would speak to her the first thing in the morning, just before she departed for Colchester.

Eve was greatly relieved, since her composure was still less than perfect. She asked Mosely if he would request that she be sent a tray at dinner, for she did not think she could face Penny and Miss Comstock's gay chatter through the meal.

She spent a quiet afternoon and evening in her room, reading sporadically, but mostly staring into space. She was trying to remember every word James had spoken to her, every expression of his face, every quirk of his mobile lips.

She did not want to forget one moment of the six months she had known him. Reaching deep into herself, she tried to recapture the thrill she had felt at his kisses, the surge of passion she had experienced at his lovemaking.

But it was gone. All she had were memories of him in the office. Oh, she could see, in her mind's eye, his naked body as he gathered up his clothing in the dimness of her chamber, and the ardent expression on his face when he lowered his body onto hers, but the turbulent love and desire she had felt were gone, leaving a hollow void where they had been.

His cruel words this morning had destroyed all tender memories of his lovemaking.

Eve was certain that she would never again know even a shadow of what she had experienced in his arms. Accepting this awful vision of the future, she felt a curious calm come over her. It was as if her body had purged itself of all knowledge of passion and would never again be troubled by the conflicting signals sent by her heart and her mind.

In a way Eve was relieved, for she had known, in her more practical moments, that she could not spend the rest of her life reliving a few moments of passion, but oh! How she wished she could.

James was not at the breakfast table the next morning, but Penny was. Now that the day of Eve's departure was at hand, she was distressed.

"Is there no way you can remain, Eve? Fallowfeld will be so dreary when you are gone."

"I wish I might, Penny, but I owe a duty to my family. I must go to them."

As if Elmwood were not the last place I would wish to be.

"I think you are not telling me everything," Penny said, a pout upon her lips. "It is James, is it not? He is sending you away. I have seen how he looks at you, as if he wants to rip you up for something."

"No, my dear, it is not your brother. I truly do have familial responsibilities—"

Especially if I am breeding.

Only this morning had she seriously considered what might happen to her in that eventuality. Alfred and Charlotte would cast her out, for one thing. Beyond that, she refused to think.

There is always a chance....

At first Penny pleaded with Eve to stay. Then, when Eve reiterated that she must depart, Penny blamed her brother for driving Eve away with his scowls and temper.

"Penny, Penny. Your brother did not alienate me, nor is he sending me away. I have family responsibilities that I must see to, and cannot stay here, much as I would like to. But, if Mr. Quinton would not object, I would like to write to you, once I am back at Elmwood. I should like to hear of your adventures in London next year."

"Oh, Eve, yes, do let us write to one another. But why would Jamie object?"

"It is not common for a young lady to correspond with a man unless he is a relative. Mr. Quinton might think it was not proper for you to do so."

"That for what Jamie thinks," Penny said, snapping her fingers. "We have become good friends, Eve, and I will write to you whether he says I may or not. But will you not be returning to London?"

"No. I will probably return to my previous employer. It is nearer to my relatives, you see," Eve said, hoping Penny would not ask any questions. "Perhaps I will come to London someday, and if I do, you may be sure that I will endeavor to visit you. But by then, you will probably be married and perhaps not even in London."

"Well, I cannot like your leaving so suddenly, Eve," Penny said with a pout, "but I understand your duty to your family. I will miss you, though"

"And I you, Penny. You have been a little sister to me. Good bye." But Penny would not settle for an impersonal bow and she jumped from her chair and threw her arms about Eve.

"Take care," she said, kissing Eve's cheek shyly.

Then her face flamed and she ran from the room, clearly aghast at her temerity at kissing a young man to whom she was not related.

No longer able to postpone her last meeting with James, Eve went to the office. He was again sitting behind his desk and his expression was as forbidding as it had been the day before.

"Come in, Eve," he said, as she hesitated in the doorway. "Sit down." He indicated a chair drawn up before his desk. "I must ask your forgiveness for my unfounded accusations yesterday. I had been trying to see a way out of this situation in which we find ourselves and had managed to drive myself into a rage. Please accept my apologies."

Although she was frozen to the core by the harshness of his voice, Eve managed to nod her acceptance.

"My apology should be in no way seen as forgiveness of your deceptions, however, and I am still determined that you will leave here today."

"Of course, sir. I had intended to do so."

"I do not deny," he said, ignoring her reply, "that some of the responsibility for our unfortunate encounter was mine. Nor do I deny my responsibility should any further, ah, ramifications arise." He stopped, scowling at her.

"You mean if I should have a child, I assume, sir. How kind of you. But I will not ask for your assistance, should that occur." Eve was determined to show him that she could be as cold and impersonal as he, but her heart broke in the attempt.

"There would be no need for you to ask, madam. I am aware of what honor demands of me, and will support you and the child, will ye or nil ye. You are to inform me immediately you know whether you are pregnant or not."

"I will do no such thing. It is none of your business. If you have nothing else to say, sir, I must depart. The stage at Colchester will not wait." Eve rose.

