

The
Reluctant
Landlord



Susanne
Marie Knight

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The Reluctant Landlord

by Susanne Marie Knight

Romance/ Historical Fiction

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Reaching into his waistcoat, Lord Udall pulled out a small blue pouch. So intent was he with the pouch, that he did not notice he also pulled out a black velvet box. It dropped to the uncarpeted floor without making a sound.

Katrina pointed to the box. "You drop—"

"These guineas will reimburse you for any hardships you believe you have suffered." The Earl jiggled the blue sack.

With a shrug, he threw the pouch next to her feet.

He obviously thought his business was concluded, for he strode to a looking-glass on the wall, then adjusted his cravat.

Katrina narrowed her gaze. So Lord Udall thought he had disposed of her, hmmn? Neatly bribing her so that he could install his latest mistress at this address. Taking a look at her mother's portrait, Katrina straightened her shoulders. *I think not.*

Picking up the coin sack, she sauntered over to the Earl. After rearranging his cravat, he realigned the stripes on the painted buttons of his tail-coat.

She raised her gaze. Faith, what a dandy!

Preoccupied with his image, he did not see her. She hurled the bag at his chest.

He flinched from the blow, then caught the coins. "What the devil!"

"Lord Udall." She gave him a smile of her own, albeit a little shaky. "I am not accepting your money for a simple reason—my great aunt and I are not leaving this house."

Balling his fists, he tightened his square jaw, giving her a stare that would quell the dead. "Indeed?"

Behind her back, Katrina crossed her fingers. She would not let him intimidate her! "My great aunt and I signed a lease with the Dowager Countess of Udall in good faith. As far as I am concerned, it is a legal document. I am afraid you will have to evict us."

"By God! You cannot be serious!"

His disbelief amused her. Obviously this man rarely faced opposition. It would do him good to experience a setback or two.

She tried to keep her lips from curving upward. "Oh, but I am, My Lord. Quite serious."

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Wings

The Reluctant Landlord

by

Susanne Marie Knight

A Wings ePress, Inc.

Regency Romance Novel

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Dedication
To Stacy—
Sugar and Spice
And
Everything Nice!

One

"I am certain this is an excellent house, Aunt Hattie. It will suit us, truly it will." Walking into the front sitting room for the first time, Miss Katrina Jones set down her tattered valise and crossed her fingers. She glanced around, then held her breath.

Her words echoed in her mind; she wished she had not said them. This room mocked her dubious assertions. The sitting area bore the marks of heavy wear and abuse. Dirt and grime everywhere. No loving hand had dusted the fireplace or the bric-a-brac for many a year. From the water stained ceiling, to the drab window draperies, cobwebs shone like undiluted silver, reflecting the late afternoon light.

Great Aunt Hattie will have a fit of the vapors.

As Katrina unbuttoned her serviceable pelisse, she scanned the room again. The Chinese paper covering the walls definitely had seen better days. Its pink lotus blossoms and gnarled miniature trees gapped open at the seams, exposing the dingy plaster wall underneath. It would take a great deal of work to flatten the curled edges of the paper-hanging.

Katrina caught her lower lip on the edge of her teeth. *Oh, dear. What will Great Aunt Hattie say?*

The furniture had not fared much better. The entire length of a Chippendale settee sported threadbare upholstery. A sudden sneeze could unleash the straw stuffing from beneath the fabric. One side table tottered precariously on three wooden legs, which explained why it had been propped against the wall.

Katrina sighed. The room did not exactly radiate warmth or prosperity. Faith, it did not even welcome them.

After taking off her wet pelisse, she shook the snow from her bonnet. A few droplets of water would make no difference to the scuffed parquet floor beneath her feet.

If this was the condition of the main receiving room, what was the rest of the house like? Great Aunt Hattie would likely suffer a severe fright.

Katrina shuddered and braced herself. Any minute Hattie's tirade would begin.

And so it did. Her hands on her padded hips, Harriet Jones sailed into the room. "Balderdash! The address is unsuitable. Mincing Lane, indeed! Whatever was the Countess of Udall thinking, saying she had the perfect property for—"

Hattie took a vast quantity of air into her large mouth. Then came the ear-splitting shriek. "Katrina!"

Breathing heavily, Hattie crammed a handkerchief into her fist, and mopped her brow. For once, no flood of words spewed forth, but her great bulk fairly vibrated outrage.

Katrina took one look at her great aunt's bulging eyes, and steered Hattie away from the fragile settee. A sturdy hard-backed chair was what she needed. Setting her down, Katrina removed the older woman's favorite silk poke hat, and waved it back and forth to create a soothing breeze. Hattie's scalp shone through her thinning grey hair, glistening with sweat from the exertions of the day.

For a long moment, peace reigned. Hattie fingered the carnelian stone ring suspended on a chain around her neck and seemed to find a measure of comfort from it.

Katrina hesitated to disturb the quiet. Then, one of her renegade curls dripped melted snow onto Hattie's powdered cheek.

Again, her great aunt shrieked.

"Dear Aunt Hattie. Please, you must not distress yourself. Pray, relax. I will get your vinaigrette. It has been a very long day for us."

The chair creaked, protesting Hattie's weight. Patting her ample bosom, she groaned. "Oh my! Oh, oh my! To think the last of the Jones' should be reduced to living in a ... a hovel! If my father, your great grandfather, were to see us now, he would expire on the spot!"

Since the gentleman in question rested beneath England's soil more years than Katrina numbered to her age, she wisely did not reply. Instead, she knelt beside her great aunt and waved the silver bottle of aromatics under Hattie's nose.

The older woman was not placated. Dabbing at her eyes with her white handkerchief, Hattie made sniffing noises. "The house smells," she complained into her handkerchief.

Katrina bit her lip. The sitting area did have an odor about it. Probably from disuse. It smelled like musty wood and age-old dust. Still, considering the condition of the room, it could have smelled worse.

"A good airing will cure that." She hurried to a side window to pry it open. Brushing cobwebs aside, she left the window cracked, hoping the frigid outside air would ventilate the room.

Poor Hattie. Removed of animation, her slackened face revealed her vulnerability. Katrina needed to be more sympathetic toward her great aunt. After all, Hattie neared her seventieth year. And it had been an arduous journey from East Bergholt, Suffolk, to London. The weather had not cooperated one jot. Brisk November winds had blown snow across the inadequate roads making it difficult to see. Katrina's eyes still stung from the strain. She pitied the unfortunate coachman.

And her stomach ached from the worry.

It was not easy leaving the only home she and Hattie had known. As Hattie had mentioned—many, many times during the trip—uprooting to an uncertain location in the metropolis of London left her sensibilities in shambles.

But Hattie *had* to realize that they had nowhere else to go. It was either Mincing Lane or the streets themselves. They had no funds to speak of; no reserves to fall back on. No, it was not easy at all.

Placing her arm around her great aunt, Katrina murmured, "Do not worry, Aunt Hattie. I shall make a fire right now. And I will have this place cleaned up in a trice. You know I have a knack for this sort of thing."

That much was true. Necessity bred aptitude. And Katrina developed talent because of need. While their friends and neighbors relied on servants to cook and clean, the Jones' only had Katrina—Katrina and their devoted maid, Devon.

Dear Devon. She had at least two years back wages due her.

Pushing Katrina's arm aside, Hattie fluttered her hanky, punctuating her remarks. "When it comes to household matters, I own you are a wonder, but can you alter this building's location? Mincing Lane and Thames Street? God in Heaven!"

Her excess flesh jiggled and twitched in a dance all its own. "Katrina! Cits and merchants for neighbors. Unacceptable! Monstrous! Why, just down the street, the Tower of London looms large over our heads."

Hattie paused to remove a white lacy mob cap from her reticule. Covering her sparse hair with it, she moaned. "They behead people in the Tower, you know. Indeed, several royals lost theirs. What a pass I have come to—Harriet Jones, the daughter of a baronet, living in the shadow of the Tower. Oh, I can never hold my head up among the ton again!"

Hiding her smile at her great aunt's inadvertent pun, Katrina eased down and rested her head on her bent knees. Faith, Hattie would try the patience of a saint, and Katrina laid no claim to that distinction.

Hattie *enjoyed* her fretful state; it would do no good to point out that over sixty years had passed since the last head rolled at the Tower.

Hattie groaned again. Katrina straightened her tender back. Time to get to work.

She walked to the fireplace and opened a tinderbox situated on top of the mantelpiece. Bending low, she rubbed the piece of steel against the flint, and waited for sparks of fire. After only a few tries, tiny plumes of smoke rose from rags inside the tinderbox.

"How very obliging!" She smiled, and carefully nurtured the fire. Soon crackling flames from the ready logs in the fireplace filled her with a contented warmth. The smell evoked memories of her childhood home.

Without thinking, she brushed her dirty hands against the skirt of her gown.

Hattie's self-pity must have given way to indignation. She pounded her beefy fist against the armrest. "If this house is the best my friend the Countess of Udall can provide, I shall sever our connection!"

Katrina smoothed a wisp of hair back behind her ear. *Patience. I must exercise some patience.*

Sitting on a wooden stool, she rummaged through her valise. "Dowager Countess, Aunt Hattie. And you are fully aware you would never do that. We need every friend we have. Being one of the genteel poor does not exactly raise our stock among the *beau monde*, you know."

She retrieved a small framed picture from her bag. A likeness of her dark-haired mother smiled up at Katrina; the green eyes seemed to sparkle happiness. It had been painted before her mother married. A rare portrait by prospering East Bergholt artist, John Constable, the painting was the only valuable her father had not sold. To protect it, Katrina had hidden the picture among her undergarments.

Unfortunately, her own silhouette portraits of her mother had not escaped her father's depraved pilfering.

Katrina lightly touched the image of her mother's bow-shaped lips, and allowed her gaze to linger on the portrait. Except for the color of her hair, *she* could have been the subject of the painting.

Kicking off her snow-stained half-boots, she dragged the stool over to the fireplace, then gingerly stepped up on it. "I shall hang Mama's picture right now. It will make us feel more at home."

"Do be careful, Katrina! Here you are, not in this house five minutes, and already you are acting the hoyden. This house is a bad influence, I tell you! Cits and merchants. What will become of us?"

Her back to her great aunt, Katrina heard the rustling of the older woman's bombazine gown. *Pacing. She must be pacing. How can I make her understand that we have no choice but to accept this lodging?*

On her tiptoes, Katrina reached up and, from over the mantel, removed an uninspired painting depicting a winter's scene. Its years of dusty neglect rubbed off on her hands. Again, she wiped her fingers on her dull grey travel dress. Odd thing for the Dowager Countess of Udall to own such an unkempt house no matter the location.

"Katrina!" Hattie shouted.

Guiltily, Katrina turned around.

"Come down from there this instant! You will fall. Oh, my heart! I fear I have heart palpitations. Get me my vinaigrette."

Not again! Katrina sighed. She gave her mother's picture an apologetic look and jumped off the stool.

In spite of Hattie's blatant agitation, she somehow managed to carefully arrange herself on the bulging settee cushions. "You unkind child. Now I feel an attack coming on."

She clasped her pudgy hand to her breast, waiting for Katrina to attend her.

Katrina retrieved Hattie's constant companion, the silver bottle, and waved it under her great aunt's nose. Soon she would calm down.

Fluttering her white handkerchief, Hattie closed her eyes. "I blame the Countess of Udall for this pass to which we have come. Indeed, I do. She takes after that rascal son of hers. His wickedness must have rubbed off on her. He has mistresses around every corner!"

That thought must have excited Hattie for she propped herself up on one elbow. "The latest *on-dit* is that the villainous Earl of Udall has ruined Lord Ivanbraugh's youngest brat. Udall's wife's sister, for Gad's sake! Can you believe? He, who was responsible for his wife's death, wooing the sister! 'Tis unnatural. It exceeds the bounds of good ton. The very idea!"

Hattie's enthusiasm spent, she fell back on the cushions. "The man has no consideration, no fine sensibilities, I tell you. He is a heathen!"

As her great aunt inhaled deeply, Katrina exhaled. After enduring hundreds of these "nervous" episodes, she was certain Hattie would eventually drift off to sleep. Seeing the withered eyelids still closed, Katrina returned to the fireplace. She lingered by the flames for a moment.

"Well, girl?"

"Well what, Aunt Hattie?" Katrina turned around but the older woman lay still in her repose.

"Have you no say about the Earl of Udall?" Hattie's question came out with a sigh. Her fretful voice soon would give way to fitful snores.

Katrina hung her mother's portrait, then studied it. Constable's image of Amanda Jones soothed Katrina and gave her strength.

She shrugged. "I would say the *on-dit* is highly unlikely, Aunt Hattie. A man cannot marry his wife's sister, anyway. As for whether he is responsible for his wife's death, you know gossip never flatters anyone. I daresay the Earl is like any other man—no better and no worse than most."

Squinting at the painting, she adjusted the left corner to make it level.

A male voice broke through the silence. "Bravo, my dear. I hardly expected to find a champion in this unlikely section of London."

"Oh!" Katrina lost her footing. Grabbing onto the mantel, she half-turned to look at the intruder.

Where had he come from? Why hadn't he waited to be announced? The cut of his elegant clothes clearly proclaimed great wealth as compared with the background of the dilapidated sitting room. Obviously one of London's Corinthians—a man about town. The gentleman placed his dark greatcoat and beaver hat over a chair, then he scanned the room.

While he did, she scanned him. His cream stockinette breeches boldly outlined his muscular thighs. The tight molding of the chocolate brown tail-coat revealed more of his powerful physique. He was a man in his prime—a true *nonpareil*. Goodness, he put a maiden to the blush!

But, who was he? His impertinent gaze slowly traveled from her disheveled hair to her stocking feet. She pushed back one of her oddly colored locks and, as if she could hide them, curled her toes. It was one thing for her querulous aunt to call her a hoyden, but quite another when a Corinthian of the first stare personally observed that Katrina Jones was indeed unconventional.

She could tell from his expression that he did not think much of her. Who could blame him? Her much patched gown would not set anyone off to advantage. And she felt grimy from the trip.

Stepping down from the stool, she lost her superiority in height. He was like a mountain, so she lifted her chin for courage. "I demand to know who you are, sir, and what you are doing in my house."

The man gave her a smile that mocked her, and then bowed. "I am the villainous Earl of Udall."

Katrina met his gaze. The heat of embarrassment inflamed her cheeks. She glanced at Hattie but the woman's closed eyes and heavy breathing told Katrina all she needed to know.

Faith, she was virtually alone with London's most notorious rake. Perhaps she better awaken her great aunt.

Lord Udall cleared his throat, claiming her attention. "And, as for what I am doing in your house, I beg to differ with you, dear girl. This house belongs to me. I hold the title, and I *do* have definite plans for it."

The Earl ... smirked. There was no other word to describe it; his lips curved upwards into a smirk.

"My plans do not include you and your ... charming companion," he continued.

Hattie's loud snore emphasized his words. He grinned in acknowledgment.

Katrina grasped a nearby chair's armrest and dropped into the seat. Her mind began to spin. This could not be happening. Losing their home in East Bergholt, packing up their meager possessions, begging charity from the Dowager Countess of Udall, and now this. It was too overwhelming.

"You cannot mean to dislodge us from this house!"

"I can, and indeed, I shall." The Earl seemed to take perverse pleasure in Katrina's distress. He clasped his hands behind his back and strolled around the room.

Rubbing her temple, Katrina protested. "Your mother agreed to let this house to us. I—"

"My mother is not in full possession of her faculties."

He said this outrageous statement as if he were commenting on the weather! Katrina stared at him. His inflexible brown gaze impaling her, he returned her stare.

Heavens, he was a cold fish. Surely he would show more emotion than this over his mother's condition. But just this afternoon, the Dowager Countess had seemed as sane as anyone. Perhaps even more so.

"Yes, I see I shocked you. I should have had my mother secluded long ago, although she is an annoyance to only me, no one else." He ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. "No matter. You are Miss Jones, I presume?"

Katrina mutely nodded.

"Good." Barely giving her a glance, Lord Udall walked over to the side window and raised his hand to someone outside.

What was he looking at? Katrina shifted in her seat until she spotted a waiting carriage. From inside the coach, a tiny hand gloved in frilly pink returned the Earl's greeting.

Lord Udall smiled ever so slightly, then faced Katrina. "Have no fear, Miss Jones." He raked his gaze over Hattie's rotund body. "You and your aunt shall be amply rewarded for this inconvenience. As I said before, I have plans for this house. Indeed, the occupant I have chosen awaits without. She grows impatient to take up residence—very impatient. As do I."

His tongue flickered over his lips. That action gave Katrina the shivers. So this was how a London rake acted—the same as an East Bergholt rake. The Earl had no feelings, no sensibilities, save his own carnal desires.

From his outward appearance, he might have been a handsome specimen, but deep inside, his heart was as dark as coal.

Reaching into his waistcoat, he pulled out a small blue pouch. So intent was he with the pouch, that he did not notice he also pulled out a black velvet box. It dropped to the uncarpeted floor without making a sound.

She pointed to the box. "You drop—"

"These guineas will reimburse you for any hardships you believe you have suffered." The Earl jiggled the blue sack.

With a shrug, he threw the pouch next to her feet.

He obviously thought his business was concluded, for he strode to a looking-glass on the wall, then adjusted his cravat.

Katrina narrowed her gaze. So Lord Udall thought he had disposed of her, hmmn? Neatly bribing her so that he could install his latest mistress at this address. Taking a look at her mother's portrait, Katrina straightened her shoulders. *I think not.*

Picking up the coin sack, she sauntered over to the Earl. After rearranging his cravat, he realigned the stripes on the painted buttons of his tail-coat.

She raised her gaze. Faith, what a dandy!

Preoccupied with his image, he did not see her. She hurled the bag at his chest.

He flinched from the blow, then caught the coins. "What the devil!"

"Lord Udall." She gave him a smile of her own, albeit a little shaky. "I am not accepting your money for a simple reason—my great aunt and I are not leaving this house."

Balling his fists, he tightened his square jaw, giving her a stare that would quell the dead. "Indeed?"

Behind her back, Katrina crossed her fingers. She would not let him intimidate her! "My great aunt and I signed a lease with the Dowager Countess of Udall in good faith. As far as I am concerned, it is a legal document. I am afraid you will have to evict us."

"By God! You cannot be serious!"

His disbelief amused her. Obviously this man rarely faced opposition. It would do him good to experience a setback or two.

She tried to keep her lips from curving upward. "Oh, but I am, My Lord. Quite serious."

"You dare—you dare to defy me?" The Earl swung around and hammered his fist against the wall. The impact left a hollow in the Chinese paper. He stared at the indentation, then stared at her.

It took no stretch of the imagination to assume he would have rather hit her. She took a step back.

Through clenched teeth, he hissed, "Make no mistake, Miss Jones. By this time tomorrow, you and your tartar aunt will be gone from my abode." He towered over her. One blow from his fist would have sent her sprawling on the floor.

But, Katrina balled her own fists. She could not lose. She just *couldn't*.

Out on the street by this time tomorrow, he had said.

She blinked. Time? Yes, of course, the morning papers! Batting her lashes at him, Katrina had the upper hand and knew it. "I venture that story will make excellent reading in *The Times*."

As she tapped her finger against her chin in a steady rhythm, she smiled sweetly. "Yes, I can visualize the headline: Hard-Hearted Earl Forces Destitute Females Out On The Street. A titillating piece of gossip, I should think. I wonder what I should say when the reporters question me?"

From the corner of her eye, she observed him. The white showing through his knuckles was quite unnerving. She held her breath.

Lord Udall moved toward her. His large bulk placed her completely in his shadow. She gulped.

But then he paused. Although his gaze never wavered, he spoiled his impassive demeanor by chewing on his lower lip.

As if committing her appearance to memory, he raked her with his gaze again. "I do not take kindly to being thwarted, Miss Jones. You will regret this."

It was a threat—an undeniable threat.

He grabbed his coat and slammed his beaver hat on his head. "Good day!"

A rush of air followed the Earl's departure and Katrina's resolve with it. Sinking into a chair, she wiped her forehead. "Heavens!" She felt fortunate to have gotten out of that situation alive. Titled or otherwise, he was a beast. All men were beasts; she knew that for a fact.

Hattie still snored peacefully, oblivious to the tempest that had swirled in the room.

Katrina inelegantly stretched out her legs and inadvertently kicked the black box that had fallen out of the Earl's pocket. She picked it up and ran to the window. Perhaps he had not left yet.

As he took a step up onto his carriage, he looked back at the house. Spotting her, his expression hardened.

Such an unpleasant man! Instead of returning his box, she decided to enrage him. She smiled and waved good-bye.

He slammed the carriage door shut.

Violent, too! She sat on the window ledge and listened to his deep voice filter through the glass. The words were muted, but then his fancy companion's high pitched screeching broke the quiet. Faith, it almost broke the glass in the window. The screaming seemed to go on forever. My, but the woman was angry. Better in Lord Udall's ears than in Katrina's!

Turning away from the window, she opened the velvet box. A sapphire and diamond bracelet sparkled brightly in the dull sunlight.

Katrina gasped. It must have been worth a fortune. Although she was not knowledgeable in the ways of the world, clearly, these jewels were meant for Lord Udall's paramour, as payment for services rendered.

Slipping the bracelet onto her wrist, Katrina admired the way it glittered. She would never have anything so valuable on her wrist again. It felt heavy, though—somehow oppressive.

What would it be like to be the Earl's mistress?

At that unmaidenly thought, she flushed. No jewels were worth selling oneself to *that* man. Or any man.

Still, the sapphires and diamonds had a compelling glow. What she would not give to see the Earl's face when he discovered he misplaced it. And when he realized his loss, he would have to break the news to his vocal companion.

For the first time in months, Katrina laughed. She hoped Lord Udall had ear muffs. If his shrew of a mistress' response to losing her love nest was any indication, then over the loss of this trinket, she was bound to be as cross as crabs! She would plague him until the cows came home.

Splendid! Katrina could not think of anyone who deserved the ill-fortune more.

* * * *

From inside his crested drag, Quentin Thornhill, the Earl of Udall, rolled a slow boil. Good God, for a Monday, this day bore all the markings of time better spent remaining in bed. How had this ruinous day followed on the heels of such an agreeable weekend?

Saturday night, at White's Club, he had won the deed to this dwelling on Mincing Lane—an ideal location to house his current interest, the willing Juliet Dufay. But that dolt, Sir Ralph Buckingill, instead of doing as he had been told, came 'round the next day at Udall House, and handed the deed to Quentin's mother. And the Dowager, for whatever perverse reason, rented the house to provincial nobodies—the Joneses.

Devil take it, was everyone out to thwart him?

Turning to Juliet, Quentin studied the effects of her temper tantrum. Uneven blotches of red spread from her plump cheeks to her dangling earlobes. Her now puffed eyelids gave her an appearance of a tawny screech owl; she sounded like one, too. The delicate membranes in his ears vibrated from her displeasure.

Gad! To think he had wanted to spend this day taking his pleasure with her.

"Juliet, or whatever your name is, you give every indication of behaving like a fishmonger's wife. I suggest you desist your ranting and give me time to think of a solution to our dilemma."

The sudden quiet slapped at his ringing ears. Good. Signaling the carriage driver, Dibbs, to proceed, Quentin again caught a glimpse of the grey-garbed vixen by the window of his newly won house. To be outwitted by a mere slip of a girl was humiliating, to say the least.

He chewed on his lower lip. Miss Jones' hair was a most strange color combination: sun-ripened maize—almost white in its intensity, yet streaked by coppery brown. Most unusual. Yet he was certain he had seen this mixture before. But where? And why was he waxing poetic over a thing as mundane as a woman's hair?

He flexed his right hand; it was only slightly tender. For some reason, she made him lose his self-control. Damn the girl, he had not resorted to punching walls since ... since his brother died.

Juliet's harsh voice caused him to start. Hell and blast! When vexed, she sounded like two tom cats brawling.