"Sit down! I am not finished with you." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a thick envelope. Tossing it across the desk toward her, he said, "Take this. It will see you through the next few months so you will not need to return to your uncle's household."

Eve picked up the envelope. It contained banknotes, most of them of large denominations. Her face flushed and she gritted her teeth. Removing the money, she counted out the amount of her salary for the past three months and stuffed it into her pocket.

For a moment, she looked across the desk at her recent employer. He stared back, almost blankly. Giving up the last of her dreams, Eve took the rest of the notes in both hands and tore them in half, then tore them again and again, until all that was left was a handful of confetti.

She forced her lips into a smile, knowing it held no humor. "I want not your charity, James Quinton," she said in a hard voice, "nor do I charge for my favors. My sins are my own and I will pay for them alone. Your money, sir!"

And she flung the bits into his face before turning and running from the room, down the stairs, and out of the house.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Jamie, I cannot tell you how I appreciate your taking me into your home like this," Chas said from where he lay on the sofa, covered with a light rug. "I could not face m'brother Alfred, and his wretched family. Let alone a winter in Yorkshire. Brr."

"The pleasure is mine, Chas. I have had a miserable autumn and am glad of some company. At least you will not go about with a gloomy phiz and an air of censure. If my sister had not decided to go to Seabrooke for Christmas, I might have strangled her."

"Your sister? Why is she in the dumps?"

James shrugged. "Who's to know what megrims a chit of eight-and-ten suffers? I believe this past month it was because young Winchester decided to pursue Penny's best friend. Or was it her worst enemy? I know not."

Chas chuckled, then grimaced as his healing wound twinged.

"But you said you had a miserable autumn. What happened? Did you lose a fortune or two?"

"Nothing so simple, nor so easily remedied. But it is a long tale, Chas, and one I'd as lief not repeat. It is not to my credit. Perhaps someday..."

James broke off to stare through the nearby window at the pale November sunshine, an expression of despair on his face.

"Of course. I did not mean to distress you. Come, tell me of the latest *on dits*. Who has run away with whose wife? Is Prinny still as extravagant as ever? Most important, Jamie, who won the Derby?"

James laughed. "Not that nag you were backing. I do believe, Chas, that you owe me twenty pounds."

"I hoped that you'd forgot that ill-advised wager. Oh, well, I'll have my batman fetch you the money, if you'll be kind enough to ring."

"Tomorrow, Chas. Tomorrow is soon enough. By the by, had you heard of the plans for Prinny's stables at Brighton? You will never believe the grandeur in which he plans to keep his cattle."

"No, tell me."

James spent the next hour relating, with much detail and many asides, just how elaborate the stables were to be at the would-be Regent's favored seaside resort. When he saw that Chas's eyes were growing heavy, he halted his comments and said, "Enough of that, Chas. You are for bed. I forgot that you are recovering from an infection." He rang the bell for Bartlett.

"And from seasickness. How is it that, in all my years as a soldier, I have not until now suffered from that vile malady? Had it not been for Slater's constant attentions, I should have probably died from starvation on the ship from the Peninsula."

"I would wager that your wound made you more susceptible. Ah, yes, Bartlett; I wish you to assist me in carrying Mr. Hadley to his room. We should be able to manage without Private Slater, who looked as done in as his master."

The two made a chair of their arms and succeeded in carrying Chas up the stairs and to his bed chamber, with a minimum of discomfort to the wounded Major. James's own valet prepared the gentleman for bed, without waking the exhausted Slater who slept on a trundle just within the dressing room.

Chas's infected wound, located as it was in the calf of his right leg, prevented him from walking about for nearly a fortnight. The infection, stubbornly persistent in the foul air of a military hospital and the

fouler air of a ship's hold, had begun to respond to the applications of fomentations almost immediately when he was ensconced in James's town house.

As the days passed, however, he regained his vitality and became restless. James was hard put to keep him amused and inactive.

One night, in desperation, James said, "Chas, if you will promise to do as the doctor said and lay back on that sofa instead of hobbling about the room like a gimp-legged tiger, I will tell you a story."

"Bedtime stories is it, Jamie?" But Chas did as he was bid and reclined, propping the injured leg on a pillow. "Proceed with your tale, oh troubadour. Or is that the title I want?"

"Close enough. Before I begin, Chas, I want you to promise me that you will not interrupt, nor will you attempt to pry from me the identity of the person of whom I speak. When I am done with my tale, you may ask what you wish of me, but I do not promise to answer."

"As you will, sir. But how unfair of you! Tell away!"

So James told the tale of a young man who came to be employed by another, older gentleman. A young man who so perfectly fitted his position and who was so likeable that his employer came to love him like a brother. Choosing his words carefully, avoiding all mention of what position the young man had filled, he went on to tell of how the young man had become part of the family, friend to his employer's sister, respected by the servants and by fellow employees, indispensable to the employer's business.

"What a paragon," Chas murmured, but James ignored him.

"Then, when he had wormed his way into the hearts of all he encountered within the employer's household and business, he fell victim to an accident. While he was incapacitated, the employer learned that this estimable young man had been, from the first, deliberately and maliciously betraying him."

"Dastardly fellow," came another soft murmur.

"The young man inveigled his employer into a compromising position, one which there was no honorable means of escaping. So the employer accused the youth of deliberate treachery and discharged him."

James fell silent.

Five minutes passed, then ten, as he stared into the fire, seeing in its flickering flames a face he could not forget.

"Well?"

"Well what, Chas?"

"What comes next? You cannot just stop there. Surely this tale you tell me has a moral. All bedtime stories must have a moral."

"No," James said, "there is no moral. That is the end of the story."

That he wanted it to go on, to have a happy ending, made no difference.

"Good God, Jamie! That's no bedtime story. It isn't even a good anecdote. What was the deceit practiced by the young man? Why was there no honorable way the employer could escape from the compromising position? You cannot dine out on a stupid tale such as that."

"I had no intention of doing so. I told you in hopes that you would be able to provide a solution to the problem."

"I might, if you were to put me in possession of all the facts. Jamie, what did the young man do that

was so terrible?"

"He masqueraded as something he was not."

"So?" Chas started to pull himself to a standing position. "A lot of us do that. Sometimes it is necessary to survival."

"Sit...No! Lie down, you idiot," James growled. "All right, I will embroider my tale. The young idiot was not a youth, but a girl. When her employer discovered her sex, he felt that he was compromised and so he had to discharge her. She had lived under his roof, unchaperoned, for better than half a year."

"Don't blame him. Stupid chit, to attempt to get away with a trick like that. But the employer must have been a bacon-brain as well, not to twig to her for so long."

"Oh, but she was most convincing. He had to remove her shirt before he realized that she was no lad."

Chas's eyebrows rose and an expression of astonishment grew on his face. "You! Jamie, 'twas you were the employer."

As James shook his head vigorously, Chas burst into hearty laughter. "The complete misogynist, taken in by a girl. The man who won't have a female under his roof, harboring a young woman for a half-year and better. This is rich!"

"Stubble it, Chas. It's not amusing. And I would not have told you had I not needed your advice. What else was I to do but send her away?"

"Why, nothing. She had earned only your contempt. But what I don't understand is why she tried to pass as a man. Wouldn't she have done better on her back? Or was she a perfect quiz?"

"She was the most lovely woman I have ever seen," said James softly, "and the finest."

Chas regarded his old friend with blatant astonishment. At last he said, "You love her, don't you, Jamie?"

"Love her? Of course not! What a damnable notion. She betrayed me, I tell you!"

"And you have spent, in your own words, 'a miserable autumn' trying to find a way to forgive her that betrayal. You must love her, man, else you'd have put her out of your mind in a trice."

"Nonsense. If you're going to prattle of love like a romantic old woman, I'm going to go to bed. Ring for Bartlett if you want anything."

James stalked angrily from the room.

No words passed between the old friends concerning James's story the next day, but there was constraint between them. Chas seemed thoughtful, and James wondered, once or twice, if Eve might have written to her uncle.

Of course not, he told himself. *He would have shot me on sight if he had known, wound or no wound.*

As the day wore on, however, James became convinced that he owed Chas the truth, and the devil with the consequences.

"I did not tell you the whole tale, Chas," James said that evening after the port had been poured and the servants had gone.

"You had better empty your budget, then, my friend, for I cannot advise you without knowing all the details. And you do wish advice, I take it, else you'd not have brought it up again."

"Advice? No, I no longer need advice. I know what I must do." He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Just telling you has made the pain and anger I felt when I learned of...of her deception return

in full force. But at the same time, it clarified my thoughts."

"Out with it then, man." Chas hit the table beside him a sharp blow, one that startled James's eyes open. "Finish your story. Then tell me what you plan to do."

Without sparing himself, James told of his advances to Eve in the forest glade, his taking of her. "She did not fight me and indeed, she even invited me into her bed, at the last, Chas. But I feel that I gave her no real choice. She was still weak from her injuries, vulnerable, and I took advantage of her condition."

He drew a hand across his face, and was surprised at the sweat he wiped from his brow. Knowing what the inevitable end of this conversation would be, but dreading it nonetheless, he rose to his feet and leaned against the edge of his desk, his back to Chas.

"And still you sent her away. Why, Jamie?"

"I don't know. Oh, at the time it was so easy to convince myself that the whole episode was *her* fault. That she had seduced me. But I know better, now, and am ashamed."

"Have you tried to find her? Or do you still wish to be shut of her?"

"I want her as I have never wanted a woman in my life. But she rejected me, Chas, when I tried to offer her assistance. She threw my money in my face."

"Money is not always the answer, Jamie, although to you, who had to strive so desperately to obtain it, it may seem so. If she would not take your money, how did she expect to support herself? Has she family? Or do you not know? And what if she is with child?"

"There is family—of sorts. Although I'll wager that they treat her like a servant. And it is because I do not know if she conceived that I told you my story. What am I to do, Chas?"

"You did not say whether you had sought her," Chas said reflectively.