"Udall, why are you letting that ... that brass-faced wench have her way? What hold does she have on you? After all, you *are* an earl." Juliet pouted. "I told all the girls at the theater about the Earl of Udall being my new protector. Fairly in awe, they were. I told them you had lodging for me."

Juliet said the last statement in an accusatory way.

The theater. Yes, that was where this exotic bird of paradise belonged—in the theater. Whatever had he been thinking? Why had he removed her from her artificial environment?

The corners of his lips curved upward in a halfhearted smile. While Juliet Dufay could boast of being blessed in abundance with those feminine charms he desired in a woman, truth be told, he fancied her only because Nathan Morelock offered her *carte blanche* first.

The Baron Morelock—a despicable fellow. But who was having the last laugh now?

Quentin looked out the carriage opening at the grey and white misted Thames River. The snow disguised the city's ugliness. Living in London in the wintertime was a mistake. Another error in judgment. He was accumulating quite a list.

Juliet pulled on his sleeve. Flaring his nostrils, he stared down his nose at her.

Her heavily rouged face whitened. "Oh, my dear Udall! You know how I adore you." She pecked his cheek and flashed a smile.

At the sight of her slightly yellowed teeth and vivid lips, he turned away. Decay on the river's docks, decay in the room at Mincing Lane, and decay by his side. He could not escape from decay.

Tugging on his sleeve again, Juliet simpered into his ear. "I can't wait 'til you visit me at the new house. What will be the address, I wonder? 'Twill be so ... so fine! You *will* get me a house, won't you, ducks? After all, now that I'm under your protection, my friends do expect it. So green they'll turn. Oh, I am glad I picked you instead of Morelock."

She gave Quentin another kiss and fingered his hair.

Wiping his undoubtedly reddened cheek, Quentin brushed away her annoying hands. "*If you please.*"

Good God, an octopus had fewer arms than she had.

Placing her tiny pink-gloved hands in her lap, she murmured her apologies.

More than ever, he wished he could have set Juliet up at that hole-in-the-wall house and be done with it. What was he to do with her now? That blasted Jones chit. Who would have thought she would have the effrontery to refuse his offer? Actually throwing his guineas at him—a sad lack in manners! Even if he had thrown them first...

He stroked his chin.

"Udall, dear."

Quentin frowned. Devil take it, if he didn't have an urge to stuff Juliet's ermine muff down her mouth. One of these days, someone would rip the very chords from her throat. One day, maybe quite soon.

He eyed the creamy column of her neck.

The silly fool batted her blackened lashes at him. "Oh Udall, didn't you say you bought me a gift? A small trifle from Rundell and Bridge's, mayhaps?"

Her painted blue lids blinked rapidly. The breeze alone would have chilled him.

Take what they could get—that was womankind's motto. His deceased brother's wife, Therese, was a perfect example. Therese always squeezed until she drew blood. Then she squeezed for more. Damned termagant, too.

Reaching into his waistcoat, Quentin felt the bag of coins. Snuff box, pocket watch, and handkerchief, but no velvet box. He patted the sides of his tail-coat. "Where the devil...?"

"Ooh, Udall, you are a naughty gent for teasing your poor Juliet! Give over, where is it?"

He brushed aside her probing hands. His inspection finished, he fell back against the plush squabs of his carriage.

"Gone," he breathed. Where had he lost it?

"Gone?" Juliet screeched. She savagely rocked his arm back and forth. "You mean to sit there and tell

me you don't have my bracelet?"

Damn common harlot. Her outburst attracted attention from passersby. Quentin signaled Dibbs to increase their pace.

Her arms upraised, the woman screeched again. As the drag accelerated, she lost her balance. She landed on the carriage floor.

Quentin eyed her dispassionately. How had she known he bought her a bracelet? And the shop name?

Ignoring her outraged face, he smoothed down his abused brown coat sleeve. "I suggest you refrain from damaging my tail-coat. My valet will be most vexed."

"Your coat be damned! Jack told me you picked out a bracelet at Rundell's—for me—for Miss Dufay!"

She propped herself back on the cushions and pointed her finger at Quentin. "Jack's a messenger boy there. He *told* me you laid the blunt down for a dazzler—what with diamonds and sapphires—to match my eyes."

Quentin dissected her with his gaze. Her scarlet lip quivered. The black box had fallen out of his pocket back at the house—back when he gave Miss Jones her *congé* money. He was certain of it.

Juliet's voice lost its power. "Jack said it was worth two whole ponies!"

In truth, the trinket cost three ponies, or seventy-five pounds, but who was counting? Quentin raised his eyebrow.

She blushed, the natural red diffusing into the unnatural rouge. "Jack is a, er, a friend of mine." A tear slid from her eye, marking a black path down her cheek.

Since Quentin remained unmoved by her feminine wiles, her fury re-ignited. "You beast!" She pounded on his thighs. "You heartless swine! *Where is my bracelet?*"

Taking out his handkerchief, he yawned into it. "The bracelet? I believe my new lodger, Miss Jones, has it."

Juliet let loose with a slew of language more foul than the streets of London.

Although he considered Nathan Morelock despicable, he had not thought him a blockhead. What *had* the man seen in this veritable harpy?

His decision made, Quentin tipped his hat to the absent Miss Jones. Although she had frustrated his purpose—again, he applauded her. Unknowingly, she saved him from making a big mistake. Juliet Dufay now had just one final gift coming to her: the gift of a good-bye.

He looked outside. Spotting the sign for St. James' Street, he rapped on the ceiling of his drag. Dibbs understood the signal. The carriage stopped, and Quentin opened the door.

"Udall, what—?"

"Enough words, my dear Juliet. Indeed, I have had enough of your words to last a lifetime."

Stepping down from the carriage, he shrugged into his greatcoat. "Intemperate weather," he pronounced.

"Udall—"

"Quiet, my dear."

Turning to the coachman, Quentin ordered, "Take this, er, lady back to Drury Lane, Dibbs. We have seen the last of her."

His face impassive, Dibbs bowed.

The woman fell to her knees. "No, no, please, Your Lordship. I promise—"

How quickly Juliet changed her tune. The good Lord above had done man a disservice by creating woman.

"Do you walk, Your Lordship?" Dibbs questioned.

Quentin perused the grey stretch of sidewalk ahead of him. "Yes, a fine day for a stroll."

Exhaling into the cold November day, he watched the frosty breath rise from his mouth. He took the sack of guineas from his pocket and threw it at Juliet. He had no fear that she would throw it back at him.

She snatched the bag from the air. Satisfied, he forgot about her. "Yes, I shall walk up to my club."

As he passed Dibbs, Quentin lifted his weary eyebrow. "Who knows? Perhaps I will play a game of piquet. If Lady Luck refuses to smile at me, I have just the thing to wager. Perhaps the victor would care to win a deed to a house on Mincing Lane."

He rubbed his chin. "Hmm, an excellent idea!"

Two

Stepping out onto the street, Quentin Thornhill shielded his eyes. God, but even the hazy light from the shrunken sun hurt. His eyes, his stomach, and his head signaled their disgust with him for indulging in blue ruin.

A night of gaming and whoring had not helped his disposition, either. Nothing had gone his way—not only had he *won* at piquet, but *trebled* his brass at speculation.

Hell and blast. Speculation—damn noisy card game! Just thinking about last night's dissipation gave him a pounding megrim—then and now.

And when he tried to shake his headache by spending the night in the arms of that accommodating doxy, his discontent had not been blunted at all.

Quentin checked his reflection in a confectioner shop window. Strangely enough, he appeared spotless. Under his dark greatcoat, his chocolate tail-coat showed to perfection. His cream colored breeches had nary a wrinkle. The points on his cravat sagged only minutely. In fact, he *looked* as fine as a newly minted guinea. Looked as fine on the surface...

Quentin detoured around a local prostitute, taking care to avoid contact. He had enough of those charms! As he passed, the woman's hopeful smile sank. He remained unmoved. Last night's visit to a house of ill-repute had not been one of his more intelligent moves. Decidedly not. A brothel on Maiden Lane, yet. *Maiden Lane*—what a hoax. In this day and age, did such a female exist?

Devil take it, he could not even remember leaving White's Club. How had he ended up with that tart? Had she never been acquainted with a bar of soap?

He shuddered. Last night, he had not realized he was in his altitudes. He must have been eight sheets in the wind instead of the usual three. What had the Cyprian looked like, anyway? Brunette? Redhead?

Was her hair the color of maize interspersed with copper?

He shook his head. No. Why tax his brain-box with remembering? The woman did not matter. No woman did. Not the doxy, nor Juliet Dufay, nor Therese Thornhill. Nor, for that matter, his dearly

departed wife, Deborah. She had pretended to be a virgin, too.

A virgin, indeed. His wife had come to him three months pregnant with another man's child.

Women—an unnecessary evil—the lot of them.

Striding down Maiden Lane, his head still throbbed from his debaucheries. Hell and damn. He could not be more vexed than he was right now.

Hearing a snicker, he swung around to see a pauper—a street low-life. Two of them, making their home in an alley. Damn baffle-headed beggars. Criminal how those riffraff always hounded London's upper crust.

Quentin rubbed his forehead. Lord, he *was* in a foul mood, wasn't he?

About to turn away, Quentin watched as one rogue whispered to his crony. The other had the effrontery to point at Quentin's feet!

Blast! What was the world coming to when such scum took liberties with their betters? He pursed his lips. Those two probably had breath as evil-smelling as the Thames River. Without thinking, he sniffed.

Quentin smiled. Yes, in fact, the scabbards smelled like ... like...

He glanced down at his perfectly polished black Hessian boots. Perfectly polished except for a mound of dark brown excrement adhering to the toe of his left boot.

Damn. Was this day destined to follow on the heels of a disastrous yesterday?

The men's raucous laughter grated on Quentin's nerves, but he waited until reaching the street corner before scraping the offensive material from his boot.

Although Somerset House, his destination, was just a stone's throw down the Strand, perhaps he should hail a hackney carriage. No telling what further indignities awaited him on the streets of London. He should have instructed Dibbs to bring the carriage 'round to White's last night and force him to return home. If he had, this predicament would have never happened.

Quentin sighed. Hindsight—an annoying commodity.

Someone chose this inopportune moment to clap him on the shoulder. Tightening his fist to plant a facer on the boulder, Quentin stopped. The vacant blue eyes of Sir Ralph Buckingill stared back at Quentin.

"Udall, old boy! Jolly good to see you." Buckingill stood back, surveying Quentin. "Devilish fine coat you're wearing. Weston, I'll wager. No one makes a coat like he does. Painted buttons, too! Damme, all the rage."

Buckingill finished his inspection and smacked his lips. "And no one fills a coat like you do, Udall. Damme, but those shoulders of yours put the rest of us mere mortals to shame."

Quentin clenched his fists again, and in a clipped voice, said, "Stow it, Buckingill."

In a trice, Quentin would have traded places with a common foot soldier. To be anywhere but here. He was certainly in no mood for the foppish Buckingill. The man's latest affectation included cascades of lace flowing from the edge of his Spanish blue coat sleeve—no doubt to enhance his every gesture. Too feminine, for Quentin's taste.

He grimaced. He had wanted solitude, and now he had to walk side-by-side with the biggest fool in England.

Buckingill fell in step. "No, no, damme, I'm not toadying up to you. God's own truth!"

Slapping his bony hand against his chest, Buckingham persisted in irritating. "You cannot think I hold a grudge against you for winning the deed to that house. On Mincing, wasn't it? No, no, fair is fair. Play or pay. That's my motto."

He waved his dark-sleeved arms so wildly that his lace flicked upwards, whip-stinging Quentin's cheek.

"Hell and blast! You and that damned hovel!" His orderly world had revolved quite smoothly until he won that house.

He made a move to rip the delicate material right out of Buckingham's sleeve.

The man must have been a mind-reader. He suddenly stilled his arms. "A hovel? No, truly? By Gad, I had no idea. Just won the demmed place myself from Old Jenson, don't you know?"

Buckingham's shrill laughter rang louder than the passing carriages pounding over the cobblestone streets. He made no attempt to quiet his amusement.

Enough was enough. Walking to the curb, Quentin raised his arm to attract a hackney. Whom had he offended to warrant such bad luck?

Buckingham followed, swiping at his eyes. "Lord, did Old Jenson kick up a devil of a dust over the loss. Well, it don't signify, then, if the place is such a rat's trap."

The man seemed to go on and on, jawing about some damn topic. Nothing Quentin was interested in. Spotting an empty hackney, he almost jerked his arm out of his shoulder. Surely the driver saw the frantic wave.

Quentin relaxed. The rickety carriage headed his way. When it stopped, he opened the door, and hitched his leg up on the step. "Pleasure talking with you, Buckingham. Must be off." Politeness be damned!

Relieved to be rid of that unwanted company, Quentin called to the driver, "To the Strand. I will direct you."

Stepping inside, he ignored the smell of stale horse sweat. He sank into the worn leather seat.

Ahhh!

But, devil take it, if the door didn't open. Buckingham settled his sparse but tall frame on the opposite seat!

Words stuck in Quentin's throat. He sat in silence, watching Buckingham adjust the lace on his sleeves. Quentin was not a superstitious man by nature, but, by jingo, someone must have placed a curse on him!

As the carriage lurched forward, Buckingham lost his balance, and grasped Quentin's knees to keep from falling.

Quentin eyed those spindly digits, and drummed his fingers. He was beyond surprise. What was next?

Removing his offensive hands, Buckingham righted himself. "Going to the Academy, ain't that so? Don't mind if I join you."

Quentin wanted to ask if he had a choice, but refrained. Instead, he nodded. A body could only take so much duress. He removed his beaver hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Private contemplation was proving to be an elusive luxury. He might as well have been trapped with a pack of females.

"Probably wondering how I figured you are headed for the Royal Academy, eh, Udall? I'm not usually

quick-witted."

Quentin gazed outside. Perhaps Buckingill would tire out and shut his trap.

The never-ending one-sided conversation continued. "All the ton knows you're a habitué of the Arts. No finer patron than you. Damme, even I'm envious of your collection at Udall House. No leap of the imagination to connect you and the Strand and Somerset House." Buckingill's slender chest puffed out like a bird's breast. Clearly, he was proud of his reasoning.

Quentin sighed. Soon Somerset House would come into view. To hasten the driver, he rapped on the roof of the carriage. "The Royal Academy, in all haste!" he shouted.

Buckingill stretched, knocking his knobby knees against Quentin's. "Bless me, I keep forgetting you are staying at the Clarendon, now. Always look for you at Udall House, don't you know? I was just saying to the Dowager and little Freddy that you are a prince among men. Such style. Such grace."

Uttered by anyone else, those sentiments would have marked the speaker as a flatterer or a jokester. However, Buckingill waxed sincere.

Knowing it would make no difference, Quentin said sarcastically, "I had no idea you were an admirer of mine. And, by the way, it is Frederick, not Freddy."

Then he stiffened to attention. "You say you saw my mother with ... Frederick? When?"

"Why, this morning, old boy. Well, not exactly morning. Must have been one o'clock. Or was it half past? Or—"

Ignoring the rest of Buckingill's patter, Quentin broke into a cold sweat. By God! If Frederick, his nephew, stayed at Udall House, that meant Therese Thornhill, the boy's mother, had abandoned him there—again. Again, to pursue her own debauched pleasures.

Quentin felt a growl of anger rise in his throat. Or was it bile? Damn it to Hades!

Therese—on the prowl. Who would next fall victim to her black widow charms? Whose life would she irrevocably ruin this time? She all but had caused his brother's death; she was responsible for Viscount Aubrey's dishonor. How many countless others had she devastated? Rumor had it she bankrupted Lord Beacham, as well.

And she was slowly but surely on the road to ruining Robert's only child, Frederick. The poor boy had been alternately smothered, then cast aside by his mother since birth.

Taking out a day-old handkerchief, Quentin wiped his forehead. Therese knew the only way she could get to him was through his nephew. God, he loved the boy. Almost four years old, Frederick was a smart little beggar. Hair as bright as the sun, just as Robert's had been.

Damn it all, time and time again, she dangled Frederick in front of Quentin. Then, when he refused to do her bidding, which he did nine times out of ten, she yanked the boy back into his hellish existence.

Pity of it was that Frederick worshipped his mother. Her neglect of him hit hard. Every month, he retreated more and more into himself.

The dear boy. *If she so much as hurts a hair on Frederick's head...*

Quentin narrowed his gaze. Instead of seeing the quadrangular court of Somerset House approaching, he viewed a mental image of him tightening his hands around Therese's velvet throat.

"Udall, Udall! Not nodding off on me, are you?"

Buckingill leaned over, grabbed Quentin's shoulder, then shook it. Surprising how deceptively strong

that match stick arm was. He stared at Buckingham until the man released his grip.

"Sorry, old boy. The Academy's just ahead. Didn't want you to miss your destination." Buckingham gave a foolish laugh. "Besides, that would be the second time today someone fell asleep while I flapped my gums. Right in the middle of my discourse, the Dowager's lady friend took forty winks! Begad, a bloke could get a complex."

Buckingham straightened his lace. "Demmed agreeable looking gel, don't you know? Never seen her before. Dressed a bit plain, for my taste. Down on her luck, most like. Odd colored hair. Some type of mixture."

An inner warning set off bells in Quentin's head. "Odd colored hair?" he questioned. "By any chance, it wouldn't have been, er, light yellow twisted with brown?"

"By Jove, yes! Yes, it was. A Miss Jones, I believe your mother said."

Quentin swore ungentlemanly words. That Jones woman was beginning to haunt him. What was she doing at Udall House? She could not be trying to sway the Dowager against her own son. Not that it would be difficult to do. His mother already had a poor opinion of him.

But, Miss Jones could not possibly believe he would initiate action to evict her.

He scratched his head. He had taken his leave of her, hadn't he? Even said "Good day" to the minx. What more could a female want?

A frigid blast of air swept through the hackney carriage. The driver opened the door, and now stood, poking his head inside. "As I said from atop me carriage, Gov'nor, this 'ere's the Academy."

He held out his callused hand, waiting for the fare.

Quentin chewed on his lower lip. The Academy and its painting class would have to wait. His bath would have to wait. Even the hackney driver would have to wait ... for his money. Quentin felt impelled to do an about-face and head for Udall House. He *had* to find out what the devil was going on there—between his mother, Therese, and Miss Jones. A conspiracy of blasted females.

"My good man," he said smoothly, "I have changed my mind. Please head for Curzon Street."

The driver blinked. "In Mayfair? The rich coves' district?" Squinting at Quentin as if assessing his worth, the man frowned, as if finding fault.

Last night's debacle came back to Quentin. Perhaps his clothes *did* reflect his own dissipation. He fingered the edge of his now-limp cravat.

Buckingham interrupted, giving Quentin a wink. "Now see here, my man. This here's the Earl of Udall, don't you know? He'll stand the blunt. And what's more, if he can't, then I will."

Blast it all! The Earl of Udall beholden to a baronet? The world *had* turned inside out!

The driver muttered something about Quality, then slammed the door shut.

Why blame the fellow? He was right; Quentin was dicked in the nob.

Leaning back against the uncomfortable squabs, Quentin sighed. It seemed he would have to endure Sir Ralph Buckingham's loquacious company all the way to Udall House on Curzon Street or somewhere in between.

* * * *

Katrina Jones, certain that her head actually spun around, cupped her chin in her hands to stop the motion. There! As long as she held onto her head, it did not whirl in circles. Glancing at the Dowager

Countess, Katrina relaxed. Her hostess was bent over the salon's writing desk, hard at work, and did not notice anything unusual. Katrina had already fallen asleep here once. It would not do to pass out again. Perhaps she should drink more coffee.

She lifted the delicate porcelain cup and took a sip. Twenty-four hours had passed since first arriving in London. Twenty-four bone-tiring hours. She had no time for sleep—only work, and more work. Much to do in a short space of time.

After thoroughly cleaning the downstairs quarters of her new home, she had assembled her art portfolio: the best of her silhouette portraits. From her home in East Bergholt, she arranged to have an interview at the workshop of the famous John Miers, silhouettist *extraordinaire*. Her appointment had been at noon.

Oh, to be gainfully employed! And to earn money by doing something she loved. Of course, Great Aunt Hattie would carry on so if word got out. “The end of the world,” she was likely to say. “A Jones sullyng her hands by engaging in trade!”

Great Aunt Hattie lived in the past. She had no idea how much money it took to run a household. No idea at all. Someone needed to bring in the wages. Somehow, Katrina had to provide for Hattie, Devon, and herself.

By the stars above, *did* Katrina convince Mr. Miers to hire her? He said he would give her his answer by the end of the week. Goodness, to be on tenterhooks the whole time. She graciously, she hoped, accepted his decision. After all, he had not dismissed her outright.

She had to admit that she handled herself well.

But here, at Udall House, her body betrayed her. Not only did she fall asleep during her visit with the Dowager Countess, but Katrina had started dozing right in the middle of a conversation with Sir Ralph Buckingill!

She burned with embarrassment. One day in London, and already she offended three members of the *haut ton*: Sir Ralph, the Dowager, and the Earl of Udall.

Keep this up, Katrina, and the ton will ostracize you for life. That would definitely *not* be an asset as far as Mr. Miers was concerned.

She fidgeted in the salon's high-backed white settee. Had she actually threatened the Earl with scandal? How could she sit here, in his house, with his mother, and pretend she hadn't tricked him into letting her stay at Mincing Lane?

She never would have gone to the papers; even if he threw her, bag and baggage, into the street, she never would have exposed him and herself to ridicule.

Shrugging, she sipped at her coffee, again. Why was she still at Udall House? She had a million and one things to accomplish before she returned to her new home. This was supposed to have been a brief visit, just to return the Earl's sapphire and diamond bracelet. Return the bracelet and run.

It had taken all her courage to lift the knocker on the front door, but she did. She could not let him believe she was a thief. She *could not* antagonize him further. After all, he *was* her landlord.

Katrina smiled. A very reluctant landlord. Fortunately, the Dowager had been at home to receive Katrina. She did not think she had the stamina to cross swords with Lord Udall a second time.

But she *did* need to get on her way. The longer she stayed at his house, the greater her chances of bumping into him.

Setting down the fragile coffee cup, she tentatively said to the Dowager, “Ah, thank you, My Lady, for

your hospitality. I really must be on my way now."

The Dowager stirred from her task at the writing table. She leveled her feather quill at Katrina. "Nonsense, girl. You have just arrived. No need to go rushing off. That is the trouble with young folk today. Always in a rush to go here and go there. No sense of purpose, that is what I say. Lack of guidance. No—"

With an odd expression on her lined face, the Dowager paused. "Ah, ah choo!" She sneezed into her handkerchief. "Oh, please excuse me, my dear."

The sneeze disturbed the coiffure of her pure smoke grey hair. She tidied up the loose strands, then waved the feather. "It is this thing—this feather. Always makes me sneeze. Now, where was I? Oh yes, drawing up a list for your household staff. Let's see. In addition to a butler, you shall require a cook, and a—"

Katrina let the Dowager talk. Quite a resolute woman—even a little managing. Not at all out of her senses, as her son had implied. The Dowager was determined to provide servants for the new house, and who was Katrina to argue?

Last night's scrubbing down of the front sitting room, the dining room, and the entryway had taken its toll. Her fingers still burned from cleaning with muriatic acid. Although Devon helped, in the early morning hours, Katrina took pity on the maid and sent her to bed.

Katrina stifled a yawn. Oh, but that someone would take pity on her. Just for a few hours rest.

Sighing, she looked down at her gloved hands. Thank goodness for gloves. Her reddened skin and roughened fingernails would hardly have appeared ladylike in this beautiful salon. Perhaps that was why she lingered at Udall House—to pretend she was a lady.