"I know where she is," James replied. "Or at least I think I do. But what if I go to her and she rejects me again? What if she despises me?"

"Then you will take it like a man. Good God, Jamie! Is this the man who parlayed a pittance into one of England's greatest fortunes? I don't believe you can be so craven!" Chas rose to his feet and began hobbling about the room. "If you are afraid to face her alone, I will go with you. But go you must, if for no other reason than to lay the ghost that haunts you. Where is she?"

"In Yorkshire," James croaked, as if the words strangled him.

"So I am to endure a Yorkshire winter after all. Oh, well, so be it. Where in Yorkshire? Anywhere near Elmwood?"

"Yes." The word was a faint whisper.

"God save me from fools in love! Where is the chit?" Chas all but roared.

"She is at Elmwood, Chas. It is your niece. Eve," James said, closing his eyes as he turned to face his oldest and best friend.

Chas stopped his pacing and stood very still.

"Did I hear you aright, Jamie?" he asked, in a dangerously soft voice.

James nodded.

"You bastard!" Chas felled James with a hard fist to his jaw.

As James fell to the floor, the crippled soldier grasped a chair for support. But his injured leg gave way under him and he toppled. He rolled to his side and managed to rise to his knees. Grabbing James's cravat, Chas shook him violently, banging his head against the polished floorboard and cursing all the while.

Eventually the cursing died away and Chas dropped James...and collapsed beside him breathing heavily.

Head still ringing, James reached an unsteady hand to Chas. "My friend, I think that you have given me the punishment which my confused mind demanded. Will you still go to Yorkshire with me? Are you still my friend?"

He felt rather than saw Chas nod.

"Good. For I intend to marry your niece, whether she wishes it or not. I may need your help to drag her to the altar."

James struggled to his feet and reached a hand down to assist Chas in doing likewise.

"I don't think you broke my jaw, but it was not for want of trying. And I doubt not that my head will be ringing like a church bell for a week."

"Only what you deserved, you router," Chas answered gruffly. "But if you'll marry the girl, I suppose I must forgive you. Family and all that. Do we leave tomorrow?"

"At first light. But we must go by way of Fallowfeld. Mosely is there, and he would never forgive me if I did not take him along. He has not yet forgiven me for sending Eve away."

~*~

"You realize, man, that we must do something to prevent Eve's being recognized as your secretary once you are wed? The scandal would be no less harmful to a new bride than to an unmarried girl."

James's carriage was rolling through a drizzle that had driven even the stalwart Mosely under cover, and the three men were sprawled about the equipage's well-appointed interior, scowling at the weather.

"Ah, sir, that'll not be needful. Once 'er 'air is grown out and she's properly clad, there's no one could know she's the same person," Mosely said.

"Perhaps not, but we can take no chances. And there's the name. How can I have a Mr. Eve Dixon as my male secretary and then, a few months later, marry a Miss Eve Dixon? Particularly given the resemblance between them. Even if they were unsure, people would be bound to gossip," James agreed. "And what of my servants?"

"Then she must use some other name. And we can tell people that Dixon was a cousin of hers, or something." Chas scratched his head. "I have it! M'brother took his wife's name when my father disowned him. She's a right to the Hadley name, no question about it."

"Splendid idea, Chas! We'll do it. But what about your brother and sister-in-law? Would they blab?"

"Not them, if I tell Alfred that you could and would ruin him financially if he ever breathed a word of gossip about Eve. Besides, they've never introduced her about the county, not wanting it known that they had such a shameful connection. Neither did m'father."

Chas smiled fiendishly. "Leave Alfred and Charlotte to me. I'll enjoy rubbing their noses in Eve's good fortune, especially after the manner in which they have treated her these past years."

After a while, Chas roused himself from a doze and said, "You know, Jamie, I'm not fond of Alfred, and Charlotte gives me the pip."

James laughed.

Chas went on. "And I hate the cold. I've a notion to move south when I sell out. If I ever do. In the meantime, you can keep my traps and horses at Fallowfeld, can you not?"

"Chas, I will support you for the rest of your life, should you desire it, if you will only help me protect Eve."

"No need of that. Just put me in the way of a good investment now and then, so I can pick up a little place in the country when the war's over. My tastes are simple."

"Better than that, I'll make a settlement to you instead of Alfred and invest it in your name. Your brother, from all accounts, has no right to it. You'll have your country place, but it had better be near Fallowfeld—or Seabrooke."

"I was just thinkin', Jamie, about the servants at Fallowfeld," Mosely said a while later. "Why don't we tell 'em the truth? And Miss Penny and your pa, too?"

"Good God! You must be out of your mind!" James exclaimed. "Word would be all over the county in no time."

"Not from Bartlett or Ackroyd, and they're the only ones I meant. Nor that Miss Comstock, though she ain't rightly speaking a servant. Those three, they're all too proud to gossip, and too fond of Eve. No need to tell the daily help, or them in the dairy and the stables."

"Are you certain, Mosely?" Chas said, doubtfully.