Never had she seen such elegance and luxury. The salon's immense windows stretched from floor to decorated ceiling, lighting the room with the dim remnants of the November sun. No cobwebs marred their beauty. A pair of fierce brass lions stood proudly on classically fluted pedestals, guarding the entrance to the terrace. The white cushioned settee on which she sat, and the white Queen Anne-style chairs showed style and simplicity with every gentle curve.

Finishing her coffee, she marveled at the rich aroma. *Ah, this is the life.*

The Dowager sneezed again. "*Voilà!* The list is done."

She stood, righted herself, then brushed the wrinkles from her Bishop's blue poplin gown. "I will just give this paper to Perkins. He is a wonder, that man. Much more than a butler. By the time you return to your great aunt tonight, he will have your house fully staffed."

Leaning heavily on her ivory-tipped cane, the Dowager hobbled over to the bellpull, then tugged on it. As an elderly servant entered the salon, she waved him closer.

Katrina had not intended on eavesdropping, but she heard the word, "dinner," then, "extra plate."

Dinner! What time was it? Peering at the ornate long-case clock next to the fireplace, she heard the time chime in at a quarter past six.

Faith! Had she overstayed her visit by four hours?

After Perkins left, Katrina also stood. "The hour is late, My Lady. I did not mean to impose on you for so long. I—"

"Nonsense! Utter nonsense, my dear."

Before Katrina had a chance to blink, the Dowager somehow managed to bustle over to the white

settee, then pushed Katrina back down.

"A pleasure. A pleasure, I assure you, dear girl." As if pushing a person down on a settee was a common occurrence, the Dowager tucked in a stray lock inside her day cap, cautiously lowered herself down next to Katrina, and smiled a sunny smile.

"My, my, yes! I have not had this much liveliness since I do not know when. First, my darling grandson, Freddy, comes for a visit, and then Sir Ralph, and now you. You must stay for dinner. Freddy will be so happy."

Katrina caught her lower lip on her teeth. "Aunt Hattie will be worrying. I really must go." She made a move to rise.

The Dowager held out her sturdy hand. "Harriet has the constitution of an ox. Always did. She will be so busy with the new staff, she won't miss you one bit."

Katrina frowned. "Yes, I suppose that is true, but, I confess, I *am* tired." Her admission caused her shoulders to sag. "And, to be perfectly frank, I do not wish for the Earl to see me here."

The Dowager tilted her head and waved her hand as if to say, "Go on."

"You see, I am certain he will believe I came here to ask you for household help." Katrina concentrated on her hands. "He, um, he was not ... very pleased to find Aunt Hattie and me in residence at Mincing Lane."

Snorting, the Dowager refilled Katrina's cup. It was useless to protest she had enough.

"So, he was displeased, eh? Good! Do him good." His mother sipped her own coffee and gave Katrina a mischievous grin.

Katrina's stomach lurched. Family disputes always made her uncomfortable. While her mother lived, Katrina had to listen to more than her share of disagreements. Her father had been one who loved to argue—and raise his voice. And, an argument was not an argument unless shouting, ranting, and a smattering of physical violence were thrown in for good measure.

All the more reason for her to leave now. Lord Udall had a violent streak, too. How could she politely wiggle out of the Dowager's clutches?

Katrina straightened her back. She *had* to insist. Before she fell asleep where she sat—again—she *had* to leave now and go home to bed.

"My Lady,—"

"Dear Katrina, you are mistaken, you know. May I call you Katrina?"

She mutely nodded. In addition to being overbearing, the Dowager had a penchant for interrupting.

"Good." The older lady beamed. "My son, Quentin, does not live here, you know. No. Rarely visits, also. You would have better odds finding him at Newcastle Prison, for Gad's sake, than here." She took another sip of coffee.

What the Dowager said did not make sense. "But this is Udall House," Katrina protested.

The Dowager sneezed. "Pardon me. Coffee does not agree with me, you know," she explained. "Yes, of course this is Udall House. However, since Quentin is single again, he prefers to have a less, ah, formal residence. Last I heard, he lives out of the Clarendon Hotel. So much easier to conduct his little liaisons."

Heat rose on Katrina's cheeks. Lord Udall also conducted his little liaisons at places such as Mincing

Lane and the like. Less disapproval radiated from hotel staff as opposed to family retainers. But why was his mother mentioning this? Was that why she agreed to let the house to Katrina? To reduce the number of trysts?

This conversation was taking an unconventional turn. Definitely time to leave. "Well, I must, um, be —"

The door to the salon opened. Perkins stepped in and announced, "The Earl of Udall."

Oh, goodness! She was in for it now. As he entered, her gaze flew to his face. He was as heart-beatingly handsome as she remembered but for his forbidding demeanor. His scowl distorted his features.

Odd thing, though. If she remembered correctly, he wore the same clothes as yesterday, right down to the same striped buttons.

The Earl made an elegant, if impersonal, bow to his mother. "Madam." Then he turned to Katrina. "Miss, er, Jones."

In some way, she felt insulted.

"Why, Quentin," the Dowager gushed. "We were just talking about you."

"Indeed?" He lifted his dark eyebrow.

Katrina's flush deepened. His square jaw seemed anchored in disapproval. He obviously was not pleased to have been the topic of conversation and, just as obviously, was not pleased to see her in the salon. The need to escape pounded through her body.

The Dowager seemed oblivious to the tension in the room. "Yes, indeed." She fluttered her hand. "Do sit down. Miss Jones paid me a visit today to return something of yours."

Oh, dear God! The Dowager was going to mention the bracelet. Katrina paid attention to the tiny new hole in her right glove. Didn't *haut ton* women believe in overlooking a man's peccadilloes?

His mother must have picked up the black box that had been lying on a side table. She handed it to him. "An expensive bauble, no? I admit my curiosity. Which paphian is this bracelet for?"

Katrina closed her eyes. Her stomach threatened to lose its contents. How could the Dowager subject her son *and* Katrina to this ... this embarrassment? She hated family scenes. She *hated* them.

After quickly glancing at the Earl, she shut her eyes again. He looked as if he could blaze lightning from his opaque eyes. Although she hardly knew him, she read his expression. He blamed her for returning the bracelet.

But what had he wanted her to do? Keep the blasted thing?

His words caused her to shiver. "Do you truly wish to know, madam?" he asked his mother.

"Of course not, Quentin. The very idea!"

While mother and son stared each other down, Katrina took a deep breath and stood. Faith, but her knees shook. "I must be g—going now. It is getting late, and Aunt Hattie does expect me."

Surprisingly enough, the Dowager did not protest. The enmity between her and Lord Udall raised the hackles on Katrina's neck. Had they even heard her?

"Well, thank you again." About to leave, she felt his hand on her upper arm. He curved his fingers around, then tightened his grip.

"You came here alone?" His tone spoke volumes of disbelief and disapproval.

Her temper flared. *He* could dispense valuable trinkets to the fashionable impure at will. But he would look down his nose at her if she traveled without a companion. Heavens! That was too improper, wasn't it?

It took some strength, but she pulled away. She icily told him, "I came with my maid."

Seeming to relax, he scratched his head. "That's all right, then," he mumbled.

Before she could reply, the Dowager rapped on the table with her cane. "Quentin, you must take Miss Jones home. It *is* very late—much too late for her to ride in a hackney carriage."

She was so close to him, that she felt his anger. So his mother tried to manage him, too. No doubt the proud Earl of Udall disliked that intensely. And to play nursemaid to his lodger—that would certainly rankle!

True, she did not want to ride in a carriage with him, but it would save her the cost of two fares.

To gauge his reaction, she glanced at him, then winced. An erupting volcano would have been more welcoming! She watched a blue vein in his forehead pulse a frantic beat. He was about to blow his top. The muscles in his arms strained the seams of his tail-coat.

But no, instead of exploding, he bowed. "As you wish. I shall make the arrangements."

He offered his arm. "Shall we?"

Although she would have rather kissed a snake, she saw no alternative but to take his arm. It was hard and unyielding, like his expression.

To her amazement, after touching him, her fingertips tingled. Odd thing, she liked the sensation!

Catching her breath, she released her hold. "If I may freshen up first?" She needed to compose herself; she needed her wits about her. Without them, Lord Udall was certain to make mincemeat out of her.

"Of course." He turned, glaring at his mother. "When I return from the stables, madam, you and I shall have a talk."

Katrina gulped. She felt a surge of pity for the Dowager.

* * * *

Waiting for her son, Constance Thornhill wrung her hands. If she had a choice, she would have paced out her frustrations. But walking aggravated her hip, so she fiddled with her fingers instead.

"Quentin, Quentin, what am I going to do with you?" Constance sighed.

Every time she saw him, he grew more impossible than the last. For Gad's sake, she could hardly recognize the happy, laughing boy that he once had been in the sarcastic, cold man that stood in the salon only seconds before.

As she creaked down into the settee, she sighed again. Sometimes it seemed that when Robert died, she had lost two sons instead of one.

With a lace hanky, she dabbed at her eyes. Really, at the advanced age of six and sixty, she was entitled to spend her remaining years free from strife. Her Freddy was the only bright spot in her life. If it wasn't for him...

Her lower lip quivered.

The salon's satinwood door burst open and Quentin strode inside. Constance hid the hanky behind her back. "Well, Quentin. To what do I owe the *pleasure* of this visit?"

As he dispassionately raked his gaze over her, she shivered with the frigidness of his stare. Surely he did not spot her shaking hands on her cane. Drat it all, but getting old was the very devil!

"Madam, there is no need to dissemble with me. You had no right to assign lodgers to my new property. Mincing Lane is none of your concern. I had plans for the dwelling."

Turning his back on her, he walked over to the ornate sideboard and poured an immoderate amount of amber liquid into a crystal brandy snifter.

Constance shook her head. "Drinking yourself under the table, again?"

He would bristle at her remark, but a mother had to say *something*!

He refused to be bated; he just took another gulp.

Fingering the finely chiseled tip of her ivory cane, she said in a matter-of-fact tone, "Harriet Jones is a bosom friend of my childhood. She and her amiable niece came to me for help. They needed a place to live."

Quentin sputtered his drink. "Amiable? You call that whey-faced chit amiable? Rag-mannered is more to the point! Blast it!"

After wiping the spill on his chocolate brown tail-coat, he raised his gaze to the ceiling, then took a deep breath. "Lord, what a day."

"Are you not feeling the thing, Quentin? You look out of sorts. Your apparel does not measure up to your usual immaculate standards."

She watched him drop down into a Queen Anne chair, then prop his feet next to the coffee service. The clatter from the delicate cups set her teeth on edge.

Resting his chin in the palm of his hand, he muttered, "Not the thing at all. Devil of a day—today and yesterday. By God, everything went wrong." He scratched at his shoulder. "And now I have to dance attendance on that cunning piece of baggage."

Constance blinked. Quentin had not confided in her like this since ... since Robert had passed on. A flutter of hope lightened her heart. "Care to tell me about it?"

Studying the classic design of the crystal snifter, he fell silent. What inner demons racked his thoughts?

He gulped down the last of the brandy, then coughed. "Blast it, my troubles all began with that house."

Narrowing his gaze as if accusing her, Quentin thundered, "Why did that Jones chit come here? Are you two, perchance, hatching a scheme against me?"

Constance leaned back against the cushions. Too bad his expansive mood had not lasted longer. Still, it was a start. "You know why Miss Jones came, Quentin. The poor gel wanted to get rid of that tainted bracelet. Hard on her sensibilities, to have that ... that thing around, I will wager. I suppose you did not thank her for her effort."

Smoothing the hair off her forehead, Constance continued, "Anyone can tell the poor child is exhausted to the bone."

Slowly but deliberately, Quentin stood, visibly trembling with rage.

Constance tut-tutted. "Dear me. You never could control your temper."

He flung his brandy snifter into the fireplace. Ignoring the loud tinkling of glass, he roared, "Blast and damn! That poor child, madam? *That poor child* could teach Medusa herself a lesson in treachery! Did Miss Jones happen to mention she—"

The door opened. Perkins took a step inside. "Your Ladyship?"

Constance waved him away. "It is all right, Perkins. The Earl just had a little ... accident."

Eyeing the crystal fragments gleaming against the white and grey marble fireplace, the butler gazed at Quentin, then nodded slowly. "Yes, Your Ladyship." Perkins then withdrew from the room.

Quentin sat down. "Damme, but Perkins always makes me feel like I am in short pants again."

Perhaps that is a good thing! Aloud, she prompted him. "Did Miss Jones tell me what?"

"That she threatened to go talk to the papers if I evicted her. As if I would." He chewed on his lip.

"Begad! The gel's got spunk." Constance laughed so hard, merry tears escaped her eyes. Katrina Jones was proving to be a "thorn" in Quentin Thornhill's side. Good!

Straightening in his chair, he scrutinized the door. "This conversation is not getting me anywhere. I have an even more unpleasant matter to discuss. I hear Therese is up to her usual tricks. Frederick is here? Yes? Who is she after this time?"

"Dear, dear Freddy." Constance sighed, again. Her tears of amusement seemed destined to turn into tears of sorrow. "I have no idea who Therese is after. Didn't talk to her. In fact, she did not wait until I hobbled my way down the staircase before she departed. Just left the boy with Perkins."

Retrieving her hanky from behind her back, Constance blotted at the moisture seeping from her eyes. "Freddy's current hero is Wellesley, you know. The dear boy corrects me if I call him Freddy. 'I'm Viscount Wellington, Grandmama,' he says. 'I fight that nasty Bonaparte.' Lord, Freddy reminds me so much of Robert."

Slumped down in the chair, except for his dark hair, Quentin almost looked like Robert, too.

Her son murmured, "Frederick's a winning little beggar."

Again, Constance felt in harmony with Quentin.

As if disliking their shared moment of camaraderie, he frowned. "Tell the boy I will pay him a visit. I shall take him to Astley's Royal Amphitheater."

Before she had a chance to reply, Quentin rose to his feet. "I hear Miss Jones in the anteroom. I bid you good day."

He pointed a stern finger at his mother. "And I *will not* tolerate additional meddling in my affairs, madam." Turning, he stalked out of the salon.

Constance tapped her foot, pleased with the day's events. "No, Quentin," she said to herself. "I do not believe further meddling is required. Now that Katrina Jones and you have been 'introduced,' I believe I shall sit back and watch the sparks fly!"

Three

Katrina sat with a straight back in the Earl of Udall's carriage. There was no earthly way she could force herself to relax against the cushions. Not that the squabs were uncomfortable. Stroking the velvety material, she felt its luxury permeate the thin cloth of her glove. *Rich*. She let her gaze wander. Smooth, soft leather lined the door. *Rich*. The carriage ornamentation glistened with brass, and the honeyed smell of beeswax filled the interior of the coach. *Rich*.

Everything about the Earl spoke of extravagance, excellence, and wealth. No doubt his carriage gave more comfort than her bed mattress.

But, did his affluence mean that he was happy?

From under the brim of her frayed crêpe bonnet, she glanced at him. His turned-down lips answered her. No, she did not think he was. Obviously riches did not insure happiness. She was not one to envy him. He had his world and she had hers.

Shifting in her seat, Katrina looked at her maid, Devon. She also appeared restless. Her sparse, bony frame showed no movement, either from the carriage sways or from her own breathing. Her gaze stayed rigid as well. She stared at the opposite squabs as if all of life's answers could be found between the cushions. Poor Devon. Sitting next to Lord Udall would not soothe anyone's ragged nerves.

The Earl was not a man who inspired relaxation. Although he leaned back against the blue velvety padding, his body was a jumble of motion. First he would drum his fingers, then he switched position in his seat, and every now and again, he scratched at his shoulder.

If Katrina were a betting woman—which she wasn't—she would bet that if Udall had been alone, he would most likely be ranting aloud. Any second she expected him to pound the carriage walls. He fairly bristled with unsaid expletives—curses just waiting to be uttered.

For the time being, she and Devon thwarted him. He would have to restrain himself ten more minutes until he was the sole occupant of the enclosed carriage.

Biting back a smile, Katrina picked at the hole in her glove. So the rich had problems, too. Udall had to have problems, or at least he thought he did. Why else would he be so ill-tempered all the time? Perhaps he was just spoiled.

She lifted her head. *Things often do not go my way, but I do not go around punching walls!*

“About time for a new pair of gloves, wouldn't you say?” The Earl settled further back on the cushions and rested his dark gaze on her.

Katrina flushed. She had worried the tiny tear into a hole the size of a pea. One more thing to do when she arrived at Mincing Lane: get out her darning needle.

Meeting his gaze, she stilled her hands. “Yes, My Lord, past time for a new pair of gloves.”

Devon's sharp intake of breath indicated she recognized Katrina's insolence. These worn little mitts were her only pair—and likely to remain so—unless she got the job with John Miers.

But the Earl did not find anything amiss. He just nodded, as if agreeing with her statement. Then he narrowed his gaze. “Forgive my impertinence, Miss Jones, but you could use a new pelisse as well.”

His scrutiny revealed every rent, every imperfection of her serviceable pelisse. She straightened her shoulders. How dare he comment on her clothing. How dare he ridicule her possessions. Who did he think he was? Earl or no earl, it was unthinkable for a gentleman to offer criticism on a woman's wearing apparel. Or rather, on a *lady's* apparel. Standards might be different for fancy companions like the woman riding in his carriage yesterday.

“Indeed?” She spoke as frostily as she could. “How thoughtless of me to inflict my garments on you and your sensibilities!”

She turned away from him. The November chill had no effect on her temper; her cheeks blazed with heat. Of all the impossible men! She *knew* what her pelisse looked like; she had eyes. Of course it was not the first stare of fashion. She could never hope to have anything that was. But no one in East Bergholt ever accused her of being shabbily dressed, either.

Her eyes stung. She quickly blinked away the extra moisture.

She heard him chuckle. "Indeed, Miss Jones, it was thoughtless of *me*. I do apologize. I—"

Why did he stop? Why had his growls of displeasure transformed into snickers of amusement? Faith, these society swells were not content to live above the masses; they actually entertained themselves with the misfortunes of others!

She curved her lip upward, then turned to face him.

He was staring at her—staring at her profile.

Raising her eyebrow, she returned his scrutiny. This man might be an earl, but he had the manners of a barbarian.

Surprisingly enough, Lord Udall had the good grace to redden. Perhaps there was hope for him yet. "I beg your pardon, Miss Jones. I realize I have overstepped the bounds of propriety. But you look so familiar. I feel as if I have seen you a thousand times before."

Familiar? She swallowed down twice. Was he trying to pour honey over vinegar? Turn her up sweet? Perhaps indulge in a little dalliance? She swept her gaze over him in a fashion her Great Aunt Hattie would have been proud of. "Lord Udall, you are my landlord. Nothing more."

Again, she heard Devon's gasp. The fat was in the fire now!

"So I am." Unmindful of Katrina's haughty tone, he smiled. His face took on a boyish cast and his eyes crinkled with mischief. "So I am," he repeated.

And what is that supposed to mean? She exchanged a look with Devon. The dear maid tsk-tsked, then resumed her study of the cushions.

Katrina gulped, again. His anger was easier to deal with than his ... his what? Playfulness?

To her intense relief, the white stone facade of her new home came into view. The Earl's horses clip-clopped to an abrupt halt. Swaying slightly, she felt his hands on her upper arms, ostensibly to steady her.

"My Lord, I am quite all—" She made the mistake of looking into his eyes. His deep, dark walnut-colored eyes. A sudden surge of warmth spread over her body. Her heart pounded, compensating for the unexpected heat. Or was it because of the nearness of his face? Slack-jawed, she struggled to recover. "—all right."

Giving her a mysterious smile, he released her.

She shivered. Thank goodness they arrived at their destination.

Before she could say another word, he opened the door, then jumped down from the carriage and gestured with his arm. "Ladies."

As much as Katrina wanted to avoid his touch, there was no escaping him. Gracious, but he made her heart beat in such an unfathomable way. After he helped her and Devon down from the coach, Katrina thanked him for the ride, and turned to go.

His strong grip stopped her as effectively as if she had walked into a brick wall. "You must allow me to escort you, Miss Jones. The walkways are slippery. Surely, I would be a negligent landlord and a boorish gentleman if I did not squire you and your maid to the door."

He had the audacity to grin at her. By the stars above, she *could not* figure this man out. Eyeing the ice-strewn sidewalk, she would have to take him up on his offer. While her half-boots were made of sturdy leather, Devon's were not as thick. Katrina could not take a chance. If her maid wobbled, then fell on the ice, she might break one of her frail old bones.

Although Katrina hated to admit it, Lord Udall was right. Her one consolation was that she would never have to see him again. She took his extended arm. "So kind of you to assist us. I am certain you have far more important demands on your time."

She hoped he did not hear Devon's tut-tut of disapproval.

They all trudged forward, and he said expansively, "Nonsense, Miss Jones. It is my pleasure."

A few minutes ago, she would have thought he was just being polite. But now ... she did not know what to think.

As they reached the sun-bleached oak door, it opened. A balding, middle-aged man stood in the entryway; his black and white uniform looked newer and crisper than anything Katrina owned. "Good evening, My Lord, miss. I am Hopkins."

Katrina pushed a weary curl off her forehead. It had been quite an eventful day. To her surprise, when she had left Udall House, her exhaustion disappeared. Now it returned in full force. She looked at the Earl as if to say, "Who is Hopkins?"

Lord Udall patted her shoulder. "M'mother works fast, when the spirit moves her. She has hired servants, remember?"

"Oh, yes. I forgot." Katrina blinked. Tonight, she would sleep like the dead.

Lifting his beaver hat, the Earl said his good-byes. "I will not keep you any longer. I shall call on you soon."

After he left, she blinked, again. *Call on me? Whatever can he mean?*

* * * *

Quentin stared at the silhouette portrait hanging on the wall of his hotel suite. Running his fingers over the delicate silver filigree frame, he marveled at the workmanship displayed in his favorite piece of art. In all his years as patron of the arts at the Royal Academy, he had never seen a finer example of a cut paper silhouette.

He rubbed his chin. His memory served him well. The profile of the woman he so admired and the profile of Katrina Jones were one and the same. Could not be coincidence. Small, straight nose; decided chin; long fluttery lashes; curled locks—by God! It was uncanny.

To an uninitiated eye, this black outline could have depicted a number of people in London. Some so-called society wits would even pat themselves on the back for proclaiming the portrait as female! Blasted nincompoops! But any student of the arts knew that a silhouette—a successful silhouette—was as singular and as unique as a person's handwriting.

"Who is the silhouettist?" In the past, he asked that question over and over again, but now grew determined to learn the answer. Removing the picture from the wall, he turned it over and carefully peeled away a strip of mounting. In the lower right-hand corner, he spotted a minute signature. The script was as fine as angel hair, so he strained his eyes. The signature read: K. Jones.

Quentin replaced the portrait, strode over to the Clarendon's sideboard, then poured himself a brandy. Sitting in his comfortable tub-shaped chair, he rested his gaze on the silhouette, as he had a thousand times before. Since no lady would ever lower herself to "commerce," the signature only confirmed that the portrait sitter was Katrina Jones. Usually the *silhouettist's* signature decorated his work, but not always. Perhaps this artist had been so enthralled with Katrina's beauty, that he secretly used her name to identify his contour of her.

No matter. Quentin sipped his drink. The warmth from the crackling fire, the choice vintage of French

brandy in his hand, and his prize hanging on the wall made him feel content. Not often that he felt content.

The odd thing of it was that as soon as he had seen this portrait, about a year ago now, he coveted it. He even put paid to a monumental gaming debt due him to possess it.

Placing the brandy snifter on the side tripod table, he flicked his finger against the clear pear-shaped glass. Its resonant “ping” echoed in the silent sitting room. Who had been the gambler?

He closed his eyes and continued to tap the crystal. Slowly, an image formed in his mind. In the gaming room at White's Club, a man sat, his face ravaged by drink, debauchery, and greed. “I have pictures,” the man had rasped. “Valuable pictures. Could pay you off with my pictures.”

Quentin had laughed. What picture could have been worth seven thousand pounds? And if it had been, how had that scoundrel become the painting's owner?