"Sure as I'm sittin' 'ere, sir. Your niece was a favorite, both in London and at Fallowfeld. There's no one in Master Jamie's employ who don't love 'er...him. Damme! I'll be glad when we get this whole affair straightened out, beggin' your pardon, Major."

"So will I," James agreed. "Are you sure you still have that special license, Chas?"

"Safe in my pocket, Jamie. And stop fidgeting. We'll be at Elmwood this time tomorrow."

"And none too soon," James said mournfully. "I may not survive until then."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Eve, when you have finished with the accounts, I wish you to take the children out for a walk. They have been confined inside for so long by the inclement weather that they are quite driving me to distraction. Oh, and Alfred wants you to stop by the stables and order his horse for this afternoon."

Eve looked up at Charlotte, standing in the doorway of the library. "I am sorry, Charlotte, but it will be this afternoon before I can take the children out. Alfred has given me other tasks today and I will not be finished with them for several hours."

She saw Charlotte's mouth firm into a straight line and sighed as the older woman stalked away.

Oh, my. I have done it again. Charlotte will now go to Alfred and complain and he will order me to obey her. Then tomorrow he will rip up at me for not finishing these accounts.

And so he did.

"Eve, I cannot see why you have so much trouble finishing the simple tasks I set you. Why, any competent secretary would have finished the household accounts in plenty of time to write those letters I dictated yesterday. I declare, you are getting more and more inefficient every day, girl, until you are hardly worth the food it takes to keep you. It is a good thing that you said that you would never again mention being paid for your work, for you are certainly not worth a ha'penny's salary."

"Alfred, Charlotte sent me out to walk the children yesterday, if you will recall, before I had finished the accounts. If I were not incessantly interrupted in my secretarial duties, I would have no trouble completing them. You must make up your mind whether I am to be your secretary or your children's governess, for I cannot be both."

"Don't be impertinent, girl. Charlotte does not expect you to be a governess. Why, she only asked you to do her a small favor."

Eve sat back, waiting. And was not disappointed when he slipped into his usual rebuke.

"I should think you would be grateful for the opportunity to make yourself useful to my wife, for her kindness and forbearance in taking you back after you made such a muddle of your high-flown career ambitions. If you cannot do all that is asked of you, perhaps I should after all replace you with a male secretary. Of course, then I could not afford to house and feed you. If you were not so selfish that you refuse to sign your inheritance over to me, it would be different. But how you expect me to provide you with the luxuries of life without recompense is beyond me. No, my girl, if you wish to stay in this house, you will either work for your keep or pay your way."

Despite being accustomed to Alfred's lectures, Eve clenched her fingers so tightly around the pen she was using that its point split and a blot of ink sprayed across the paper she was writing upon.

Her uncle saw what happened. "Good God, girl! Can you not even write without making a mess of things? Paper costs money, don't you know? You will have to recopy that letter and I did want it to go out with the rest of today's post. Now you will have to carry it to the village, for the messenger is ready to depart. Hurry, can't you!"

Eve started a fresh copy of the letter, biting her lip to keep from exploding her anger at Alfred. How had she endured his constant carping before?

Before she had finished the letter, Charlotte's whining voice interrupted her.

"Alfred says that you will be free to mark the hem of my new ballgown as soon as you return from the village, but it had better not take you long to go and return. You should not bother to change into your habit for the ride, so as to return sooner. No one will see you anyway."

As Eve was about to answer her aunt, Alfred's voice was heard from the corridor. "Tell her that she will have to finish the rest of the letters this evening, while we are at dinner, Charlotte. Just because she has some trifling favors to do for you does not mean that she is excused from her duties."

"Did you hear that, Eve?" Charlotte said.

"Yes, Charlotte, I heard. And yes, Charlotte, I will hurry. And yes, Alfred, I will work through the dinner hour. Not that it matters, for I would not be allowed to come down for dinner while there are guests in the house," Eve muttered as she folded the letter and put its direction on the outside.

"What was that you said, girl?" Charlotte whined. "Are you being impertinent?"

"Not at all, dear aunt," Eve replied. She rose from the desk and stretched. "I was merely repeating your instructions. I shall ride as fast as I can to the village and should be back to pin your hem right after you have finished your luncheon."

Eve kicked the horse into a gallop on the way to the village, ignoring the expanse of leg that showed below her hiked-up skirt. She got so little time to ride any more, for Charlotte and Alfred seemed to feel that they must fill her every waking moment with work. For a few moments, as she sped along the road, she forgot the indignities and injustices of her situation and enjoyed the feel of the horse beneath her.

One of the four horses Chas had left at Elmwood, Captain, had stood idle, except for infrequent exercise by a groom, during her absence. His capriciousness as she had struggled to mount him today showed that his manners needed correcting, but she had not the time to do it. Eve was surprised that Alfred had so allowed Chas's horses to be neglected. She supposed her miserly uncle had not been inclined to allow his overworked grooms to spend much time on any but his own cattle.

Chas. How she missed him. If only he were here, instead of in London.

I will not think of where he is staying in London. I will not!