Despite Quentin's reservations, he had agreed to visit the gambler's apartments. As soon as Quentin saw the silhouette, he wanted to claim it for his own.

And the scoundrel? What had he looked like?

Red. The man's face had been reddened by drink. His bulbous nose stretched across the plains of his face.

“I remember now.” Quentin nodded. But there was something more. The man's hair. His hair had shone like copper mixed with sun-lightened gold.

Quentin snapped his fingers too hard. The snifter shattered into a thousand crystal fragments.

“Damn!” The man's name was Jones; he must have been Katrina's father. That blasted bounder.

No wonder the poor girl was in such dire straits. To have a sire such as he.

Forgetting about the untidiness on the table, Quentin walked over to the sideboard, then poured cool water into the waiting bowl. The aromatic smell of brandy drifted up from the sleeve of his coat. Using his handkerchief, he dabbed at the stain.

Before he himself had realized it, perhaps his mind identified Katrina as the girl in his silhouette. Perhaps that was why her spirited temper amused him instead of enraged him.

Quentin smiled—an action he performed infrequently. Yes, Katrina Jones made it quite plain that she wished to be rid of his company—permanently. She had every reason for wanting to sever the connection. His boorish behavior amazed even him. Throwing money at her, punching the wall, almost threatening her—how had he sunken to such depths?

Dropping his handkerchief into the water, he sighed. Whatever the provocation, he was wrong to denigrate *all* of womankind. In the future, he would have to bear that in mind and act accordingly.

Acknowledging one's faults was never an agreeable pastime—even for the best of men. He took another look at the silhouette. Some strange emotion pumped in his blood.

Blast, he needed to fritter away his frustrations at White's gaming tables. Only this time, he would endeavor to remain sober.

As he straightened the points of his clean waistcoat, he heard a sharp rap on the outside door. He called out, “Enter.”

A young lad opened the door. He was years away from his first shave. “Your L—Lordship...” The boy's voice wavered nervously. “Your Lordship, you ‘ave a visitor.”

Quentin frowned. Who was seeking his counsel at this hour of the night? Any man with an ounce of brains spent the winter at his country estate. London was decidedly thin of the *bon ton*. Also, not many people knew he was housed at the Clarendon. After his wife Deborah, died, he had let his mother run Udall House. He no longer had the heart to reside there. Town romantics said he missed his wife.

Quentin smiled bitterly. Town skeptics said he drove his wife to her death. The truth of it was that Deborah, seven months gone with child, had been fleeing London with her lover. Neither her father, Lord Ivanbraugh, could dissuade her; nor Quentin's mother; nor Quentin himself.

A premature birthing took both Deborah's and the baby's lives.

No, fewer memories disturbed him at the Clarendon. Although the rooms felt sterile and barren, they contained no memories of his brother Robert, nor Deborah.

The shuffling noise from the boy's boots snapped Quentin out of his preoccupation. "My visitor—you may show him up."

The boy shook his head. His hotel cap seemed too large for him. "Not a 'im. 'Tis a 'er! A fancy mort, too!"

"Indeed? How intriguing. Escort *her* up, then."

Nodding, the boy left.

While Quentin waited, he poured a brandy—only his second for the day. Some inner sense told him he would need it.

Cracking the door ajar, a tall woman entered, dressed in the first stare of fashion. She closed the door, then turned around and smiled.

Therese. He should have guessed.

"Quentin! How good it is to see you again." Therese Thornhill held out her hands to him.

As theatrical as ever. Neglecting to take her outstretched hands, he took a sip of brandy instead. "Do not play the coquette with me, Therese. What brings you to my rooms at this hour? I was on my way out." He studied her. "The Dowager believes you went out of town."

While Therese's dark eyebrows lowered, her reddened lips pouted. "Ever the gentleman, aren't you?" She pulled off her black kid gloves, signaling her intention to delay him. "I intended to go to Bath—to take the waters. I got as far as Newbury, but ... things did not work out."

She lowered her gaze. "Thought I would pay you a visit."

In addition to the gloves, her ermine cloak and matching muff also found their way onto his favorite chair.

Quentin drummed his fingers against the brandy snifter. Not ten minutes ago, he made a resolve to be less misanthropic. How good intentions go awry. Noticing the broken glass on the tripod table, he stilled his hand.

"So you have," he drawled. "Now that you have seen me, you may leave."

The idea of Therese bathing in the mineral waters at Bath was almost laughable. She must have had an argument with her latest cavalier—to use a polite word.

No matter. He was not interested. He just wanted her to leave. But Therese would never be dismissed that easily. He knew that for a fact.

Flashing him a wanton smile, she slowly, languidly pressed her hands down the outline of her body.

The thin, silk material of her silver evening gown revealed every feminine curve—and Therese could boast of many.

Despite himself, he caught his breath. Fool.

She licked her lips; she must have heard his reaction. Moving closer, she murmured, “Pour me a drink, Quen?”

He ignored her.

She poured one herself. “Once upon a time, you did not find me so repugnant. As I recall, you were quite ... attentive.” Fluttering her lashes, she rested her hand on her voluptuous bosom.

He looked away. “Once upon a time is for fairy tales, Therese. For children—not adults. What happened between us transpired a long time ago.” He exhaled. Even the memory of that time caused him pain. “And there is not a minute that goes by that I do not rue the day I first met you.”

Pouting again, she took a drink, then stretched out on a divan. She pulled up on her silk gown until her shapely feet and lower legs lay exposed on the cushions. “Ah,” she sighed, “I will never understand why you moved out of Udall House. The Clarendon is nowhere near as impressive.”

Kicking off her silver slippers, she wiggled her toes. “But I digress. Five years is not such a long time. You still have not forgiven me for Robert's death, have you? How was I to know he did not understand the rules and ways of the ton? I presented him with an heir—I did my job. Why shouldn't I look for pleasure elsewhere? *Every* wife does. Even your wife did, though I disapproved of Deborah tricking you into marriage. Trying to pass off her unborn bastard as heir to the earldom! She did not play by the rules.”

Twisted logic. Quentin snorted. “Your censure of Deborah's actions is small consolation to me.”

Therese wet her lips, again. “That may be. If I may say in my own defense, Robert was a bit of a boor —”

“Enough!” Quentin almost threw down his glass. Turning away from her, he closed his eyes to relive his own demons. In a voice reflecting his agony, he said harshly, “Our brief time together was destined to end. You knew that. But you wanted more, didn't you? You were not satisfied with my generous farewell gifts. *You* wanted to be the one to terminate the affair. So you sought out my brother, Robert, to exact your revenge against me.”

“Farewell gifts!” she spat. “Bribery! I wanted *you*. I loved *you*.”

“Love!” Quentin suddenly felt double his three and thirty years. “Two months time with me and you decided you loved me? You do not know the meaning of the word. How could you? You do not even love your own son.”

He leaned against the fireplace mantel. Somehow his own weight seemed too much for him to carry. “Robert was just down from Cambridge—a callow youth. What chance did he have against a notorious *femme fatale*? When you convinced him to elope with you to Gretna Green, I had no way of knowing. I was visiting my northern estates. After I found out, the marriage was a *fait accompli*—it had already taken place.”

Lowering his head, he whispered, “I will never forgive myself—or you.”

Robert, dear Robert. Never to challenge him to a race using the finest horses in the Udall stables, or to hear his deep genuine laughter when he won—which he usually did. Never, never again.

Therese massaged a spot on her uncovered knees. “How noble of you, Quen, to blame yourself for Robert's death. But you did not force the liquor down his throat that night, did you? You did not accept

that wager for him, the one that put him into that rickety carriage. You did not put the whip in his hand. You had no control over the muddy roads."

She shrugged. "Face it. Robert *chose* to act in that irresponsible manner. It was Robert who caused his death, not you." Taking another drink, she paled slightly. "And not me."

Quentin had enough. If only he could make her stop talking.

Therese must have read his mind, for she continued her prattling. She knew of a thousand ways to annoy him. "Besides, that night was not the first time Robert caught me with another man. He should have been used to it—it happened often enough."

Clenching and unclenching his fists, Quentin steamed. By God, this woman did not deserve to live! No wonder he soured on womankind. Perhaps the only reason he did not rid the world of her amoral presence was because of Frederick. Even a mother as devoid of feeling as Therese was better than having no mother at all.

Quentin eyed her again. Or maybe not.

He ran his hand over his hair. "I am leaving now. By the time I return, I expect you to be gone."

Before he did anything he would regret later, he left and slammed his hotel room door shut behind him.

Four

For a week, Katrina worked from dawn to dusk—and beyond, as assistant to John Miers. The grueling schedule showed. The blue smudges now under her eyes threatened to become permanent. Anyone with artistic sensibilities must have thought she looked like a walking rainbow: vivid green eyes, noticeable blue circles, a wan complexion, and oddly colored hair.

She did not mind though; she was happy. At the Miers silhouette concession stand inside Astley's Ampitheatre, she rested a blackened paintbrush behind her ear. The smell of turpentine clung to her as expensive perfume clouded around a *haut ton* grand lady. An offensive odor to some, but Katrina's nose rejoiced in the sharp fumes of the oil solvent. Narrowing her gaze, she viewed her latest work. Yes, it pleased her. Heavens, but she was loving every minute of her current occupation!

A voice called out, "G'evening. G'evening."

Striding purposefully down the narrow corridor, John Miers greeted the other merchants in the area without looking at them. He obviously made his way past these vendors many times before, so why *should* he let his gaze wander? She, on the other hand, still stared wide-eyed at the circus hawkers and their colorful, diverting wares. London was vital—full of hustle and bustle. Nothing in East Bergholt prepared her for the excitement of city life.

A wayward curl wiggled out of her chignon and flopped down on her cheek. Extracting a hair pin, she restrained that lock of hair, but also succeeded in smearing her hand with black oil paint.

You are so untidy, Katrina! She dabbed a clean cloth into turpentine to remove the pigment. Soon tonight's ticket holders would enter the corridor to await their seats for the show. If they were in a carefree mood, they might stop along the stands and part with some hard-earned shillings. It was Katrina's job to entice them to purchase a silhouette or two.

Mr. Miers walked around boxes of supplies, reached her side, then viewed the profile she worked on. "I like it. First rate. Bang-up job."

She smiled up at him. He had taken a chance on hiring her. Women artists were a rarity, even in this

advanced year of 1810. She smiled, again. It felt good to have her talent appreciated.

Cocking his head, he studied the silhouette portrait painted on glass. “Yes, that is a fine example of one of our upstanding English matrons. Plump chin, high forehead, a rather overbearing nose. Harumph! I’ll wager she will haggle over the payment.”

Katrina thought so, too. Her nervous laugh turned into concern. “Do you think I should tone down the nose?”

He shook his head vigorously, nearly displacing his spectacles. “No, I believe you have diplomatically captured the woman. She will be pleased.”

Frowning, he turned his magnified gaze on Katrina. “Didn’t she sit for you just yesterday? After Astley’s six o’clock show?”

Katrina retrieved her paintbrush and touched up a curve on the woman’s neck. “Yes, sir, that is right. She wants to come by today, before the first show. If she gives her approval, she is going to commission me to make cut paper copies of this original—five of them. She plans to give them as holiday gifts for her family and friends.”

He pulled on his bristly grey side hairs; he only pulled on them when he was distressed. A week in his employ taught her that. “Katrina, I say, you are working too hard. A fevered pitch, that’s what it is! Dash it, girl. I count my blessings that you came to London, but, by jingo, if you keep this pace up, you will wear yourself out. A fine silhouette takes time, concentration, and a good eye. Strain your eyes, and you’ll end up like me!”

Pushing his spectacles up on his nose, he shook his finger at her. “I will take no responsibility if you ruin your constitution.”

Katrina threaded the brush back behind her ear, then wiped her hands on her linen smock. “Please, Mr. Miers, I am fine—truly I am. This schedule is perfect for me. After I arrive at half-past three, it is quiet, and I get a great deal finished. Then, of course, the show-goers come. And while they mill about, waiting for Astley’s doors to open…”

She rubbed her thumb against her other fingers, signaling the silent but effective sign for money. “You do your best business before the first show, you know.”

Picking up the glass portrait, she set it upright on the display table. “I do what I can during the show, then I leave when the second show’s doors open at half-past eight. By nine o’clock, I am home. As I said, the job is perfect.”

“You are not pushing yourself too hard? I do applaud the industrious spirit, but everything in moderation—that’s my motto.”

He pointed to a pile of four and ten paper silhouettes lying on the table—her work from the morning hours. “And when did you do these?”

Biting her lower lip, she murmured, “These? Perhaps your son, William…?”

Faith, Mr. Miers was observant. She had hoped to frame her latest projects before he arrived.

“Don’t widen those green orbs at me, my dear, and tell me a Banbury tale! I was fleecing customers before you were born. I know you are the silhouettist. No one else in my shop cuts paper silhouettes. Not the quality of these, at any rate.”

She leaned against the counter. Any minute Astley’s patrons for the night would start spilling through the doors. Tonight promised to be a special show. In addition to the spectacle of dancing animals and death-defying feats of horsemanship, Astley advertised acrobats, clowns, and fireworks to entertain the

crowds. Perhaps before she left for the night, she would take a peak through the stage doors.

"Katrina!"

"Oh, er, yes, Mr. Miers?"

"I am a businessman, not a wet-nurse. What does your great aunt say about you arriving home each night by nine?"

"She, ah, she..."

No sense telling a falsehood—not another one, anyway. Sooner or later the truth would come out. "She thinks I leave at three to be a companion to an older lady. Goodness, she would have kittens if she knew what I was doing!"

There. The truth was out. But surely Mr. Miers would not dismiss her now. He just *couldn't*.

Katrina's shoulders started to sag, so she straightened them. "Sometimes a white lie is kinder than the stark truth."

He shook his head, again.

She refused to feel guilty. Because of this job, she actually had money to pay Devon some of her back wages.

Mr. Miers pulled once more on his side hairs. "You are old enough to know what you are doing, girl, and you know how to pace yourself. Do not look to me if you fall into a bumble broth."

After referring to his pocket watch, he snapped it shut. The previous topic of conversation was snapped shut as well. "Crowd should be a good one tonight."

As if on cue, the entrance doors opened. A mob five people thick burst through Astley's portals.

"Busy night. I shall move these boxes out back. Give you some room. William should be by in a bit, to lend you a hand."

Peering into the distance, he bobbed his head up. "I believe I see your tartar matron advancing now. Don't let her bamboozle you!"

Katrina smoothed her hair back into her chignon. "Oh no, sir, never fear. I can hold my own against overbearing ladies."

From over the edge of his spectacles, he surveyed her. "I am certain you can." Giving her a wink, he lifted a box and maneuvered around the display table to the back area.

Wearing a little smile of satisfaction, Katrina tidied her area. She successfully handled the embarrassing contretemps over her work, and she came out ahead. Things were going wonderfully smooth. Bending over, she shooed some dirt out of her booth. While on her hands and knees, she felt someone's gaze on her back. Quickly turning around, she found herself scrutinized by a mere wisp of a boy.

"Oh! You startled me." Although the boy could not have been more than four, her cheeks burned hot. No one liked to be observed in such an inelegant position.

She stood. "Are you here for the show?"

Keeping his dark brown-eyed gaze on her, the little boy nodded. His tiny nose and mouth were no match for his large round eyes. A glance at his clothing confirmed her suspicions that he was a rich man's son. An ornamented shiny tail-coat plus a waistcoat and trousers made him appear as a miniature adult. His top hat overshadowed his straw colored locks of hair. Whoever dressed him knew nothing

about appropriate clothes for children.

But rich parents usually wanted a keepsake of their child. This was a good chance to drum up business. Katrina scanned the incoming crowd, looking for two light-haired people. "Where are your parents, my good little man?"

He kept unnaturally still and made no reply. His silence struck her as tragic.

She got on her knees and put her arm around him. "Your parents? Are you lost?"

His intense gaze never left her face, but his lower lip trembled ever so slightly. "My papa is gone. He's dead." The boy shifted from one foot to the other. "He liked to ride horses."

The tiny waver in the lad's voice dug deeply into her heart. "Oh, you poor lamb."

Giving him a hug, she fetched her satchel of goods, and produced an apple. "Here. Why don't you eat this and I shall find your mother for you?"

Accepting the apple, he took a bite, and moved behind the counter with her. He walked as a wooden toy soldier might; his fine satin clothes hampered free movement.

As he crunched the apple, he mumbled, "Mama's not here. Don't know where she is. Out running around, Grandmama says."

The uncanny thing about it was the boy spoke without emotion, without feeling.

Katrina curled her arm around him, and held him closely, as if to shelter him from misfortune. Poor little soul. He might be rich, but he seemed to lack for love.

At his eye-level, she looked at him. "Who are you with then, my good man? And what is your name?"

"I'm Viscount Wellington." He gave a stiff bow. "I fight that nasty Bonaparte."

It was so absurd that she sat back on her heels and laughed. "I am pleased to meet you, my Lord Wellington! And I am—"

"Frederick! Frederick, where the deuce—?" A deep male voice carried over the counter. "Oh, there you are. Do come out from behind this ledge."

The boy made no move to obey. Katrina quickly stood, to explain to the boy's anxious sounding guardian. "Good evening, sir. I was just about to..."

Faith! Of all the people in the world, she never expected to see the Earl of Udall stop by her booth. Her heart beat in sharp, staccato movements.

His tall grandly clothed figure loomed large and conspicuous among the throng of pleasure seekers for tonight's performance. The fine threads of his tail-coat showed every muscular contour in his arms and back. He moved as a man used to power. Unfortunately, he abused it as well.

The Earl, complete with his never-ending frown, ignored her and gestured to the boy. "Nephew, I am waiting. Thank the woman for the apple and we will go claim our seats."

Lord Udall hammered his fingers against the counter. Evidently, he was not used to waiting on the vagaries of a child.

Frederick—Freddy. The Dowager's grandson. How strange fate was to deposit by her side the nephew of the one person in all of London that she did not wish to see. But then, the Earl had not really *seen* her. Since she was engaging in trade, heaven forbid, he deemed her invisible. Just another servant to raise one's nose at.

The boy held out his half-eaten apple. "Thank you for the treat, ma'am," he said seriously.

"You are quite welcome, Freddy." Brushing his yellow hair out of his eyes, she smiled. She took his tiny hand and led him out of the booth, next to his uncle.

"Frederick, my good woman," the Earl corrected. He peered at her portrait of the matron on the display table and seemed distracted. "By the bye, that is a fine example of a painted silhouette."

"Thank you, My Lord," she said as demurely as she could. His eyes still refused to see her.

"Who is the silhouettist? The workmanship looks familiar. I have one in my rooms—"

His gaze finally focused on her. Although she should have been apprehensive, his dropped mouth and bug-eyed gawking were as far from a *bon ton* haughty demeanor as they could be. She tried not to giggle.

"You!" he breathed. His gaze swept over her taking in her soiled linen smock, creased round gown, and unruly curls of hair.

She tried to tuck her locks back into the chignon.

"What the devil are you doing here, Miss Jones? This is not the place for a respectable female."

His attitude rankled. "And why not? Mr. Miers runs a respectable shop. He is known for high quality silhouettes."

The Earl removed his beaver hat and ran his hand through his hair. "Yes, yes, of course. But you, you are *working* here? You are exposing yourself to the loathsome attentions of the masses. Miss Jones, this just is not done."

He gripped her upper arm and tugged her towards him. "Come. I will purchase a ticket for you, then after the show, I shall escort you home."

Closing her eyes for a minute and calling up her mother's soothing image, Katrina then pulled free from his grasp. "You need not concern yourself with me, Lord Udall. The only loathsome attention I am receiving is from you. I am quite capable of making my own decisions, and I do not wish to leave with you—ever."

Freddy's lower lip trembled again, and the solemn gaze with which he watched her made her feel at fault. She did not want to upset the little fellow. "If I have spoken out of turn, I do apologize."

Looking up, she saw her proper English matron waiting at the other end of the counter. Thank the heavens. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must tend to my customer."

Her arms vibrated with some strong feeling, but she did not have the luxury to pinpoint which one. Turning to the woman, Katrina willed her hands to stop shaking. "Here is your silhouette, ma'am. I hope you like it."

"Oh my, yes, indeed. 'Tis the very picture of me. Oh, the very likeness of me!" The woman patted her chest as if overcome with emotion. "I look as spry as I did when I was but four and ten. What do you say, Arnold?"

A shadow of a man wobbled his head brightly. "Yes, my dear, I agree. The very image of you, to be sure."

Katrina curved her lips upward at the couple but her heart was not in the smile. The Earl still leaned against the counter.

She narrowed her gaze at him. *Why don't you leave?* Maybe he could read her mind.

The woman also noticed him. She gave herself several blows to her chest that would have knocked

down a lesser woman. "Arnold! Arnold! Isn't that the Earl of Udall?"

"Yes, I believe it is, my precious."

As the woman ambled over to the Earl, Katrina prayed for divine intervention. A stampede of horses, a thunderbolt from the sky—anything! By the expression on Lord Udall's face, she knew he planned to make mischief. Why did he want to ruin everything for her?

"Oh, My Lord Udall! You remember me, don't you? Lavinia Larderwood? You and I served on an art committee at the Royal Academy some ages ago."

She thrust the silhouette in front of his face. "You have an excellent eye, My Lord. Isn't this the finest work you have seen? Am I not the most youthful model? I plan to have copies made, you know. Such wonderful gifts. Just look at this presence, this grace, and this poise!"

The Earl looked, but he masked his earlier enthusiasm. "To be sure, Mrs. Larderwood, it is an ... acceptable piece. Is it a rendering of your mother?"

Katrina gritted her teeth. The woman's face fell. How dare he take away the simple joy she had felt.

Wiping non-existent fingerprints off the glass, Katrina poured on the proverbial honey. "You can be assured, ma'am, that Mr. Miers stands behind all the work in his workshop. The finest in England, we are convinced."

But the damage had been done. The woman shook her head. "I've changed my mind. The portrait does not resemble me in the slightest, does it, Arnold?"

"Certainly not, my dear," was his prompt reply.

"I shall not take it." With a sniff, she bid the Earl adieu, turned heel, and took Arnold with her.

Not only had Katrina lost the moneys for the glass silhouette, but the additional cut paper orders as well. The Earl's disapproval cost her close to three whole crowns. Goodness, that was so much money. She bit her lip. What would she tell Mr. Miers? What *could* she tell him?

"Do not worry about that vulgar woman, Miss Jones. You should not demean yourself in this fashion. I shall have a talk with John Miers on the morrow, to release you from whatever contract you signed. Collecting moneys like a common Cit. No, this will not do at all."

She stared at the Earl.

"Do not bother to thank me." He raised his hat. "I believe the show is about to begin. Good day, Miss Jones."

He and Freddy walked down the corridor and disappeared behind the amphitheatre's waiting doors.

"Good day?" she repeated, blinking back tears. "Good nightmare is more like it."

The Earl of Udall ruined everything for her; he would ruin all her plans. Mr. Miers could not afford not to go along with the Earl's wishes. If he said she was not to work anymore, Mr. Miers would have no choice but to agree.

She slumped against a wooden chair. Mr. Miers had mentioned a bumble broth. If this was not a muddle, she did not know what was. What, in heaven's name, was she going to do now?

* * * *

"This 'ere's the 'ouse?" Jack rubbed his forehead and gazed up at the white stone building. He whistled white frost into the night air. "Do you suppose 'er bedchamber be upstairs?"

"Yes, of course! Where else would it be, now?" Juliet Dufay patted her upper arms through the thin

material of her pelisse and stamped her booted feet to keep warm.

"Lord love you, Jack, but unless you lower your booming voice, every bloke this side of Mincing Lane will know what we're about!"

Jack's face threatened to puddle up. He was such a dear. "Sorry, luv, but the thought of climbing on the outside of that rickety building to the upper floors makes me innards want to heave."

She eyed the crumbling facade and agreed with his innards. Holding his work-roughened hand against her cheek, Juliet murmured, "I know, Jack, 'tis ungodly, but there's no other way. That bracelet I worked so hard for—it's in there. That drab of a girl has it, a Miss Jones, Udall said. My bracelet is worth the earth—diamonds and sapphires, yet. It can keep us in style, it can."

Jack's description of that sparkling trinket danced before Juliet's beauty-starved mind. "To think, it should have been rightfully mine!"

She pressed her scarlet lips together. "So what does Udall go and do? He lets some dowdy keep it. Quality, hah!"

Stamping her foot hard against the pavement, she burned with the injustice of it all. "The bracelet *is* mine! *I* worked for it!"

"Now my jewel, though the clock just struck two in the morn, we can still run into the night watchman. Time for you to still yer jabbering."

She flushed. "You're right. Let's get this over and done with. The quicker we pick Miss Jones' pocket, the quicker we'll be living the life of ease."

Arm in arm, they walked down the alleyway in back of Miss Jones' new residence. Juliet studied the windows. "That window on the left has some gay curtains—might be hers. Try that one. If I were her, I'd keep my valuables in my room. Mayhaps she keeps her precious things in with her undergarments."

She shook her finger at him. "Don't go snooping. We're only interested in the bracelet."

Jack gave her a quick kiss. "Right, ducks. Say a liddle prayer for me, and I be off."

Watching him scale the wall as a flattened spider might, Juliet shuddered. This crime business was not to her liking. Once they found the bracelet, they'd be done with dishonesty—they'd be set for life.

* * * *

Quentin Thornhill could not call it a night. After the excitement of Astley's, he took Frederick home, then had played a few rounds at White's. At half-past two in the morning, he should be seeking his bed. After all he was thirty-three, not some young buck of twenty years. But Katrina Jones' face haunted him.

Reaching the intersection of Mincing and Thames Street, he kicked a piece of debris onto the cobblestones. There she had stood, in the middle of the booth, for God's sake—working. Taking money, plying trade, like a common shopkeeper. Not that an honest day's work ever hurt anyone, but she was the great granddaughter of a baronet. If Quentin was any judge of character—and he did admit to judging, on occasion—he would lay odds that Katrina's Aunt Hattie had no idea of what her niece was up to.

Why in God's name would Katrina sully her hands so—cashiering for John Miers? Did she need the money so badly?

The image of her worn pelisse and gloves returned to Quentin. Her father had been a cad. The size of his gaming debts had been legion. Of course she needed money. How could Quentin have thought

otherwise?

He walked toward the white stone building. Too late for a visit, but he would make a resolve, right here and now, that come tomorrow afternoon, he would arrange for extra funds to be deposited into her bank account. He was her landlord, after all. He had a certain responsibility towards her. Her great aunt and his mother were bosom bows from way back. And Frederick liked Katrina—that was as good a reason as any to put a stop to the girl peddling wares.

Stopping in front of the house, he clasped his hands behind him. Taking positive action for Katrina's sake felt good! He adjusted his hat, and as he turned to leave, a flash of red cloth caught his eye. What the devil? Someone lingered in the alley. Relying his fists, Quentin made his way to the back of the building.

From behind a pillar, he watched a man lean out of an upper story window. Quentin hung back.

A sensation almost the strength of a boxer's blow slammed him in the mid-section. He waited until he caught his breath. Blast! Taken in by an innocent face again! So, Katrina Jones entertained nighttime lovers, did she? She was nothing more than a—

He unfurled his fists. No. No matter the evidence of his eyes, he did not believe she was a lowly strumpet. He had been gulled by Therese Thornhill and his wife, Deborah, but not all women were without honor. It had taken him too long to realize this; he refused to sink back to their amoral depths.

Focusing on the intruder, Quentin wiped his fingers against his greatcoat. Had the blackguard hurt Katrina?

The man made a hissing sound. Cupping his hands against his mouth, he whispered, "Psst! I can't find it. I've looked bloody everywhere."

From out of the shadows, Quentin heard a woman's harsh voice. "Try under the bed. Under her pillow. It's *got* to be there!"

The man nodded and disappeared back inside. In the light of the moon, Quentin saw the woman's face—Juliet Dufay. By God! Another one of his peccadilloes had come back to plague him.

Although he did not consider his buff-colored pantaloons to be the best in climbing apparel, he had no choice. He would have to ascend the back wall of the building as is. Moving stealthily, he positioned himself behind Juliet, then placed his hand over her mouth.

"I would suggest you keep that pretty mouth of yours shut."

She struggled for a moment. When he turned her around, her painted eyes widened at the sight of him. "Yes, it is Udall, your former protector, dolt that I am."

He tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Not a word of warning from you, Juliet. I am risking life and limb here to climb like a burglar, and I will not have you give advance warning to your partner. Understand? It shall go harder for you and your accomplice if you do. Am I clear?"

Blinking rapidly, she nodded several times.

"Good." Quentin removed his greatcoat, then pushed up his tail-coat sleeves. He sighed. Rescuing a lady was a damned sight less romantic in real life than reading about it in books.

* * * *

Katrina snuggled into her pillow and ignored the heavy breathing that penetrated the outer edges of her dreams. She willed the noises to go away. Sleep was the only time she escaped from the rigors of the day; she would not be cheated out of a much needed night's rest. Rough fabric scratched at her cheek.

She frowned, but still kept her eyes closed. Bad dream, she decided.

A sharp aroma of rum invaded her nostrils. It was her call to the world of the living. As reluctant as she was to open them, she finally rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. Then she gasped. Resting on her bed was a large gloved hand. Two fingers poked their way out of the glove, giving it a more grisly effect. She gasped again. The hand was attached to a dark clothed arm. The rest of the person remained hidden by the side of the bed.

Sitting up, she pulled the bedsheets to her neck for cover. "What are you doing here?" she asked in a severe tone.

"B—Blimey! You gave me a scare!" The hand disappeared, but a man's head poked up from the floor. He pulled off his fuzzy hat and stared at her.

He did not seem dangerous but ... "I gave *you* a scare! Whatever are you doing here?"

She leaned over to her bedstand and lit a candle. The room glowed with flickering light, exposing the soft down on the man's chin. Young—and inexperienced. He had to be; he made a mistake in coming here. She had nothing a thief would want.

He kneaded his cap. "Please, mum. I just be lookin' for that accursed bracelet, is all. Juliet, she be wantin' it awful bad. Diamonds and sapphires! As sure as me name is Jack, I wish I never laid eyes on it!"

Brushing her hair out of her face, Katrina curled her legs underneath her. She had nothing to fear from this man. "Juliet? Does she know the Earl of Udall?"

The man bobbed his head.

"But I returned the bracelet to the Earl some time ago. He should have given it to Juliet by now."

Jack's shoulders slumped. "The Earl, he be done with Juliet. She just has me to take care of 'er."

His simple statement touched Katrina's heart. She could not agree with the way Juliet earned her living, but sometimes a person had to do unorthodox things in order to get by. Katrina knew that for a fact.

"I am sorry, Jack, but—"

A sound at the window captured both of their attentions. Katrina held the bedsheet tighter at her throat and watched as a muscular leg appeared over the window ledge. A few grunts and groans later, and the Earl of Udall stood inside the room.

Katrina balled her fist by her mouth. "Faith, now I know I must be dreaming!"

Wiping off the dirt, he swept his gaze over her and Jack. "Faith indeed! I risk life and limb, and what do I find? A veritable tea party!"

Jack's uneasy shifting warned her that he contemplated making a mad dash to escape. The Earl's solid glare of anger made her certain he would not take kindly to any of Jack's bids for freedom.

She spread out her hands. "Jack was just looking for that bracelet. He is fond of Juliet, you know, and they thought they might..."

If Lord Udall frowned any deeper, the chords in his neck were bound to burst. Katrina winced.

"I am well aware of what they thought to do." He stood with arms clasped against his chest and took a step forward. His gaze rested on the fallen bedsheet.

Her face flamed. Although her nightgown had fewer patches than any of her daytime clothes, its material was filmy enough to cling to her body. She snatched at the bedsheets, again.

"If you please, My Lord, perhaps they could have a second chance? I do not think Jack means us harm. Perhaps if he had some direction—some help?"

She did not know why she was pleading this man's case. After all, he had ripped her from one of her more satisfying dreams. She glanced at him. He twisted his cap so violently, it was sure to have more holes than his gloves.

She raised her gaze to the Earl. "Please?"

He exhaled deeply. "Lord, give me strength."

With a sweeping gesture, he swung his arm in the direction of the window. "All right, man, you may go. And take Juliet Dufay with you."

Jack reached out and pumped Katrina's hand. "Thankee, thankee, mum!" He then edged a wide circle around the Earl.

Lord Udall hammered his fist at the man. "If you are serious about making a clean start, come by Udall House tomorrow, in the afternoon. Talk to Her Ladyship's man, Perkins. He will offer you an honest living."

"Thankee, oh thankee, Your Lordship! I will! I promise." Jack moved to shake the Earl's hand.

"Thank the young lady, not me. Now go!"

After Jack slipped over the window ledge, the Earl wiped his brow. "I confess, I am not looking forward to exiting the same way I entered your boudoir."

In spite of herself, Katrina smiled. He was so unlike himself; she looked him over as if seeing him for the first time. He seemed so unsure—so ill-at-ease. As well he might be! She certainly had never entertained a gentleman in her nightclothes! Goodness, if Aunt Hattie ever found out. She flushed.

"Mind if I sit a minute? Waylaying burglars does tend to be exhausting work."

"Oh, please do!" She pointed to the only chair in the room, an upholstered, frilly knick-knack of a piece close by her bed. Although she was in a compromising situation, and inappropriately dressed to play the hostess, she picked up the pitcher of water on her bedstand and poured him a glass. Now would be the perfect time to ask, no, beg him to not interfere with her arrangements concerning John Miers.

The Earl accepted the water. "My thanks."

As he took a sip, he regarded her with a strange expression. When she met his gaze, he looked away. "I must apologize for placing you in such an intolerable circumstance. You must believe me, I had no idea my former, er, acquaintance would commit such a deed. You could have been in danger."

She toyed with the white lace edging the neckline of her nightgown. His concern for her melted a reserve she had placed around her heart. Perhaps she misjudged him. After all, he had come barreling through the window in her defense, and listened to her plea for mercy in dealing with Jack, instead of calling the constable. No one had ever come to her rescue before.

He made her feel special. His presence alone sent delicious tingles up her spine. She had felt in no danger before, but now...

Tilting her head, she asked, "What were you doing outside my window, My Lord? The hour is late, and Mincing Lane does not hold any particular entertainments."

He gave her a sheepish grin. Strange, he appeared so young and carefree. "I am afraid I do not have an answer for you, Miss Jones."

Setting the glass back on the table, he leaned over and held her chin between his thumb and forefinger. His dark gaze kept her mesmerized. The tingles that had danced down her spine before, now turned into heat waves burning through her inner core. What was happening to her? She gulped down hard.

He released her. "I must go."

"B—But, wait. I—"

The Earl turned around. "Yes?"

She placed her cool fingers to her cheeks, to stop the extraordinary fever raging within her. "I wanted to ask you—if you would not talk to Mr. Miers? I do so want this job and..."

Under the blaze of the Earl's scrutiny, she swallowed down again. Faith, but he was intimidating! "I mean, I, um, need this job—"

A loud click broke into her disjointed sentence. Her bedchamber door opened with a swoosh, and in sailed Great Aunt Hattie.

"Katrina!" she boomed in the most blistering, awful voice Katrina had ever heard.

Hattie's gaze swerved from the Earl to Katrina. Her aunt swayed with strong emotion, setting her favorite carnelian ring necklace to bouncing over her bosom. Her face grew alarmingly red.

She would never understand; she would insist that Katrina was ruined.

A tremor of intense fear overtook Katrina. She started to quake in her bed. Between the storming swirl of her aunt's self-righteous thunderbolt and the black scowl marring the Earl's face, Katrina was in for a barrage of hostile words the sound of which would likely awaken her former neighbors in East Bergholt.

She hung her head. The worst part of it was that Hattie would never allow the Earl to leave without extracting from him an offer of marriage.

Marriage—a forced marriage to the Earl of Udall!

Five

"What am I going to do now, Devon? Just what am I going to do?" Katrina paced the length of her bedchamber, sat down on her frilly, upholstered chair, gnawed at her lip, then bounced up and paced the room again.

Her maid glanced at Katrina's untouched breakfast. Picking up a piece of toast, Devon handed it to Katrina. "Twould seem you have no choice, Miss Katrina. 'Specially since his Lordship is conferrin' with the elder Miss Jones right now—downstairs."

Katrina winced. Right now. Right now the Earl was downstairs. Right under her bedchamber. Her stomach flip-flopped. Why did he have to come so early? At eleven o'clock, most of London's *haut ton* were still abed. Why wasn't he?

Heavens, she needed more time. She had to compose herself before facing him. After last night's fiasco, who could sleep? Not her. Oh, dear God, how could she ever sleep again?

Katrina took the toast. Its crusty crumbs flaked off onto her fingers and the bare wooden floor. The buttery aroma failed to tempt her. For the third time this morning, her stomach heaved. "I cannot eat, Devon. I ... it is just too upsetting."

Her maid removed the offending bread. As she fixed the curls framing Katrina's face, Devon tut-tutted.

"Upsettin', is it? I can think of more upsettin' things than marryin' a title. 'Tis a countess, you'll be."

Katrina pulled away from her maid's ministrations. The extra hair pins made Katrina's head itch. She tugged on the sleeve of her finest dress, or rather, her mother's finest dress, then smoothed the soft white muslin material that fell from the high waistline. Even her finest gown had been mended countless times before.

"You were not there, Devon. You did not see the Earl's face. Between him and Aunt Hattie, I wondered who would suffer apoplexy first."

Devon must have pictured the scene, for she gave an appreciative chuckle.

Katrina swallowed down her own nearly hysterical groan. "Faith, I see no humor in this! The Earl is not the kind of man I want for a husband. No man is. I know what marriage is like. I remember how my father abused my mother."

Rubbing her hands together in a Lady Macbeth-like massage, Katrina closed her eyes. "He was always after her—arguing, belittling, even striking her. Mother and I always watched what we said—watched what we spent. We never knew if we would have money to pay our bills. Father left us for months at a time, and then descended upon us like a bird of prey—like a vulture. Our few remaining possessions would be snatched away. You remember, Devon. You know how he was. How can I possibly ... submit to that, again?"

Devon wrapped her bony arm around Katrina. "There, there, child. Not every man is like your father. Think of the advantages. For the first time in your life, you'll be plump in the pocket. Never want for anythin'. You and your aunt'll be set for life."

Katrina clenched her hands. "We would be like money-grubbing leeches. Money—that is not everything. I would want for love. Lord Udall could never love me—nor I him. He—"

She tapped her foot. "Wait. Perhaps there is a way out of this imbroglio. He does not want to marry me, either—that much is certain. Between the two of us, perhaps we can think of a way out."

Her maid lifted a scrawny eyebrow.

"Oh, Devon! I am not dicked in the nob!"

The crushing weight of the world shifted position on Katrina's shoulders. It was not gone—only shifted. She had hope. The Earl was a powerful man, used to getting his own way. Surely, if he set his mind to accomplish something, he would not allow anyone to cross him. And, in some matters, surely she could be as determined as he. Between the two of them, they could contrive an acceptable solution. They *had* to. They *had* to think of something to pacify Aunt Hattie. Marriage was not the answer.

A knock at the door startled Katrina. Devon cracked the door ajar, then spoke with the butler, Hopkins. Turning back to Katrina, the maid whispered, "'Tis His Lordship. He's waitin' for you in the front sittin' room."

Katrina fluffed the lace at her bodice, and pulled down on her sleeves, again. She would convince him. One way or another, she would convince him. After all, this was not the middle ages. It was unthinkable for two unwilling people to marry just because of a little misunderstanding. Things like that could not happen.

She straightened her shoulders. "How do I look?"

Pinching Katrina's cheeks, Devon tsk-tsked. "Dearie me. You're as pale as a ghost, child. I've got to put some color on you."

Katrina smiled bitterly. Whether she had blooming cheeks or not was unimportant. What did matter

was that she absolutely refused to marry the Earl of Udall.

* * * *

Seated next to the Earl in his fashionable cabriolet, Katrina scarcely dared to look at him. Back in the sitting room at Mincing Lane, his knuckles had shown white against the tan of his hands, and his stiff nod as she entered warned her as to his disposition. Her courage had fled. When her aunt stated that Katrina was to accompany Lord Udall for the afternoon, she made no demur. Better to confer with him in private than to attempt to consult with him in Aunt Hattie's presence.

The Earl had spoken not a word, and neither did Katrina. After helping her up into his carriage, he took the reins from his groom and urged his horse forward.

In a way, she envied him. While he could pretend to be occupied driving the cabriolet, she could only stare at the passing London scenery. The normally colorful shops and houses that lined the streets now wore a coat of winter-grey drabness. The dreary monochrome hue reflected her mood: somber. Winter had started early this year; it felt as if the season would never end.

She pushed a lock of hair back inside her bonnet. *Katrina, you must gather your wits about you. Speak! Say something!*

Easier said than done. The trouble was, she was certain whatever wits she had left, had gone begging.

After they made a right turn off Thames onto New Bridge Street, she cleared her throat and asked, "Where are we headed?"

"To Oxford Street," he succinctly replied.

She waited, but he continued to gaze straight ahead, concentrating on the icy roadway. What awaited them on Oxford Street was a puzzle, but she had more important matters to discuss.

His stern bearing constricted the muscles in her throat, but she had to press onward. Dressed as fine as royalty, he was an imposing sight. However, he bore little resemblance to the young and carefree man who had but yesterday sat by her bed.

"My Lord," she began, "we must talk."

"I believe we are doing so." He flicked the reins, prodding his horse to go faster.

She flushed. Why was he being so difficult? She was not his enemy. But perhaps he had just cause. After all, the thought of marrying a penniless nobody must be particularly infuriating to a proud man like the Earl.

Inhaling deeply, she tried again. "Lord Udall, we *need* to talk. I am hoping that between the two of us, we can think of a plan to get out of our engagement. This was not of our making, and—"

"Do you mean to cry off? Leave me standing at the altar?" He cocked his head. "Are you a jilt, Miss Jones?"

She caught her breath. His dark eyes almost twinkled—as if he were amused! "Wh—Why no! Of course not. But, what I am saying is that we both do not wish to marry."

"We do not? Your great aunt was most insistent that we do." Lifting his eyebrow, he lazily raked his gaze over her.

She must have been wrong about the lights in his eyes. This man *was not* amused. As his frown deepened, she shivered. "Aunt Hattie naturally wishes for you to protect my reputation, but, surely together you and I can discern another solution? Marriage is so drastic—so permanent."

Katrina shivered, again. "No one but Jack saw you enter or leave my bedchamber. Perhaps we can forget it ever happened."

She would never forget it; it would be forever etched in her memory. But the Earl did not have to know *that*!

The Earl removed his hat, then ran his hand over his curly hair. "Devil take it! Marriage is drastic, hey? You say we can forget about last night and go about our business? You must live in fairy tales, m'dear."

One side of his mouth curved upward. A deep dimple pulsated appealingly. Goodness, he could be confoundedly charming.

Her heart's thudding seemed to match the dimple's beat. She met his gaze and the pounding intensified. Faith, a veritable fire roared throughout her veins! His masculine woodsy scent sparked the flames further. Whatever was going on? Her body seemed like a traitorous stranger.

He broke contact first and shook his head. "More fool me," he muttered.

Pulling up on the reins, he brought the horse to an abrupt stop. Why? She fought the carriage's momentum and managed to only sway slightly. In her emotionally unsteady condition, she did not need to bump into the Earl's hard shoulder and muscular thigh. Just the brief whiff of his sandalwood fragrance wafting over to her brought on a light-headed feeling.

A reckless coach rumbled past them, unmindful of the collision that had just been averted. If the Earl had not stopped ... She gulped down hard. London streets were not advantageous for a leisurely drive.

He tugged on the reins as if nothing happened. "So, you are saying you do not want me to offer marriage. And you expect me to believe you? Indeed, I was not born yesterday. What do you want me to offer—money? *Carte blanche*?"

Again, he kept his gaze rigidly ahead. Which was well that he did, for her face blazed uncomfortably hot. Her hand itched to box his ears. By the stars above, she should have realized he would be impossible to reason with.

She hardened her voice. "Lord Udall, you do not wish to marry me, and I *do not* wish to marry anyone—especially you. Whether you believe me or not is of no consequence. If we can think of some way to pacify my aunt, then we will both be rid of an intolerable situation."

Katrina raised her chin. There! Maybe now he would take her seriously and put his brain-box to work.

The Earl smiled—this time with both sides of his mouth. But there was a tinge of sadness to it, so poignant that, without thinking, she reached over and touched the sleeve of his greatcoat.

He placed his gloved hand over hers and held it there, just for a moment. Then he patted her hand.

She quickly placed her hands in her lap.

He smiled again. "I daresay if any of my acquaintances ever accuse me of becoming toplofty, I shall relay to them your sentiments—marriage to me is an intolerable situation."

Tears stung her eyes. "Oh, no, My Lord, I did not mean—"

He held up his hand. "No apologies needed, Miss Jones. You are most likely correct. I have no fond regard for the tender state of matrimony. I was tricked into it once before, you know. M'mother devised the plot along with Lord Ivanbraugh."

Tricked into it once before! Looking for her handkerchief, Katrina blindly pawed through her reticule. He believed she tricked him into proposing marriage! She turned her head away from him and sniffed into her muslin handkerchief, mortified beyond words.

His voice sounded flat. "You needn't turn into a watering pot on my account, m'dear. I assure you, I am not reneging on our troth."

Of all the insufferable men! He thought she was as shallow as he was! Drat the man. Her anger dried up every drop of moisture that had threatened to cascade from her eyes. She turned back toward him and said through clenched teeth, "I release you from your pledge. I have no idea what I shall tell my great aunt, but I shall gladly suffer her righteous wrath rather than leg-shackle myself to the likes of you!"

Katrina's chest heaved deeply. "And, should London, by some odd chance, become privy to my so-called dishonor, I shall somehow manage. Perhaps I will go back to East Bergholt."

She jutted out her chin. Brave words, but foolish words as well. Returning to her old home was unthinkable, but perhaps she could board with friends until she could find a position. Good household help was always in demand. How unfortunate that her job with John Miers was now at an end.

Before she was aware of what was happening, the Earl guided the cabriolet to the side of the street. He halted the carriage, then gestured to the groom in back of them. Handing the reins to his servant, Lord Udall said, "Dibbs, walk the horse around the block. Miss Jones and I desire a stroll."

The Earl helped her down, then firmly placed his hand on her upper arm. "This way, m'dear."

Faith, was there no end to the indignities he planned to subject her to? "I wish to return home, My Lord." She pulled on her arm but he held it tightly.

He briskly walked forward, and she had no choice but to follow. "Not yet, my dear. The day is still early, and I realize that I must make my apologies to you. I hope you will accept them."

Stopping in the middle of the walkway, he stood and gazed down into her eyes. Again, a surge of warmth flooded her. She sighed. The gamut of emotions she experienced in this short space of time was tearing her apart. She needed to rest. "May we sit someplace?"

"Certainly. Gunter's is just ahead. We will stop and get some nourishment. But before we move one step further, you must give me your assurances that you will not do anything rash. I have no intention of crying off from our engagement."

He held her by the shoulders. As she glanced up at him, she felt small, insignificant in his grasp. Ordinarily, she did not feel so tiny.

Then again, he *was* the size of a mountain.

She shook her head. "But why not? All we have to do is convince Aunt Hattie that we would not suit. As I said, no one but Jack knows about last night's visit."