She was so tired of being at the beck and call of her uncle and aunt, of having no one to talk with, to laugh with. Chas would not stay at Elmwood for long, but even a few weeks' respite from boredom and loneliness would be welcome.

Eve now regretted crawling back to Elmwood as she had. She still did not know if she had done the right thing, but at the time she had not felt strong enough to face the uphill battle that would be hers in London. The first time she went into a registry office to inquire about a position, she would have burst into tears at the slightest provocation. Indeed, so low had been her spirits that she had wept through much of the long journey from Fallowfeld.

Her welcome had not been warm. Eve had contained her pride and apologized abjectly to Charlotte and Alfred for leaving them. She had even admitted that she had met with failure in London.

Of course, she had not told them of her employment by Quinton, but only that her search for work had been futile. Charlotte had made several remarks imparting her suspicions that Eve had had a number of immoral adventures in London, but had never come out and actually accused her of improper behavior. Alfred had only required that Eve assure him that she would not again go haring off to again in search of her fortune.

At first they had rubbed on fairly smoothly together. For a while, Charlotte had treated her as a poor but somewhat welcome relation. Lately, though, her aunt's behavior toward her had become more humiliating, as if she expected Eve to kiss her hem in gratitude once a week.

Somehow her life did not seem so hopeless as it had before her departure. No amount of humiliation could ever wipe out the memory of those few months of joy when she had been in James Quinton's

company almost daily. And the one night of ecstasy she had experienced with him had been worth a lifetime of servility and drudgery. Although she daily thanked God she had not conceived—that would have made her present position impossible—she also sometimes regretted not having James's child.

If only it were not so difficult for her to keep her temper on a tight rein, when Alfred or Charlotte started on their complaints about the cost of keeping her at Elmwood. Perhaps she should sign her inheritance, meager as it was, over to Alfred, in exchange for his promise to provide her with a home for the rest of her life.

No! Already her uncle and aunt were piling more and more tasks on her shoulders, tasks that should have been left to servants. Her inheritance she would keep in her own control. It was her only insurance that when or if Alfred's miserly streak got the better of him and he refused to house and feed her any longer, she would have the means to escape.

And, Eve admitted to herself, the day could well come when her independent spirit could not longer maintain the necessary humble behavior that her aunt and uncle required of her.

The letter delivered, Eve did not gallop Captain back to Elmwood. She knew that if she were not to return quickly, she would have to miss her luncheon in order to avoid more of Charlotte's whining scolds. But the day was so fair and she wished to savor her few moments of freedom.

How long had it been since she had ridden? Two weeks? Three? Perhaps if she arose before dawn, she could find an hour to ride, for her body demanded more activity than walking the children in the park or sitting hunched over a desk. No, for then Alfred would think she was lacking in tasks to keep her occupied and would find other work for her to do. She had better give up all thought of riding for pleasure, at least until Chas arrived, she decided as she arrived back at Elmwood.

Eve was on her way to the attic, in search of a lettercase Alfred had decided he needed, when she heard screams from the schoolroom. She detoured and looked inside.

She was just in time to rescue Lisabet's favorite dolly from little Wilfred's scalping knife or tomahawk—or was he a pirate today? Now the spoiled little brat was on the floor, kicking and screaming in a tantrum, while Lisabet continued sobbing, her dolly clutched to her breast.

"What have you done to my son?" Charlotte demanded, flying into the room. At sight of her mother, the little girl's sobs developed into loud wails of distress and she ran across the room to clutch at her mother's skirts. Eve did not move from where she stood by Wilfred, her hands on her hips.

"If you have struck my son, I will have Alfred beat you, Eve. What have you done to him? Wilfred, what did she do, my darling? What did the nasty girl do to my baby?"

Wilfred, a calculating gleam in his eye, rolled to his feet. "She pushed me down, Mama, and it hurt me. And she took Lisabet's dolly away from her." His chubby face was all innocence as he mouthed the lies.

Charlotte turned on Eve and struck her across the face, her rings tearing a small cut at the corner of Eve's mouth. Before she could continue her tirade, however, she was interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"Miss Eve, there is a gentleman who wishes to speak to you."

Both Charlotte and Eve turned to face the butler, the children forgotten.

"To see me?" Eve asked. "Who is it, Johnson?"

"A Mr. James Quinton, Miss. He said that he had been acquainted with you in London. He is waiting in the blue salon."

Eve's heart leapt in her breast and she started for the door. But Charlotte halted her advance with a tight grip on her arm. "There must be some mistake, Johnson. No one from London would call to see Eve. *I* shall speak to the gentleman."

"But the gentleman specifically asked to see Miss Eve," Johnson protested, before Eve could

"I am mistress here," Charlotte said, "and I will decide to whom callers may be allowed to speak. Stay here, Eve. I will deal with you later. Johnson, call Maddy and have her come to take the children to the nursery. And do not leave Eve alone with them. She might do them harm."

She swept from the room, only to put her head back inside and say, "Oh, and Johnson, you will not allow Eve to leave this room until I have returned, if you value your position. I wish to have words with her."

Johnson turned a sympathetic eye upon Eve. "I'm sorry, miss. I should have waited until you were alone. Will you stay here while I get Maddy?"

"Of course, Johnson. It does not matter anyway," Eve said. There was no place she could go, if she were to escape. She turned to the window leaned her head against the cold glass.

Wilfred's smug, "My mama will have you beaten for being so mean to me, Eve," fell upon uncaring ears.

Eve stared blankly out of the window for a long time. Her mind was as empty as her stare, for at the news that James was here, at Elmwood, the frozen shell around her heart had again expanded to fill her entire being. She scarcely heard Maddy come and fetch the children or Johnson return to check that she was still in the room. She ignored the raised voices sounded from downstairs, voices speaking words that she could not understand, although she recognized anger driving them. A little later she heard pounding footsteps on the stairs, followed by the sound of one door after another being thrown open then slammed shut. And she did not care.

"Eve!"

At the familiar, beloved voice she came to herself again. She turned slowly. It was he, gray eyes flashing and scowl in place.

James rushed across the room to where Eve sat, staring at him as if he were an apparition. He caught her by her shoulders, wanting to pull her into his arms and smother her with kisses. Instead he shook her until her teeth clicked.

"Damn it, Eve! She said you did not wish to see me! Why?"

"Stop, please stop," she cried. "You're hurting me." She twisted her shoulders out of his grasp as he stopped shaking her. "I did not...she would not let me..." Her voice dwindled off into silence, her hands made ineffectual fluttering motions between them.

He grabbed them and held tightly, aware of their almost imperceptible tremble. "Damn it, Eve, you look like the devil! What have you been doing to yourself? And why is your lip bleeding?"

"You did it again," was all she said. "Twice."

"What? I did *what* again?"

"You said 'damn it, Eve.' I told you I was tired of people saying that to me."

"Idiot! As if that had to do with anything. Have you been ill?"

James searched her eyes, wishing he could see what thoughts hid behind them. But before she could answer him, both Charlotte and Alfred burst into the room, followed by Chas, whose grin held unholy

glee.

"Chas! You are here too?"

Eve sounded happy to see her uncle, at least.

"How dare you make free of my house, sir!" Alfred demanded as he approached. "My wife told you that you were not welcome here and as a gentleman you should have left at once."

"Shut up." James spoke without taking his eyes from Eve's face. Alfred's mouth dropped open at the curt command.

"Johnson!" Charlotte cried from behind her gaping husband. "Johnson, where are you?"

"Here, madam," the butler answered from the open doorway.

"Johnson, I demand that you put this...this person out of the house this instant!"

As Johnson was close to sixty and slight, while the gentleman whom he had been told to eject was young, tall, and muscular, Johnson quite naturally hesitated.

James ignored the others. "Eve, I have been miserable since you left," he said, setting his hands on her shoulders and forcing her to stand quietly. "I owe you more than an apology. I was angry. Frustrated. It was a damnable situation! And I wronged you cruelly. Will you come back?"

"No, sir, I cannot," Eve whispered.

He shook her again, gently. "You must."

"No." Eve tried to pull her hands from his but James held them tightly. "Please, sir, release me. I cannot return, for I have vowed that I will never again take up my masquerade. And it would not be possible, otherwise."

"What masquerade?" Alfred, briefly rendered speechless, seemed to have rediscovered his bluster.

"What is all this? How do you come to know my niece? And what gives you the right to come bursting into my house without a by your leave and demand to see her? Get out, sir, before I call for reinforcements and have you thrown out."

"I knew that she had been up to no good in London," Charlotte whined. "He's probably one of the men she dallied with, the slut. Alfred, how can you allow me to be exposed to such indelicacy?" She lifted a limp hand to press upon her forehead. "I feel faint."

"You shut up as well," James said over his shoulder. "Eve, I asked you what happened to your lip."

"Oh, it is nothing. Merely an accident. Mr. Quinton, please do go away, for you are only making my position here more untenable."

"Damn it, Eve," he swore, then chuckled at her outraged expression. "It seems that I cannot speak to you in any other terms. I think you misunderstand me. I am not asking you to return as my secretary."

"Not your secretary? Then why..."

James dropped her hands and turned to face the others in the room. "Sir Alfred, Lady Charlotte, if you will leave us alone for five minutes, I think that I can assure you that you will never see me again. If you do not go, you will find that I am capable of forcing you both through that door. Chas, will you escort your relatives elsewhere?"

Alfred stammered and blustered, but Charlotte quailed before the force of James's personality. She went willingly with Chas, who had taken an arm of each and pushed them toward the door.

"You do what Jamie says, Eve," he said, before he pulled it shut behind him.

Eve broke free and attempted to follow. James caught her as her fingers touched the knob.

He kicked angrily at the closed door, then leaned against it, preventing her escape. "Now, Eve, perhaps we will have a few moments' peace so that I may convince you to obey Chas and come with me."