Katrina heard the desperation in her voice, but persevered. She *had* to change his mind.

The Earl laughed. "Such a spirited little filly." He chuckled her under the chin, then took her arm and continued their stroll. "But, I am afraid you are wrong. Soon all of London will know—about our engagement, at any rate."

She stared at him.

"Dear Miss Jones. You must close your mouth."

After flushing, she complied. "What are you talking about?"

He patted her hand. "Tomorrow's *Morning Post* and *The Times* contain the announcement of our betrothal."

“No!” Katrina's mouth silently worked. This was not happening. This was some kind of nightmare.

She swallowed. “But ... how? Why? Can you tell the newspapers to remove the article? Say it was a mistake? There *must* be enough time for them to pull the announcement.”

As her eyes watered, she whispered, “There *must* be.”

His voice sounded kind. “It would be no use, my dear.”

Kind? Even through the haze of despair smothering her, she admitted that the Earl's demeanor had softened.

He explained further. “You see, I also sent the notice to the *Gazette*. It should appear in this evening's edition.”

“You sent the notice...?” At that moment, for the first time in her life, Katrina swooned.

* * * *

Standing on a platform, Katrina hugged her arms against her chest. Not only were her arms bare, but half her chest as well. Her mortification earlier, fainting dead away, could in no way compare with her present humiliation. How could she have known the Earl planned to buy clothes for her? Oxford Street turned out to be a veritable Mecca of stores for the fashion-conscious female. And, he assured her, Madame Marcella's was the shop most patronized by the *crème de la crème* of the ton.

Katrina shivered. She did not believe him. How could any respectable young woman possibly wear this filmy, sheer, evening gown she had on? Positively indecent! She shivered, again.

Heavens, the gown *was* beautiful, no denying that, but if she had a choice, she would not have wanted to wear this dress to bed, let alone to be seen in it! But the worst part was that not only was she on display for Madame Marcella—an obsequious kind of woman, but ... but also for the Earl of Udall.

Why had he informed the newspapers of their betrothal? Why hadn't he waited? It was not as if he were a love-struck swain. His actions did not make any sense.

Katrina closed her eyes. The sight of him squeezed into a boudoir chair, stroking his chin as he contemplated her near-nudity was more than her overwrought sensibilities could handle. No proper young woman would wear this gown. Madame Marcella lied. The Earl lied. Katrina would never bemoan her trusty old clothes again.

“Katrina, do open your eyes. You are spoiling the effect.” The Earl sounded impatient.

She sighed. She had not given him leave to call her by her Christian name. Drat the man. No amount of wishing him gone would make it so.

He crossed his legs and seemed to scrutinize every last inch of her. Goodness, he probably counted every goose bump on her exposed skin.

“Excellent,” he commented to the dressmaker. “Just the right design and décolletage for my fiancée's come-out.”

Katrina raised her gaze. If this gown was a pattern card of respectability for an unmarried miss, what did society matrons wear to a ball? Nothing?

The Earl gave instructions to Madame Marcella for more evening gowns, day dresses, riding habits, and on and on. Katrina could barely contain her impatience for the woman to take the order and leave. It would not do to argue in front of the French shop owner, so Katrina waited. She had to stop the Earl from continuing with this ... this farce. The money he planned to drop at this store would likely have kept her in comfort for the rest of her days.

As the Earl expanded his seemingly never-ending list, Madame Marcella smiled widely and bobbed her head in agreement. “*Oui, oui, Mon Lordship!* You are correct! *Zee mademoiselle* certainly must have zee finest in all of England. As your new countess, it is only right. And, as always, *Mon Lordship* has impeccable taste. I shall get my girls started on your order *immédiatement!*”

Katrina frowned. As always? How many other women had paraded on Madame Marcella's dais for him? Had he taken Jack's Juliet here?

After the woman scurried out of the presentation room, Katrina stepped down from the platform, scooped up a nearby shawl, and covered herself. She also wiped a dab of perspiration from her upper lip. Who ever heard of sweating in the month of December?

Now she could talk. “My Lord, I cannot accept these clothes. It is not proper. I am certain my Aunt Hattie will agree.”

To Katrina's dismay, he left the chair and walked over to her.

She took a step back. The dais blocked her path.

“Katrina, your great aunt and I both wish for you to dress in a manner befitting a countess.”

He lifted a stray strand of hair from her neck. His touch sent ripples of pleasure down her arms and deep into her chest. She clasped the shawl tighter. “But—”

“No buts, my dear. As I explained to you at Gunter's, we have no choice now but to marry. What's done is done. It is up to us to make the best of it.”

As he curled her lock around his finger, her breathing rate increased a thousand fold. Faith, why did his nearness induce such ... such panic?

“Beautiful hair, Katrina. I look forward to the day that you wear it down for me.” He moved closer and buried his fingers in her chignon.

“Oh!” She blinked wide-eyed. His dark penetrating gaze was only inches away. Her lips trembled. Did he mean to kiss her? Did she want him to? Without realizing it, she stood on tiptoes to reach up to him. Other than an inner buzzing in her ears, she heard nothing except the pounding of her heart.

A sudden noise arrested her attention—and the Earl's as well. As she moved away from him, a loud, penetrating voice sliced through the air. “Well, now! This *is* touching!”

Sauntering into the presentation room came a tall, exquisitely dressed woman—exquisitely dressed for a Cyprian ball, that is. Who was she? Her crêpe gown seemed diaphanous, made of fine and delicate gossamer threads. Not only was the immodest gown nearly transparent, but it hugged the woman's shapely form in a very revealing way. Compared with the woman's gown, Katrina's new dress seemed almost demure. She would have to reconcile her small village morality with London's brash boldness—in manners and wearing apparel.

The woman's midnight hair was piled gloriously high on her head, and one lone ringlet curled over her bare shoulder. She might have given the Greek goddess Aphrodite cause for envy.

The woman slowly approached them, confident of her charms, then made a perusing circle around Katrina and the Earl. “Not your usual style, Quentin, but she does have a certain ... rustic appeal.”

Although Katrina had not moved, he laid his hand on her upper arm. Even through the woolen shawl, she felt the heat from his fingers.

A muscle twitched in his cheek. When he looked at the woman, his gaze hardened. “Therese—”

“I do apologize for disturbing your little tête-à-tête. I will wager that would have been your first kiss

together. Am I correct?" Therese smiled seductively, then wet her upper lip with her tongue. Her moistened lips blew him a kiss.

Katrina smothered her gasp. She'd never met a female like Therese before. The woman fairly oozed sensuality, and an overpowering scent of heliotrope. Katrina wrinkled her nose.

Leaning toward her, Therese confided, "My dear child, I must tell you ... Quentin is an expert kisser. The way—"

"Therese," he interrupted, stepping between her and Katrina, "where did you get those bruises around your neck?"

What an odd thing to say! Katrina looked at the Earl, but he appeared unusually calm, except for a pulse at his temple. She turned her gaze on Therese. No contusions marred her creamy white skin. Strange.

The woman stroked her neck. "Bruises? I do not have any bruises."

Lord Udall smiled—a smile as dangerous as a hooded cobra. "So you do not ... yet." He smiled warmly. "A trick of the light."

A threat! Pure and simple. Katrina observed him in a new light. Perhaps his violent tendencies served some purpose after all. Therese pressed her lips together in a mulish fashion. She deserved that setback.

The Earl gave a quiet sigh, and glanced at Katrina. His eyes seemed to flash an apology at her, then they hardened again. "As reluctant as I am to perform them, I realize introductions are in order."

With an open hand, he gestured at the woman. "Therese Thornhill, this is Miss Katrina Jones."

His voice deepened. "Therese is my brother's widow—mother to young Frederick."

"Oh!" Therese was that poor little boy's mother? Katrina shot an understanding look at Lord Udall. Perhaps he *did* have just cause to be as cross as crabs all the time. "I met your son. He is a delightful little boy—"

Before Katrina could continue, Therese yawned into her lace handkerchief. Faith, what kind of mother was she? She obviously did not enjoy hearing praises about her child's virtues.

"Just so," the Earl said enigmatically.

The woman's lips pursed in annoyance. She fingered his tail-coat lapel, then slid her hand down the length of it. "Quentin, I hardly think it is proper for you to introduce me to your latest light o'love."

After she spoke, she adjusted the low neckline of her bodice. Or rather, *pulled down* on her neckline. Any lower, and her entire bosom would have escaped from bondage.

Goodness! Such a contradictory woman. She talked about what was proper, then practically exposed herself! What an education Katrina was receiving today.

She folded her arms and tapped her foot. If Therese was an example of "Quality," Katrina wanted none of it! She waited. Would the Earl correct his sister-in-law's statement? He had better, or Katrina would herself. Light o'love, indeed!

Unfolding Katrina's arm, he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "Actually, Therese, congratulations are in order. Miss Jones has kindly consented to become my wife."

Therese's scream of "What!" reverberated off the room's walls. Not exactly a ladylike reaction.

Her vocal cords would have hardened again to emit another ear-piercing scream, but, thankfully,

Madame Marcella came bustling into the room. Even Therese knew enough not to cause a scene.

"*Mon Lordship*, I have zee list here." Flapping the papers, she stopped cold when she noticed Therese. "*Sacré bleu!*"

Madame Marcella must have realized she walked into an explosive situation.

He waved the mantua-maker away, and with alacrity that was surprising, Madame Marcella complied.

Therese hurried over to him, then tugged on his Spanish blue sleeve. "Quentin, you cannot be serious. I cannot believe you. I *will not* believe you! You said you would never marry again."

He easily freed his arm. "I was wrong. You may be interested to read the betrothal announcement in this evening's *Gazette*."

Her beautiful face crumpled. She must have cared a great deal for the Earl. Katrina almost felt sorry for the woman. *Almost*. A memory of her little son resurfaced. Poor Freddy—so solemn, so quiet. So lacking for love.

Therese stood, frozen.

He turned his back on her. "My dear," he murmured to Katrina, "I will escort you to the fitting area so you may change."

Thank goodness! Her heart nearly jumped in relief. First, to get back into her own comfortable clothes, and second, to leave the presence of that unpleasant woman. "Yes, it is past time for us to go, My Lord."

"Quentin. Call me Quentin. And yes, it *is* past time for us to depart."

She caught the shadow of that appealing dimple of his. His approval lightened the crushing weight of the world she had felt earlier. Taking a cleansing breath, she tightened her grip on his arm. Perhaps they had just vanquished a dragon.

But Therese was not finished with them. From behind them, she shouted, "You must be hoaxing me! Tell me you are hoaxing me!"

Not replying, the Earl pivoted, bowed slightly, then headed for the door with Katrina.

She glanced up at him and whispered, "What a disagreeable woman."

He winked at her.

Over her shoulder, Katrina looked back at Therese. The woman seemed to have turned to granite. She must have pulled on her black hair, for it fell mussed about her shoulders. An eerie chill passed over Katrina. Therese Thornhill was a perfect version of an evil witch.

Katrina's polite smile lacked any internal warmth. "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Thornhill."

Therese's dark eyes glittered glacial shafts. In a barely audible voice, the woman warned, "You shall regret this day, Miss Jones. I shall make certain that you do."

The Earl had not heard. He kept walking.

A shudder rocked through Katrina. Someone was walking on her grave.

In the salon at Udall House, the Dowager Countess sat poised by the refreshments. "Would you care for more coffee? Tea? Or perhaps some lemonade?" She seemed determined that Katrina drink her fill.

Katrina politely declined. The mere mention of cold lemonade on this frigid December Sunday raised goose bumps on her arms. Or, was it possible that her skin grew expressive at the thought of becoming Countess of Udall? Mistress of the elegant Udall House? Wife to the Earl?

She shivered. How had her life come to such a pass?

"My dear, you have taken a chill. I shall have Perkins place another log in the fire."

The Dowager made several moves to inch her way out of her Queen Anne chair. This moist inclement weather probably exacerbated her hip problems.

"Please, My Lady, I am fine. Do not trouble yourself. To be sure, I feel quite toasty."

Katrina glanced over at the salon's grand windows. Even through the delicate sheers covering the glass, she could see heavy flakes of snow falling from the sky. Time to leave this calming warmth behind. "I believe the snow is starting to accumulate. I best be on my way."

The Dowager fluttered her fingers. "Just a light dusting, my dear. Not to worry. Besides, you have only just arrived. We have not had a chance to discuss the wedding plans yet."

Wedding plans. Katrina's stomach dropped. How could she talk about wedding plans when the very idea filled her with dread? Even now, she still could not believe it. When she told John Miers about it at church this morning, she almost convinced herself she was talking about somebody else.

Mr. Miers, however, understood. He had patted her hand, said he never expected to keep a pretty lass like herself tied to a workshop. Then he stunned her by asking to be invited to the wedding.

The wedding. She closed her eyes.

The Dowager continued to talk. "And, Katrina dear, do you think you might call me 'Mother?' I never had a daughter, you know."

This was unexpected. The older woman's voice sounded wistful. In a familiar action, she pushed a grey lock of hair inside her lacy cap, but the cast of her eyes revealed how much the answer to that question meant to her.

Reaching over to give her blue-veined hand a squeeze, Katrina smiled. "I would love to—really, only I do not feel entitled to that privilege ... not yet."

Not yet, maybe not ever. She silently prayed.

Finishing the last bit of coffee in her cup, she looked outside again at the ice-strewn window. Whether or not the Dowager protested, Katrina and Devon needed to head home.

"Nonsense, girl. What do you mean, don't feel entitled?" The Dowager settled back in her chair. "There now, everything will be all right and tight. Soon you and my son will tie the knot, and before you know it, I shall have another grandchild to bounce on my knee."

"Oh!" Katrina could not help her exclamation of surprise from escaping. Plans to return home vanished as quickly as a dream. Visions of bouncing babies took over.

Babies! She had not thought about that. She had not thought about the intimacy involved in marriage. Marriage and the marriage bed.

Heat crept down her face to her neck. The Earl would see her in her nightclothes. She frowned. He *already* had seen her in her nightclothes. But that night had been different. Now he would be able to view her without her clothes—if he so desired. He would touch her, and kiss her, and...

She quickly stood and hurried over to one of the windows. Maybe the cool air penetrating the glass

would help dissipate the fever that raged within.

Standing squarely in front of the window, she stared out at a swirling dance of snowflakes. The intemperate outside air did not help to douse her inner flames nor raise her flagging spirit.

She fingered the blond lace decorating the collar of her new walking dress—one of Madame Marcella's creations. The Earl had been very generous. After yesterday's unpleasantness with Therese Thornhill, Katrina and he even developed a certain rapport. She was beginning to understand him—the causes of his anger and violent tendencies. That she was able to see him as something other than a villain, frightened her all the more.

From behind her, the Dowager spoke. "I see I have alarmed you, child. Forgive me. I meant no harm. Truly, there is nothing to be afraid of."

The creaking of a chair indicated that the Dowager had risen. Katrina blinked her eyes fast to dry the sudden moisture that formed. She must not cry. As Devon had said, there were more upsetting things in the world than marrying the Earl of Udall. Many, many more things.

There would be some good that would come out of the marriage. Devon would benefit by Katrina's elevated position—Great Aunt Hattie, as well. Katrina would never have to worry about insufficient funds ever again.

But was that truly a proper reason for marrying?

Arriving at the window, the Dowager leaned on her cane and gave Katrina a small squeeze. The Dowager's touch was comforting. Somehow, Katrina's troubles did not loom so large anymore. The Dowager Countess had a soothing quality about her, a quality Katrina remembered her own mother as having.

The Dowager's eyes glistened brightly. "I fear sometimes my mouth runs away with me. My son accuses me of indelicacy. He is right. You will forgive me, won't you, dear child?"

"What crimes have you committed this time, Mother, to ask Katrina's forgiveness?"

Katrina spun around. Without making a sound, the Earl had entered the salon. On his shoulders, sat Freddy, looking for all the world like a wide-eyed owl! The boy clasped his uncle around the neck and hugged as if his life depended upon it. Maybe it did. The Earl was a very tall man.

But, stranger than the sight of a small boy riding on Lord Udall's shoulders, was the Earl himself. He stood, with a mischievous smile on his face, still in his greatcoat. His outer garment was overlaid with moisture—moisture shimmering like prisms in the room's soft candlelight. Melted snow also puddled around his Hessian boots. His casual appearance gave vibrant animation to the rather staid atmosphere of the salon.

The Dowager slapped her hand against her bosom. Although she blinked, she spoke not a word.

The Earl's ebullience was infectious, however, and Katrina found herself smiling back at him.

His mother set her hands on her hips. "Quentin Thornhill, you put my grandson down this instant. He is likely to catch his death of cold, with all the water you are wearing."

Katrina was not fooled. The Dowager's voice held a quiver of amusement to belie her harsh words.

The Earl inclined his head, which gave Freddy quite a ride! "As you wish, Mother."

Reaching behind him, he lifted Freddy up, then set the boy on the carpeted floor. "Your Grandmama is right, Frederick. Why don't you warm yourself by the fire?"

Gazing up at the Earl, the child nodded. He turned to his grandmother, again all eyes. Katrina longed to

see a carefree smile on his face. Instead, he trotted over to the stone fireplace and did as his uncle had bid.

“Good boy,” the Dowager encouraged.

Watching his nephew's actions, the Earl smiled again. This time the smile was shadowed. Then he crossed the room, took Katrina's hand and kissed it. The cold of his fingers burned her skin, but the heat of his lips sent both warm and cool tremors up her arm.

“Katrina,” he whispered.

She reclaimed her hand. Faith, this man disturbed her. How had he gotten this power over her?

His gaze swept her, head to toe, then he regarded the Dowager. Raising his dark eyebrow, he commented, “Blasted weather, what? So, how do you go on, Mother? You have not answered my question. What indignities have you perpetrated against my fiancée?”

The Dowager sneezed. “Pardon me, I must be allergic to snow.” After extracting a handkerchief, she dabbed at her nose. “The reason I have not answered your question, is that the sight of you dripping volumes on this expensive Aubusson rug has left me speechless.”

He regarded the darkened stains, and grinned sheepishly. “Would you believe Perkins was nowhere around to take my things?”

“No, I would not,” she crisply replied.

“I did not think so!” As the Earl shrugged out of his soaked coat, Perkins came scurrying through the door.

“My Lordship!” With outstretched arms, he stopped by his master, huffing and puffing away his exertions. “My Lordship, I shall be h—happy to relieve you of your wet ap—apparel.”

“Dashed past you, didn't I, Perkins? Never mind. Here you go.”

The butler took the coat, sighed, then resumed his long-suffering demeanor. “Thank you, My Lordship,” he said dryly. Exchanging a pointed look with the Dowager, he left the room.

Katrina had trouble holding in her chuckle. The Earl had undergone some sort of transformation. A miraculous transformation. What had come over him?

He flicked his hand through his thick hair, and shook off water droplets as a drenched puppy might. “Devil of a storm outside.”

Katrina snapped out of her reverie. “The snow! I forgot. Devon and I must—”

“All in good time,” the Dowager commanded. Wiping at her snow-moistened sleeve, his mother added frostily, “It would seem Quentin has brought the storm inside with him. Come, let us pour him some coffee.”

Katrina sighed, but filled his cup, anyway. A few more minutes lingering here would not matter. Now that the Earl was present, she almost hated to leave. He seemed so different—so full of fun. When he smiled, his eyes crinkled, and his dimple twitched at the corner of his mouth. She had no idea he could be like this. Perhaps he was more dangerous this way. Dangerous to her self-control.

After taking a sip, he said pleasantly, “Well, Mother, you still have not told me why you need to apologize. Why don't *you* tell me, Katrina?”

The Dowager shook her head, and with her finger, outlined the chiseled tip of her ivory cane. “I suppose I am suffering the slightest degree of shock. It has been ages since you last addressed me as

‘Mother.’”

The Earl raised his eyebrow, again. “Indeed?” He made no further comment.

Katrina took advantage of the break in the conversation. She stood, and brushed the wrinkles from her jaconet muslin gown. “You must forgive me, My Lord, if I appear hasty, but I am concerned about the weather. Devon and I—”

“Quentin, remember? And there is no need to be concerned.” The Earl picked up a cream pastry and took a bite. Its rich, heavy custard rolled out of the middle, onto his fingers.

Giving him a linen napkin, she could not help grinning. “Perhaps the other little boy in this room would like one?”

Lord Udall grinned back at her, then he called over to his nephew. “Frederick, try one of these pastries. They are rather tasty.”

Freddy agilely made his way to the side table, studied the arrangement of pastries, then chose one. Somehow, he managed not to make a mess as his uncle had. After wiping his mouth, he refolded his napkin, then resumed his seat by the fire.

Katrina smiled. Such a quiet, little boy.

But there was still the snow to think about. “Um, Quentin, how can I not be concerned about the ride home? Even from the salon window, the snow looks quite high. Perhaps the roads are not as bad?”

“Worse,” he replied.

She jerked her head back. “Worse? Then—”

Yanking on her sleeve, the Dowager pulled Katrina down onto the settee. “Might as well make yourself comfortable, my dear. What Quentin proposes is that you and your maid stay here. No person in their right mind would travel in such blustery conditions!”

Righting herself on the couch, Katrina caught her breath. “Stay! Oh, I cannot.”

She covered her mouth with her hand. “What I mean is, what would Aunt Hattie say? She must be wondering when I will return.”

Braving the elements was preferable to spending the night under the same roof as the Earl. If he planned to stay here. Perhaps he did not.

Katrina spread out her hands. “And I do not have a change of clothes.” That was stating the obvious, but all she wished for now was the safety of her own home—her own bed. Soon enough—too soon—she would have to spend many nights in this house. She did not want to start tonight.

The Earl leaned over, his left knee accidentally touching hers. “Not to worry, Katrina. I took care of all the details. After stopping by White's this afternoon, I traveled to Mincing Lane to see you. By then, the snow drifts interfered with the speed of my carriage. I saw quite a few accidents.”

To put some breathing space between them, Katrina repositioned herself further down the settee.

He gave a low chuckle, but thankfully, did not follow her. “Your great aunt said that after church service, you planned to visit m'mother. Naturally, I told Hattie to pack a bag for you and your maid. It would be foolish to journey forth under these conditions.”

Katrina stared at her fingers. Now she had no choice. She *had* to stay.

“Your aunt does not expect you home until the weather clears,” he added.

That was the final nail in the coffin. The majority of the few remaining days left to her as Miss Jones

might well be spent at Udall House.

“And, you?” She raised her gaze. She already knew his reply, but she had to ask, anyway.

He met her gaze. The lines around his eyes crinkled. “*Moi?* I, too, shall remain. Indeed, I can think of no pleasanter place than Udall House to ride out a storm! We will have a cozy visit—and by the end of our stay, I am certain we shall get to know each other very well indeed.”

Katrina felt a hot flush rise up her neck to the tips of her ears. That was what she was afraid of—getting to know the Earl—being alone with him. The Dowager would prove to be an inadequate chaperon. Faith, she would say there was no need for one. Her son and Katrina were betrothed, weren't they?

Trapped. She felt trapped. Trapped into marriage, and now trapped into having the Earl's company—exclusively. Heavens! Who knew how her traitorous body would respond?

The pungent smell of cedar chips rescued her from her pointless speculations. Little Freddy stood by her side; he must have been sitting too close to the fire. He tugged on her sleeve, then pointed at the door. “I have to ... g—go. Grandmama, may I be excused?”

The Dowager smiled. “Yes, of course, Freddy. Katrina, would you help him?”

Bless you, Freddy! She had to have time to digest this latest change to her ever-changing plans. Thinking with a clear head was very difficult around the compelling Earl of Udall.

Katrina took the little boy's hand. “Come, Freddy, why don't you show me where your room is?” She nodded at the Dowager and the Earl and, when Katrina and Freddy left the salon, she breathed a sigh of relief.

* * * *

After Katrina had left, Quentin's mother hobbled over to the settee. She shook her gnarled finger at him. “Quentin Thornhill, what was that all about?”

“Whatever do you mean, Mother? I thought I behaved in my usual charming fashion.” He hid his grin behind his teacup. “Why don't you sit?”

As she did, he mulled over possible replies to her question. Of course he knew exactly what she referred to. Ever since he learned his mother had a hand in tricking him into marrying Deborah, his relations with the Dowager had been less than cordial. He understood she had his welfare at heart. She wanted him to cease his mourning for Robert and get on with life. And there always was that matronly concern for an heir.

But why the Dowager had settled on Deborah Ivanbraugh, Quentin would never understand. Perhaps that was why he did not judge the excesses of the Prince of Wales as harshly as his friends. Prince George and Quentin had one thing in common: disastrous marriages. Marriages made in hell.

Shaking that thought off, he refilled his cup himself. How could he explain to his mother the tender emotions he felt for Katrina? His feelings surprised even him. Katrina Jones—a mere slip of a girl he met just a scant twelve days ago. How could he make the Dowager understand that he trusted Katrina? Her innate goodness melted the cold, hard crust of cynicism he built to protect his sanity. He felt reborn. Though he shuddered to think of how he would react if somehow he were wrong—if somehow she turned out to be as tainted as the rest.

No. This time, luck was with him.

Thinking of how she slid down the settee to escape his touch, he laughed. She was a skittish colt, to be sure, but he would be patient; he would win her confidence. By the heavens, he'd make certain he would! Katrina Jones was worth the wait.

"Would you care to divulge the source of your amusement?" The Dowager took the china cup from his hand and placed it on the table. "Quentin, you must tell me. Just yesterday morning, you informed me about your betrothal. And if I remember aright, you were none too pleased. Blazing thunderbolts, as I recall. Today, you are smelling of April and May."

She took his hand. "Not that I am displeased."

Rubbing the soft, veined skin on her hand, he smiled. "I know, Mother. It has been a long four years, hasn't it? With Robert's death ... and Deborah's."

He looked at the salon door, suddenly wishing Katrina would reappear. "I have a feeling things will be different from now on."

His mother pulled out a handkerchief from the sleeve of her gown. She dabbed at her eyes. "Oh, Quentin, you do not know how happy this makes me!" After sneezing, she blew her nose.

He stood, then kissed the top of her lacy cap. "Now that we have called a truce, would you mind telling me why you requested Katrina's forgiveness?"

The almost impossible happened. At the Dowager's ripe age of sixty six, she blushed. "I, er, I was rather thoughtless. Sometimes, when you get to my years, you forget how sensitive the young can be. You see, I mentioned I was looking forward to more grandchildren."

A blast of heat burned in his chest, then descended lower. His body grew impatient to provide his mother with more grandchildren!

Turning away from her, he poured a glass of cool lemonade. It quenched his thirst, but not his fire. "Ah, I, er, see. And the idea of children embarrassed Katrina?"

He felt sure she suffered from maidenly fears, nothing more. If Therese had not disturbed them yesterday, he was certain Katrina had lifted her lips to respond to his kiss.

Sweet, beautiful, tempting lips.

His mother reached up and held his hand. "Everything is happening so fast for her. Give her time, Quentin."

"I will," he agreed. "I shall give her the rest of my life."

The air crackled with his unexpected declaration. He had not planned to reveal his innermost sentiments. By jingo, he felt like a coxcomb! Giving his mother a bow, he gruffly stated the need to take care of some pressing business, then left the salon.

* * * *

A few minutes passed. Constance heard the salon door slowly open. As she turned around, Perkins entered. Although he probably knew she had been crying with joy—servants always knew everything—she hid her hanky anyway.

She held out her hands. "Perkins, Perkins! I am in alt!"

The butler took her hands and slowly got on one knee. The creaking of his old bones made her chuckle. "Not getting any younger, are we, Perkins?"

"No, Milady." Shifting his weight, he gave her a fresh handkerchief. "Might I venture a hope that all is well with the young master?"

She took another swipe at her eyes, then squeezed his fingers. "Perkins, not only is Lord Udall well—he is happy—actually happy! Oh, I never thought I would live to see this day."

With much difficulty, the butler rose to his feet. "The household rejoices with you, Milady." A rare smile lit his lined face. "It will be good to hear once more the pitter-patter of little feet throughout the halls of Udall House."

Constance sneezed. "I agree, Perkins, but on no condition will you mention little feet, or babies, for that matter, to Miss Jones. She is a bit fidgety. And I would not have her uncomfortable for all the world."

The butler sniffed. "As if I would, Milady."

Seven

On the music room floor at Udall House, Katrina sat with her legs folded under her, stacking toy blocks with Freddy. As much as she liked to see him happy, two days of stacking blocks were her limit! The storm kept everyone restricted inside. And though the Earl's house was grand indeed, a prison was still a prison.

She tried to get Freddy to play a different game, like spillikin or hunt the slipper—something other than blocks, but little Freddy had a mind of his own. He insisted on placing block upon colorful block—higher and higher, until the column fell. He clapped his hands, squealed "*Crash!*", then he stacked them again. Apparently, he could keep this ritual up for days.

Katrina spread out the edges of her new cambric linen day dress and sighed. Not only did he refuse to play anything other than blocks, but he only wanted to play in this particular room. None of the salons, nor bedchambers, nor anywhere else would do.

The music room was nice enough, to be sure. Two large pianofortes sat side by side by the northern windows, while high-backed chairs lined the opposing walls. Two woodwind instruments, either oboes or English horns, lay neglected on a massive oak table, along with a violin and a trumpet. In times long past, the Thornhills must have had more than a passing interest in family musicales.

But now, the room's air hung heavy with dust. A musty, stale odor made deep breathing difficult—very similar to the condition of the front sitting room at Mincing Lane just two weeks ago.

She itched to open the wide windows but the fierce wind howling its eerie whistle through the window panes shook some sense into her.

No reflection on the Udall household, but this room must have remained unused for a long time, probably since the Earl and his brother had been boys. That was sad. These musical instruments were meant to give enjoyment. Now that the Earl was getting married...

Katrina's unsteady hands toppled her creation.

Freddy looked on in approval at the destruction, then crowed, "*Crash!* That was a jolly good crash, Miss Trina."

The boy was more talkative now—not so withdrawn. He seemed to relish having her as a constant playmate.

She gave him a smile, then started another column. She did not mind hiding in the music room. It was the one place the Earl never frequented. She took great care to avoid him. Only the Lord above knew how long they all would be stranded. For two days and three nights, the storm belted London with blinding winds and icy snow, prohibiting anyone from leaving or arriving at Udall House. Fortunately, the kitchen was well stocked.

When she had expressed concern about how Aunt Hattie and the Mincing Lane staff were faring, the Earl said, "I may be a reluctant landlord, but I do honor my obligations. Before I left your house,

Katrina, I made certain things were in order."

She believed him. The Earl behaved honorably throughout this whole ordeal; he had done more than she dared hope. But he might as well have been talking about *her*. He might as well have said, "I may be a reluctant *husband*, but I do honor my obligations."

What woman did not hate being an obligation?

Her feelings for him had nothing to do with duty. She could not exactly identify them, but they were affected by that appealing little dimple on the side of his mouth. Every time he smiled a certain way, that dimple would flash at her, and her heart would take a flying leap.

His conspiratorial wink at Madame Marcella's shop had implied sharing: Katrina and he were united partners against the unpleasant Therese. And when he entered the salon with Freddy on his shoulders ... faith, Katrina's untrustworthy heart melted right then and there.

She added another block to her pile. Was this love? No, it could not be. She *couldn't* love the Earl. She *could not* let herself love any man. Look what had happened to her mother.

Katrina studied the six colors on the wooden toy cube in her hand. Her gaze stilled on the blue. Besides, he did not love her. She was not sure why he seemed determined to go through with this wedding, but it certainly was not for love. Perhaps he decided it was time to fill his nursery.

Picking a fuzzy white thread from her spring green gown, she sighed. She felt drawn to the Earl, she might even wish to kiss him once or twice, but she did not want to *marry* him.

Did that make her a hussy?

"Miss Trina, is there something wrong with that block?"

She started. She had been staring at the cube for some time. "N—No, Freddy. I was just wool-gathering."

She tried hard to evade the Earl's company. During the daytime, she was successful because he conferred with his man of business—going over the accounts here at the house.

But at night, the Earl always appeared for dinner, impeccably dressed and oh, so very attractive. He would prod her for information on how she spent her day, raise his dark eyebrow at her provincial attempts at conversation and, sometimes, he would flash that charming dimple her way.

After dinner, she would plead fatigue, then flee to her room. She planned to do the same tonight.

Last night, he had asked her if she would like to take a tour of Udall House on the morrow. She declined. Freddy would grow fretful if she did not keep him company, she said. She had enough trouble as it was keeping her emotions on an even keel. No need to tempt fate by strolling arm in arm with the Earl down secluded corridors. No, she much preferred stacking blocks.

As Freddy demolished his thousandth column, she admired his sweet profile. Without thinking, she began to trace it in the air. "Freddy, I have an idea. Why don't I cut out your silhouette? We will paste it on white paper and give it to your Grandmama as a present."

"Capital!" The boy jumped up and ran to Katrina, apparently forgetting about his building blocks.

"Would you? A present for Grandmama!"

He pulled on his lower lip for a moment. "Would you also make one to give to Lord Wellington? He says he wants one."

"He does, does he?" Katrina looked around the room a moment to make sure England's favorite military man was not lurking behind one of the pianofortes. Then she ruffled the boy's fair hair. "Well,

we can certainly make one for him."

"Thank you, Miss Trina." Freddy picked up a crude wooden sword and slashed it through the air, probably in imitation of his hero. With those actions, all his solemn ways vanished. He seemed like any other little boy. Amazing how a small amount of attention accomplished so much.

Katrina asked a servant to procure some black paper, a pencil, and scissors, and upon receiving the items, she sat next to a frost covered window. "Now, you have to promise to sit very, very still for me. Mustn't make a move, you know."

"Yes, Miss Trina." Freddy put away his sword and obediently climbed onto the chair opposite her.

As she outlined his face, she smiled. Such lovable features, chubby with youth, and wide-eyed with innocence. She carefully traced the bulge of his forehead, his crown of curls, the heavy fringe of eyelashes, and the heavy muslin collar at his throat. Before she knew it, she finished one, then started the second silhouette. She had not realized how much she missed working on her art.

When the music room door opened, she kept her head bent over her paper. "Did the Countess send up a tray? Good, we could use some refreshments."

"Will I do instead?"

At the sound of the Earl's voice, Katrina almost cut off the tip of the silhouette nose.

"Uncle Quentin!" Freddy looked to her for permission to leave his chair.

She nodded. "My Lord! I thought you were—"

He smiled, revealing his appealing dimple. "Quentin," he corrected. "And I could use some refreshments, too. Let's have a nunccheon served up here."

Without waiting for her reply, he tugged on the bellpull. After he gave orders to the servant, he picked Freddy up and swung him around the room. The boy's giggles and squeals warmed her heart.

Too soon, the Earl set his nephew down. As Freddy returned to his blocks, the Earl walked over to her side. "So, Katrina, you dabble in the silhouette?"

How smug he sounded. She pretended not to hear him.

Looking over her shoulder, he inhaled sharply. "You did these?"

She shrugged. "I do not see anyone else in the music room."

His voice expressed his disbelief. "A woman silhouettist?"

Katrina put down her portrait. Although it was almost finished, she could not trust her hands. The slightest shaking would mar the smooth line of the profile. And her hands now twitched in the most distressing way. She bit her lip. Patronizing male!

He picked up her completed silhouette. "But, Katrina, this is quite good. Excellent, in fact."

With his finger, he traced the curve of the lips. "This work is on par with the silhouette of that matron in Astley's Ampitheatre."

"Indeed? I was under the impression you thought that piece was just barely acceptable."

Still staring at the portrait, he waved his hand. "I had to take the woman down a peg—toadeater, you know. But your work..."

Standing, she folded her arms against her chest and tapped her foot. "You think that because I am a woman, I cannot be an accomplished artist? A competent silhouettist? I will wager you are not aware

that the Princess Elizabeth is known for her silhouettes."

"True, the King's third daughter has been known to do some cuttings." The Earl scratched his chin. "But your work defies description. Words escape me."

"Good." It was bad enough that she had to leave her job. Now her future husband thought nothing of belittling her talent. Patronizing, indeed. She turned away.

Catching her by the shoulders, he dug his fingers into her skin. "Have you ever done a self-portrait?"

He made the question sound so urgent. What nonsense. Why did it matter to him? She tried to pull away, but he held fast.

"No. I prefer to do others."

"Ever had your silhouette done by someone else?"

"No, again. What is all this about, Quentin?" For the first time since she met him, she thought of him as Quentin—Quentin, the imperfect man, instead of Lord Udall, the powerful earl.

He released her, then ran his hand over his hair. "Blast! I pride myself on being a connoisseur of the arts and I could have sworn that if *you* crafted the matron at Astley's, then you must be the artist of the angel hanging on my hotel room wall. To be sure, the profile *is* yours. It has to be. 'K. Jones,' it reads." He dropped his voice. "Your father gave it to me."

She averted her gaze. "You met Father?" Her father had not been the type of man a maiden wished to introduce her prospective husband to. "In payment of a gaming debt, I will wager."

Wager. Wagering was what had gotten her father in trouble in the first place. Why did she phrase her comment in that way?

But what did Quentin say? He owned a portrait that resembled her? It *had* to be one that she made of her mother!

Her heart soared. She snatched his hands and pressed them together between hers. "You have one of my silhouettes? It resembles me?"

Oh, dear God, let it be so!

He gazed down at her, a little smile lighting his lips. "Yes, it is you to perfection. It has comforted me for over a year."

She dropped back her head and laughed. "Yes! Yes, she has that same effect on me! That silhouette is of my mother. She and I looked very similar except for this odd-color hair." Katrina impatiently pushed a thick curl back behind her ear.

Oh, this was a happy day. Of the many cuttings she had done of her mother, not one remained. Her father took them all—took them to pay for his gambling obsession.

Her mother's words seemed to mock Katrina: *When you love a man, you would do anything for him.*

She shook her head. She would never agree with that particular sentiment of her mother's. But, onto happier thoughts, now not only did she have the John Constable portrait of her mother, but a silhouette, as well. When would she be able to view it?

His hotel room wall, he said. Katrina flushed. She longed to see the silhouette once more, but she did not wish to receive an invitation to his hotel, either. Time enough when she wed the Earl...

Wed the Earl. She swallowed a thick lump.

He still gazed down at her. His eyes darkened. Lightly grazing her cheekbones with the soft pads of his

fingertips, he moved closer.

A tremble within her middle spread outward, then down to her toes. He meant to kiss her. She closed her eyes. If he cherished her mother's picture, then surely, her mother would have approved of one kiss.

Their lips briefly touched. She felt a shock, then a burning need to be closer still. As she pressed her lips to his again, she brushed at a tugging on her skirt, and came in contact with warm skin.

"Oh! Oh, Freddy!" She blazed red hot with embarrassment. How could she have forgotten about Freddy? And how could she have forgotten her vow to stay clear of his uncle?

Giving her a wink, Quentin stepped away. "Well, old boy, what do you say?"

Freddy handed his uncle the silhouette. "Miss Trina did this. I'm giving one to Grandmama and one to Lord Wellington. D'you think he'll like it?"

"Wellington, eh? He will be pleased that you thought of him, Frederick."

To steady herself, Katrina smoothed down her gown's fine linen fabric. With Quentin's winning ways, he could captivate any maiden's heart. And hers was no exception. Her foolish heart was his for the taking, should he ever desire it.

A servant entered with their food. Nodding to the footman, Quentin then ushered his nephew over to a low table. After setting him down on the floor, Quentin called over to her. "Miss Trina, would you care to join us? We have a fine collection of cheeses and sliced meats to tempt your palate."

"Yes, please do!" chimed Freddy.

"Of course, I am honored." Smoothing away any blushes that might remain on her face, she took her place at the small table, folded her skirt under her, and sat.

"By the bye, I have been meaning to ask you about Jack. Did he apply for a job here?"

Quentin handed her the bread rolls. Their fresh baked aroma tantalized her. She took one.

He placed a second roll on her plate. "Yes, the following day, Jack paid Udall house a visit. I instructed Perkins to send Jack and his good lady to one of my northern estates. I am certain they will both do well there."

Wanting to thank Quentin, Katrina smiled instead.

He smiled back, then forked some slices of ham onto her plate, next to her bread. "Eat your fill. As soon as we finish, I shall challenge you and Frederick to a snowball fight. The air is crisp and clear."

Katrina glanced out the window. Quentin was right; the snow finally stopped.

After that statement, little Freddy was impossible to contain. As he and Quentin started a mock battle over the remaining bread roll, Katrina watched. He was so good with Freddy—just what the little boy needed. Another part of her reserve against the Earl melted away. Heavens, at this rate, she would have no uncertainties left.

* * * *

"Watch out for this one, Uncle Quentin!"

Frederick hurled the loosely packed snowball with as much force as his three-year-old body could muster. No, four. Hard to believe the lad would turn four in two days. Quentin smiled.

But time was fleeting. He had only a few seconds to maneuver into the snowball's range, so he ran, then bent over, and finally slid on the ground. Success! The snowball impacted and scattered thousands of crystal fragments over his greatcoat. "A hit, Frederick!"

“Good-o!” The boy jumped up and down. “I did it, Miss Trina.”

She shook his hand, then scooped up her own ammunition. “Now it is my turn.”

Quentin groaned. “This will teach me—I shall never again consent to be the underdog. Two to one, indeed.”

Katrina's snowball also fell wide of the mark, but he did not bother to reposition himself in its path. “You missed,” he taunted.

Gammon little filly that she was, she called out, “We will just make us a bigger one, won't we, Freddy?”

“You two will have to find me first.” Leaving behind a frosty trail of breath, Quentin headed for the snow covered hedges of Udall House's garden.

Finding temporary shelter between two pine trees, he squatted down. Lord, he had not had this much carefree fun since he was a boy. The storm had abated, and in its wake, London never looked lovelier. A fairyland of ice and pristine snow. Too soon the pure whiteness would decay into grey sludge, sprinkled with soot, filth, and grime. But for now, London was magical.

Magical, like the sound of Katrina's laughter. The joyous melody filtered through the trees and hedges. It rode on the wind, beckoning him to return.

“Come and find me,” he shouted to her. Perhaps, when she did, he could steal a kiss. A kiss as sweet, as full of promise as the kiss his nephew interrupted. Dash it, if all her kisses were as delectable, he would never be able to tear himself away from her—nor would he want to.

Brushing frozen snow crystals from his leather gloves, he conjured up her image, willing her to appear. She did not, but in his mind's eye he saw her clearly. This bitter cold reddened her cheeks and put a sparkle into her green eyes. Her snow-dampened hair curling around her face made him impatient again to loosen her thick mane and have her hair dance around her shoulders for him. Faith, he was under her spell.

The irony of it all was that he had been under her spell for some time—since first setting his eyes on her silhouette portrait. Katrina was his angel. His own very special angel.

That her talent stirred a mountain of emotion in him made her even more special. In truth, he felt bewitched.

Being so afflicted bothered him not a jot. Who else could claim to be as fortunate? No other woman he knew would have set a toe out-of-doors today, let alone frolicked in these frigid temperatures. Not Therese, Juliet, Deborah, nor any of the other females with whom he had conducted liaisons.

And little Frederick absolutely adored Katrina. Lord, that poor child had so much misery in his life. Quentin had never seen Frederick happier.

Quentin frowned. Perhaps if he spoke to Therese—again—perhaps this time she would let him keep Frederick. Perhaps she would finally understand that Frederick was not a pawn in a game. Her power over the Earl of Udall was about to end—now that he had a wife...

“Quentin, Quentin.”

As Katrina approached, her voice grew loud. He stood, wiping the snow from the bottom of his coat. Perhaps Frederick lagged behind a bit. Then Quentin could steal his kiss.

Following his path through the snow, she arrived in the garden, panting as if she were one of those new steam locomotives. The sight of her snow dusted eyelashes and pinkened lips would stay with him

forever.

"Quentin, I—I have been calling you." She struggled to catch her breath.

Brushing a wet strand of hair from her forehead, he smiled. "I have been waiting for you. What the devil took you so long? I am nearly frozen!"

The ease with which he could converse with her surprised even him. He felt as if he had truly come home.

Looking past her, he did not see his nephew bringing up the rear. "Where is Frederick?"

Because of her red cheeks, Quentin could not be certain, but it appeared she was blushing.

"Freddy had to, um, you know, go inside. So I took him back. When you did not follow us, I thought I would fetch you." She took his hand. "Come, I am almost frozen, too."

He lifted his eyebrow. "Fetch me? Like a stick?" Moving closer, he cupped her face in his hands. "What if I refuse to be fetched?"

Her eyebrows lowered. He could read the puzzlement in her expression. Tipping her chin up, he gently kissed her lips. Her honeyed taste ignited a fire deep in his soul. He clasped her to him, only briefly aware of the icy weather around them. He sought her lips more urgently, feeling the trembling of her hesitation, yet he was unable to control his desire.

"Katrina," he murmured. His hot breath mingled freely with hers. He possessed her mouth again, pressing deeper, harder, without giving any thought as to whether he had a right to continue.

But when he trailed his lips to the curve of her warm neck, she pulled away, her chest heaving. Her lawn green eyes grew as wide as an open door. "I th—think we should go back now." She blinked, then lowered her gaze.

He went too fast; he had gone beyond the bounds of propriety. But how could he deny himself the angel of his dreams?

Sighing, he placed her arm in his. "If you insist."

As they headed toward the house, he wished to say something that would smooth over the awkward moment. In spite of all his supposed *savoir-faire*, nothing came to him.

Katrina stumbled over a dip in the snow. "My feet are numb," she explained.

He quickly replied, "I will warm them."

She was even quicker. "You have warmed enough of me!"

Her response surprised him. What was she thinking? That damned poke bonnet of hers hid most of her face. Did she regret her response to him? Had she been as affected as he?

Although doing so hurt his cold-tightened face, he smiled. No one could be as affected as he. If the month of the year was July instead of December, he was certain all reason would have deserted him, and he would have foolishly jeopardized his new-found rapport with his bride-to-be. He was sure he would have taken her right there in the garden.

He shuddered. Thank heavens for the snow.

Her grip tightened on his arm. "We are almost at the house. You will get warm soon."

She misunderstood the reason for his shudder. The innocent! However, if she could still feel concern for him, then perhaps she had not minded his loss of control out in the garden.

He smiled again. As he decided earlier, he was a fortunate man.

Eight

Katrina placed last minute stitches into the rag doll she made for Freddy. The high military hat kept slipping off the doll's head, and the black boots refused to stay put on the limp cloth legs. She had no choice but to sew them on.

Sitting on the high-backed white settee in the salon, she hunched over, concentrating on making tiny, near-invisible stitches. Freddy would not want his Wellington doll to show any imperfections. A hero must be flawless.

The satinwood doors opened, and Quentin entered, magnificently dressed in champagne-colored trousers and a navy blue tail-coat of lustrous superfine wool. She straightened at the sight of him, and inadvertently pricked her finger.

"Shall I?" Kneeling by her side, he extracted a handkerchief, and pressed it against her hurt finger.

She gazed down at his thick, curly hair. An urge struck her to run her fingers through the dark locks. She fought it. That impulse would get her into trouble. After what had happened in the garden, she made an extra effort to avoid him—or at least not to be alone with him. Her emotions frightened her. It was times like these that she missed her mother's advice the most.

"There. The bleeding has stopped." He removed the handkerchief to examine her finger. Satisfied, he then sat next to her.

She had no choice but to inhale a whiff of his cologne. The scent hurtled her back to the garden. Her breath quickened. Deep, tingly sensations washed over her.

To hide her emotions, she stared down at the doll in her lap. "Th-Thank you. H—How do you like Wellington?"