Eve shook her head, unable to speak. *Everything is happening too quickly. I don't know what to do. I only know what I want to do may be an irreparable mistake.*

"Oh, yes. You will, my dear, for you have no choice. There is not another person in England with your peculiar set of qualifications and you must come back to me. Of course, we cannot have Miss Eve Dixon, a young lady, replacing Mr. Eve Dixon, a gentleman, as my secretary. I think that you will have to change your name. Yes, that will do the trick, I think. What shall your new name be, I wonder?"

"I will not return as your secretary sir," Eve said firmly, "and I would never consider changing my name, even if I were to do so. That would be simply a masquerade of a different sort."

"Not if you changed it to Quinton."

"To Quin...No. No. No!" Eve covered her face with her hands. "Oh, please sir, do not tease me. I cannot bear it."

How can he be so cruel?

James took her into his arms. "Oh, my love. I did not mean to hurt you so. What I am offering is not employment, unless you consider being mistress of my heart to be such. I want you, Eve. I want you to be my wife. Until you left me, I never realized how much I loved you.

"Nay, not even then, for I was merely miserable for a long time after you'd gone. It took Chas to make me see that I was incomplete without you. He forced me to look into my heart and see what I should have realized long since."

"If this is my uncle's doing, then you are offering out of a sense of obligation. I cannot accept, though I am aware of the honor you do me."

"Obligation be damned! I want to marry you because I cannot live without you."

His sudden and passionate kiss almost convinced Eve.

"When you left Fallowfeld, I was furious with you and with myself. Later I was overwhelmed with guilt. Miserable. I could not work. Could not think. Penny went to Seabrooke at Christmas because she could abide living in the same house with an ogre—her very words—no longer."

Another kiss, this one gentle and questing. Eve stiffened her resolve.

James's finger under her chin forced her to look up into his face.

"Finally I told Chas the tale," he said. "He forced me to question why I had felt such desire for you and made me realize that it was more than desire. Damn it, Eve. I'm telling you that I love you!"

The coldness in her breast dissolved and her soul was warm for the first time in months. Still not quite believing in her good fortune, Eve touched his lips with her fingers. He did not move. But in his eyes she read the truth.

Eve doubted no longer. She raised her mouth to his; letting her action tell him silently what her heart had said so many times.

A long time later, she pulled away and looked again into his face. "I must warn you, James, if you say 'damn it, Eve' one more time, I may be tempted to violence," she said, "which would not be proper wifely behavior." Her eyes sparkled into his and she pressed the length of her body against him.

"Never again." he vowed, and captured her mouth with his in a kiss that promised more than words.

THE END

*About the author of **The Anonymous Amanuensis***



Judith B. Glad

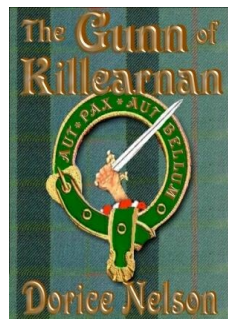
The road I followed to writing was pretty winding. There were detours into accounting, an extended delay at motherhood, a complete stop at graduate school, and then a nice long pause to park while I worked as a botanical consultant and did a lot of technical writing and editing. I semi-'retired' in 1998, which simply meant I allowed myself more time to write—I still do a few consulting jobs, the ones that sound like fun. But mostly I write. Regency romance. Historical romance. Contemporary romance. If a story doesn't have a happy ending, I won't read it, and I'd never, never write it.

For years I dreamed about the time I could try all the hobbies that interested me, travel to all the places I dreamed of, and read all the books I saved until I had the time. Of the three, the last is closest to becoming reality, but the book list seems to keep growing longer rather than shorter. We take to the road whenever we can, and have explored most of the hidden corners of the US by car, train, boat, bicycle, foot, whatever. This year the hobbies I'm spending the most time on are bicycling, genealogy, digitizing our enormous collection of family photos, and playing with computer graphics. This is, of course, subject to change without notice.

After growing up in Idaho—the locale of my first two historical romances—I now live in Portland, Oregon. Flowers bloom in my yard every month of the year and snow usually stays on the mountains where it belongs. It's a great place to write because the rainy season lasts for eight months—a perfect excuse to stay indoors and tell stories. I have four children, all grown, two granddaughters and a grandson, and a husband who supposedly retired a couple of years ago, but still spends a lot of time building gadgets and inventing interesting little gizmos. He also reads my books and does floors—and no, he's not for rent or sale!

I belong to Rose City Romance Writers and to EPIC and to far, far too many listserves. But that's all right, because I only read every ninth message. With any luck, the law of averages will prevent me from losing the important stuff.

Drop by my website at www.judithbglad.com, and while you're there, look around at the other pages. You'll find a bit of this and that, from botany to history, with the odd stop in between.



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by

Dorice Nelson

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Catriona MacFarr had no intention of marrying a man known as the 'Beast'—he sounded so much like her vicious and savage father that she was horrified. Such a lifelong disaster could not be, no matter the consequences! Never.....

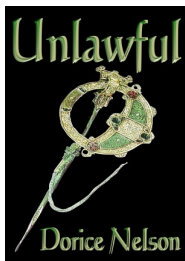
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