"Wellington?" Quentin picked up the doll and scrutinized it. "It lacks the Viscount's distinctive profile, but Frederick will be enthralled."

Setting the doll down, Quentin took possession of her hand. "My dear, you are so thoughtful to make a present for my nephew. I have noticed he flourishes under your gentle guidance and attention. For that, I thank you."

She flushed. "I only wish I'd known sooner about his birthday. I could have made him a proper doll."

"Wellington is delightful. Frederick will—"

Bursting into the room, Freddy tripped, and fell headlong at their feet. As he raised his head, he giggled. "Uncle Quentin, Miss Trina, come see what Grandmama gave me for my birthday. It's the bestest!"

Freddy scrambled to his feet. "Come on!" He tugged on his uncle's hand. Nothing shy about the boy now!

Glad for Freddy's interruption, Katrina hid her present in the skirt of her gown, then stood. "Let's follow the birthday boy!"

Before she finished her sentence, he was already gone from the room. Alone again with Quentin, she sidestepped his attempt to hold her hand. "Well, let's go. What are we waiting for?" Laughing, she exited the salon first.

* * * *

In the main dining room at Udall House, Katrina nibbled on her slice of birthday seed cake—Freddy's favorite treat. Besides herself, only the Dowager and Quentin celebrated the young boy's special day. The weather prevented inviting more guests. Therese Thornhill, too, was absent. Because of the weather or forgetfulness no one knew, and no one seemed to mind. Her name was not mentioned.

What did Freddy think of his mother's absence? Katrina looked over at him. He had placed the Wellington doll in the chair next to him, and every now and then he offered a cake-filled spoon to his new plaything. Between the doll, the ivory elephant his grandmother gave him, and the new set of blocks from Quentin, Freddy could not have been happier. His endless chatter entertained them all. Perhaps his mother's absence was for the best.

But when his childish prattle suddenly stopped, Katrina glanced up. Perkins opened the dining room doors and ushered in Therese Thornhill!

"The honorable Mrs. Robert Thornhill," the butler intoned. His face appeared set in disapproval.

For a second, the announcement seemed frozen in time. Quentin dropped his fork loudly, then slowly rose from his chair to perform a perfunctory bow. If only he could control his temper. Little Freddy looked nervous enough as it was. The boy grabbed onto his doll, hugging it to his chest.

The Dowager came to the rescue; she found her voice first. Waving her hand in Freddy's direction, she commanded, "Therese, do have a seat. How nice of you to journey forth in this ungodly weather—on this special day." Then the Dowager sneezed.

Therese made no comment, but her elaborate ball gown spoke for her. Its glossy skirt of blue silken taffeta swished loudly in the silent room. The dress was beautiful, but with puffed sleeves resting halfway off her shoulders, was it appropriate attire for the afternoon?

Katrina glanced down at her own sprig muslin gown. Inexplicably, she felt dowdy.

Undaunted by the quiet, the Dowager asked, "Have you eaten?"

Therese let Perkins pull out the chair next to her son. Barely looking at the boy, she sat down, then removed her long gloves. "Thank you, yes, I have eaten."

Flickering her gaze over Katrina, Therese added, "But I will have some of that cake."

The ice from the woman's light azure eyes gave Katrina a chill. Therese then flashed a hungry look at Quentin, and wet her lips.

In a brief moment, the atmosphere in the dining room went from merry levity to stark, cold wariness.

After the butler served her, he left. Katrina never saw him move so fast.

"Morbid fellow, isn't he?" Therese remarked. "What special day were you referring to, Constance?"

The Dowager gasped, then sneezed again into her napkin.

Freddy shrank down in his chair. Faith, it hurt to see him so ignored by his mother. Katrina blinked her eyes to drive away a flood of sympathetic tears.

As Quentin raised his glass of wine, his gaze narrowed. "There is no need to *tease* us—or Frederick, Therese. We all *know* you braved the snowy streets of London so you could wish your son a happy birthday. Is that not so?"

Finishing his drink in one smooth movement, Quentin refilled his glass.

She raised a slim eyebrow. "His birthday, is it?" She leaned over to her son. "And how many years are

you, boy? Three?"

Freddy's mouth grew pinched. Squeezing his doll, he slowly replied, "Four, Mama."

Katrina grasped the edge of the table. The woman was determined to tear the little boy apart.

"Four? Yes, I suppose it *was* four years ago." Therese's face took on an irritated cast. She reached over, took Freddy's doll, and dangled it from its arm. "And what is this dreadful thing? A homespun present from the noble Thornhills? Is this the best you could do, Quentin?"

"It's mine! Give it back!" Freddy cried. He frantically tried to retrieve his toy.

Quentin leaned forward. "Is this how you amuse yourself? Grabbing toys away from toddlers?"

Paying him no heed, Therese, purposefully, held the doll higher, out of Freddy's reach. "Frightful manners, boy."

As his face crumpled, his childish wails grew softer—a far more serious occurrence than screams of displeasure. Right before their eyes, the child was retreating into his somber self.

Quentin pushed on his chair to rise, but Katrina moved faster. She could not trust his violent disposition. And the Dowager was turning an alarming color of grey. It was up to Katrina to stop Therese's mistreatment of her son. "I believe it is time for Freddy's nap."

Katrina deftly plucked Wellington from his mother's grip and returned the doll to Freddy.

To the Dowager and Quentin, Katrina nodded. "Too much excitement is tiring for a young boy. I am certain he will be fine after he sleeps." In trying to reassure them, she was also trying to convince herself.

She held the quietly sobbing boy by her side and hardened her gaze at his mother. "Mrs. Thornhill, I do hope you are satisfied."

Katrina handed Freddy her handkerchief and they both left the room.

* * * *

Therese dabbed at the corner of her mouth with the linen napkin. "Sensitive boy. Too sensitive for my tastes. And playing with dolls! What would Robert have thought?"

Quentin clenched his fists. Robert. Poor Robert. This strumpet had the effrontery to mention Robert in front of his mother.

But Therese's question struck a chord. What would Robert have thought? No one would ever know. However, his mother and his son now had to deal with the shrewish Therese without his help. Perhaps Robert had taken the coward's way out.

Suddenly desiring another drink, Quentin reached for the decanter of claret. Its blood red color excited him. Her inexcusable treatment of her son raised in Quentin the urge to spill some of her own blood.

Spotting his mother's furrowed brow, he suppressed his emotions, then set the crystal container back down. The Dowager was right; he did not need his wits clouded with alcohol. Therese could be a formidable opponent.

He reached across the table, and patted his mother's hand. "You are longing to go to Frederick, Mother. Why don't you? I shall remain here and ... entertain Therese."

The Dowager's gaze darted from him to Therese. "You do not mind?"

The soft skin on his mother's face seemed to sag. She appeared small ... defenseless ... defeated. For the first time, he realized she was getting on in years.

She did not need to be present at this upcoming confrontation. This was between him and Therese. Perhaps he could settle things once and for all.

He gentled his expression. "Everything will be fine, Mother. Do go on."

The Dowager nodded, and with her cane, slowly hobbled out of the room.

The closing door was like a signal. Now he could say ... or do whatever he deemed necessary. Leaning back in his chair, he studied his sister-in-law. Her pale complexion seemed sallow, and she overapplied rouge to compensate. The result was unfortunate.

His scrutiny bothered her—he could tell. She squirmed in her seat and, with her fork, picked apart the remnants of her seed cake.

"You and your mother coddle that boy. And that namby-pamby fiancée of yours is just as bad. She has the bearing of a Cit! Whatever do you see in her?" Therese's lower lip drooped; her pouting like a spoiled child erased whatever power she had over him.

He smiled. "You would not understand, Therese."

No, she would not ever understand someone as innately good as Katrina. "And as for coddling Frederick—someone must. Certainly you are not up for the job. Tell me, have you reconsidered letting me raise the boy? I assure you Katrina and I will take good care of Frederick."

A mistake! As soon as he said that, he realized his mistake. Two mistakes, really. When had Therese ever been concerned about Frederick's well-being?

Springing up, she knocked her chair to the floor. Standing hunched over the table, she balled her fists so tightly, her knuckles almost protruded through her skin.

"Katrina, Katrina, Katrina!" Therese screeched. "That is all I hear! I have had it with Katrina. A whey-faced, mealy-mouthed, milk-and-water miss. I thought you had better taste, Quentin."

He ran his hand through his hair. Some women refused reason. "You do not want the boy, Therese. You never did. If I take him—"

Inhaling deeply, Quentin made certain he left out Katrina's name. "If you give him to me, you would be free to pursue your own pleasures." She pursued her own pleasures now, but he did not point that out.

Therese's pallid blue eyes glittered, then shuttered. "I have plans for Freddy."

Quentin shook as if an explosive shell detonated within him. Unable to contain himself, he strode to her side, and grabbed her by the wrists. "From now on, Therese, whatever treatment you levy on the boy shall be levied upon *you*. Remember that."

Quentin loosened his grip. Hell and damn! She had gotten to him. She knew his Achilles' heel, and she would use it against him.

With triumph in her eyes, Therese suffered his savage vehemence and lifted her chin. "Levied on me. By whom? You? And what will your fiancée say about that? By the bye, when are you marrying your paragon of virtue? Do you think she deserves a brute such as you?"

He flinched. A muscle twitched near his eye. "No, Katrina deserves better." He knew she deserved better. But somehow his salvation rested within her tiny hands. He could not lose her.

Releasing Therese, he folded his arms against his chest. Violence against her was not the answer; it served no purpose. As he had thought earlier, a clear head better suited his dealings with his sister-in-law. She attacked on an emotional level; he needed to counterattack with logic.

"But then," he smiled wickedly, "you do not deserve your son, either."

She acknowledged the hit. "Touché." Swinging her hips in an exaggerated fashion, she slithered closer, then lifted her arms around his neck. Her strong perfumed scent—of heliotrope, he believed—caused his nostrils to flare.

He let her press herself against him. In an even voice, he asked, "What are your plans for Frederick?"

Parting her lips, her tongue darted over her reddened mouth. "Make me tell you, Quen," she whispered.

He felt nothing for her—nothing but disgust. "You are wasting your time." Starting to push her from him, he heard the dining room door open.

Katrina! As she stepped inside, her face paled. He completed his action, but she had seen. She had seen Therese's arms wrapped around him.

If he could just explain ... By the set of her lips, he knew he better wait—wait until he got rid of the stench of heliotrope.

Katrina stopped, and stood as still as a statue—a perfect, beautiful, and ... bloodless marble statue. "The Dowager thought I might be needed down here. I see you have things well in hand."

She inclined her head. "If you will excuse me."

Seeing that cool look on her face, watching her exit wrenched his very soul from his body. Katrina! Although he longed to call after her—to go after her, he did not. It would be best to explain later, after he changed clothes.

Would she believe him? She must!

But why should she? He ran his hand over his hair. His reputation with the ladies was hardly an asset. No matter. One way or another, he would convince her.

By God, he would have to *make* her believe him.

"Quen?"

He ignored the source of his difficulties. Without a backward glance, he left the dining room. Unfortunately, Therese's laugh of amusement followed him.

* * * *

Katrina had not been looking forward to dinnertime, and now that it arrived, the meal lived up to her expectations: disastrous. No aspersions on the food; the cook outdid himself with exotic menu items such as eel soup, salmon pie, Cornish hens, and stuffed rabbit. For those with plainer appetites, a large rump of beef also decorated the table.

The fruity bouquet of the juniper berry stuffing teased her. Any day other than today, she would have been able to dine on the aroma alone. But tonight, she was not hungry. The Dowager, Therese Thornhill, and Quentin all ate heartily enough, but not Katrina. She could not eat with a broken heart.

Toying with a sprig of broccoli, she studied its tightly clustered green flower-buds. *Don't get carried away with theatrics, Katrina. Your heart is not broken. It is not!*

She separated a sprig from the broccoli stem, then responded politely to one of the Dowager's comments.

Freddy's grandmama was the only reason Katrina did not continue to plead a megrim. The Dowager, poor thing, was adversely affected by Therese's presence. The older woman's smoke grey hair appeared to have yellowed, and her face seemed to have sunken—all in a few hours' time. When she reached for

her glass of wine, her hand visibly shook. She even forgot to sneeze.

No, Katrina could not do as she wanted; she could not ignore the Dowager's needs. If *she* could make an appearance at the dinner table, then Katrina could also.

But oh, how she wished she could hide away in her bedchamber, as she had done earlier in the evening. Hide from Quentin.

He had attempted to see her—no doubt to explain about the little tête-à-tête she interrupted. Tête-à-tête? That was not an accurate phrase. She would name it for what it was: a passionate lovers' embrace.

No, perhaps love had nothing to do with what she saw. Perhaps it had something to do with a baser emotion, a baser need.

Rubbing her temple, she gave up feigning interest in eating. The megrim she had pretended was turning into a reality. Proper payment for lying, she supposed. The falsehood had come in handy, though. She *did not* want to see or to talk with Quentin. She did not want to hear his excuses. He was what he was, what else did she expect? A rake was a rake, and nothing could change that. He thrived on women as naturally as a plant thrived on sunlight. Symbiosis. Romancing was his nature. Surely she did not think a kiss or two from her meant something important to him?

Certainly not. He was marrying her to beget heirs—nothing more, nothing less. He would continue to seek his pleasure elsewhere.

A piece of broccoli stuck in her throat. She took a gulp of Madeira to wash it down. Thinking about the loveless future that lay ahead of her made her head pound harder.

The pity of it was although her forehead genuinely ached now, she dared not leave the table. She did not have the heart to leave the Dowager alone with Therese. Quentin did not count. He would never see that his mother was vulnerable to Therese's cruel barbs. Most likely he was sitting there anticipating spending the night together with her.

Katrina shivered.

Upstairs, another one of Therese's victims languished in silence. Little Freddy had gone to bed easily enough. But he refused to say a word. Tucked into his bed, he hugged his new doll, and stared up at the ceiling. Katrina tried to coax a kiss out of him, then a smile, and finally, she would have settled for just a word.

Although she stayed by his side, he ignored her. Motionless, he remained withdrawn until at last, he fell asleep through sheer exhaustion. Then, she gave him a kiss.

How could a mother knowingly demoralize her child? How could *anyone* be so cruel to *any* child? And how could Quentin willingly consort with a woman as heartless as Therese? Perhaps he had not been an *active* participant in the dining room scene.

Perhaps.

Katrina took a bite of sourdough bread. Its crisp crust and rough texture failed to please her, as it normally did. While she responded to the others' conversations, she made her plans. Since the roads had been clear enough for Therese to travel, Katrina would leave Udall House tomorrow. She would insist. She was not married to the Earl—yet. He could not order her to stay.

If only Therese would also leave—for Freddy and the Dowager's sakes. But if not, perhaps Freddy would like to take a trip to Mincing Lane.

A loud voice summoned Katrina to attention.

"Katrina, I may call you Katrina, may I not? After all, we are almost related." Therese laughed in an intimidating way. "I was going to say you are not eating much. Is she, Quen?"

He wiped his mouth on his napkin, then glanced at Katrina. She looked away.

He also appeared drawn—which was odd. Perhaps Therese was like a black widow spider—sucking the life out of her lovers. She certainly had that effect on Freddy and the Dowager. Then again, maybe the thought of marriage had a draining effect on him.

After taking a drink of Madeira, he replied, "Katrina suffers the megrim. I will wager it is painful." His voice grew a bit husky. "I *am* glad you could join us, Katrina."

He could be extremely charming, when he wanted to be. There could not have been a woman alive capable of withstanding that devilish dimple of his. Too appealing, by half. Drat the man!

She straightened her shoulders and held his gaze. "Thank you for your concern. I will be fine."

Therese buttered a slice of bread, then looked sideways at Katrina. "Quentin's consideration for you is quite touching. Such devotion. I am certain he will make an excellent husband."

Angry heat rose on Katrina's cheeks. To make sport of the sacred institution of marriage—her marriage—was intolerable. If she could only retort in kind!

Katrina shrugged. That would only drag her down to Therese's level.

A low noise made by Quentin caught Katrina's attention. His hand tightened on his crystal goblet, and if he continued his hold, the stem would surely break.

His temper, again. She had to do something. "Yes, Therese, I am certain you are right." Picking up her glass, Katrina asked, "Quentin, would you please pour more wine? I am quite parched."

Her diversion worked. As he set down his goblet, she wiped a trickle of perspiration from her forehead.

The Dowager smiled for the first time this evening. "Please refresh mine, also, son." Then she winked at Katrina.

After he refilled her glass, Katrina thanked him.

He responded, "It is I who must thank *you*." His penetrating gaze made her flush.

Before Therese could open her poisoned mouth again, the Dowager asked, "So, Therese, since you did not remember your son's birthday, what *does* bring you to Udall House?"

Therese finished the remaining slice of beef left on her plate. Her lips then curved upward into a mocking smile. "I did not tell you, Constance? Of course not, how silly of me. You see, I also have good news to impart."

Batting her lashes at Quentin, Therese continued, "You must congratulate me. I am engaged to be married."

Whatever Katrina expected, she had not expected that. Evidently, Quentin and his mother had not, either. Heavy silence in the room seemed to stretch forever. The flickering of the candles in the chandeliers made more noise than any of the dining room's occupants.

The chords in Quentin's neck stood at attention. "To whom?" he snapped.

So he cared about Therese. He did feel something for her. Why else would he act so strangely?

Katrina swallowed back her sadness. It had a bitter taste.

Therese's smile deepened. "Oh, you know him, Quen. In fact, I asked him to stop by here—later." She

positively gloated. "I am marrying Nathan Morelock."

The name meant nothing to Katrina, but Quentin's eyes almost shot red flames.

Before Katrina had a chance to ask the man's identity, she heard a loud gasp. Right in front of them, the Dowager Countess swooned in her chair.

Nine

If the atmosphere in the dining room had been disastrous, here in the salon, it crackled a thousand times worse. Although the impressive and lofty ceiling of this grand salon seemed to reach as high as the sky, the room still was not large enough to contain the hostilities threatening to explode within it.

Katrina sat on the white settee, next to the Dowager, and patted her blue-veined hand. Together, they sipped at hot spiced tea, dabbed at their lips with a napkin, and, to all the world must have appeared as calm and as properly precise as could be.

But looks could be deceiving. Below this placid front, Katrina's insides tightened and twisted, creating sharp stabs of pain slashing through her middle.

Worry. It was worry that waged war on her. The Dowager should not be here in the salon—not with Quentin, Therese, and Nathan Morelock also present. The Dowager should be upstairs in her bed, resting after her sudden faint. But she had insisted. The dear woman insisted on accompanying the three adversaries into the room for after-dinner drinks. And Katrina had no choice but to follow.

She watched a purple vein pulse at the Dowager's temple. If only she would reconsider, and retire to her bedchamber. This night's hostilities might prove to be too destructive even for the strong-willed Dowager.

Katrina glanced at the trio. Quentin had shown some consideration for his mother by removing Therese and her fiancé to another area of the room, until the Dowager recovered from her shock. Over by the mahogany sideboard designed by Sheraton, the three of them slouched down in their chairs and consumed decanter after decanter of port as if imbibing the most liquor determined one's manhood. Even Therese participated in this contest. Most unseemly for a woman.

Nathan Morelock spotted Katrina's gaze and raised his sparkling glass in her direction. His broad face seemed less threatening when wreathed in a smile. But she did not trust his smile; she had found out who he was. He had been Deborah Thornhill's lover.

The Dowager plucked out a hanky from the sleeve of her gown. Wiping her forehead, she murmured, "I do not understand Therese at all. How she has the effrontery to invite Morelock here. Here! Of all places—with Quentin present, no less."

The older woman sneezed, then balled the handkerchief in her hand. "No decency. Today's young people have no decency."

Katrina caught her lip between her teeth. The Dowager did not mean what she said; she was just overwrought. "Are you certain you would not rather retire to your bedchamber? You did give us a fright. Fainting takes a great deal out of a person."

Remembering her swoon outside Gunters, Katrina spoke with personal knowledge. "I promise I will not leave Quentin alone with Lord Morelock."

Not that Quentin needed protection, but both she and his mother were apprehensive about his temper.

Looking over at him, Katrina felt her stomach painfully constrict, again. He lounged in his Queen Anne

chair and casually downed another glass of port. With his white cravat askew, and his hair seriously tousled, he looked quite unlike the Quentin Thornhill she knew. Not that he did not look handsome. No matter how far under the table he drank, he would always look handsome to her.

She sighed. How did she get herself into such a fix?

The Dowager refilled their teacups. The fragrant aroma of cloves and cinnamon drifted upwards. "When Deborah ran away with Morelock, she was seven months with child—Morelock's child, you see."

Freddy's Grandmama rubbed at her temple. "Quentin blamed me for entrapping him into marriage with her."

Blowing her nose, his mother continued, "He was right. Deborah's father and I concocted a compromising situation for our children to fall into. But, upon my honor, I did not know she was with child. Lord Ivanbraugh knew, but I did not. I had no way of knowing he was determined to see his daughter marry an earl. Evidently, a baron was not good enough for him."

The Dowager's face contorted, revealing the heartbreak she unknowingly had caused. "After my son Robert's death, Quentin was beside himself. I believed that perhaps if he married and produced an heir, he would be able to get on with his life."

Tears formed in her eyes.

Katrina searched for her own handkerchief, then gave it to the Dowager.

Smiling her thanks, the Dowager patted at the wetness. "I am responsible for this muddle you see before you now. If I had not arranged for the marriage between Quentin and Deborah, my son's life would have taken an entirely different turn."

Katrina put her arm around the older woman. She seemed unbelievably frail. So much grief. So much unhappiness. What would it take to correct this bumble broth? Could it ever be righted?

As the Baron Morelock barked a sharp laugh, the Dowager flinched. Katrina tightened her hold around the woman, and observed him. Lord Morelock laughing? He did not appear to be the type of man who countenanced foolish behavior. Although he stood a head shorter than Quentin, his sturdy shoulders and powerful barrel build served to emphasize his strength. He was not a man to trifle with.

He finished yet another glass of port. Faith, if she so much as sniffed the heavy wine's fumes, she would have passed out in an instant. How could men consume so much of that intoxicating liquid?

Lord Morelock met her gaze and smiled. His face took on a pagan quality: wild and dangerous. From across the room, she heard him say, "Udall, why don't we join the ladies? We are being rude by excluding them from our scintillating conversation—and earls are never rude, are they? I, for one, would like to get to know your bride-to-be."

Pouting, Therese maneuvered out of her chair, then sat on her fiancé's armrest. "Nathan, darling, you have a lady right here by your side." She threaded her arm through his.

"I do?" He looked over at her, then disengaged her arm. "Yes, I suppose some would say that I do."

A brief grin lit Quentin's face. He leaned over and refilled Lord Morelock's glass. "I had no intention of being rude. Just giving m'mother time to absorb your joyous news." He stood. "Come, let us join the ladies."

Katrina whispered in the Dowager's ear. "Have you reconsidered? I am certain your bedchamber's atmosphere will be far more congenial this evening. Here in the salon, the battle lines are drawn."

Pausing for a moment, Katrina then played her trump card. “Besides, Freddy will need you all the more tomorrow. You must have your strength about you.”

What lay ahead was bound to upset the Dowager. Underneath the guise of polite social civilities, old animosities and bitter rivalries would rise to the top like newly churned cream. Katrina abhorred family arguments, but she would try to act as peacemaker between three antagonistic opponents.

The Dowager's hand fluttered over the ivory handle of her cane. “Perhaps you are right. Freddy does need me. And this confrontation ... well, I am not as young as I used to be.” She raised her watery gaze to Katrina. “You must think I am a faint-heart.”

“Not in the slightest. You must take care of yourself. Your grandson depends on you.”

She helped the Dowager rise. As the others approached, she said, “The Countess needs to retire. I shall see her to her room, then I will return.”

Quentin held out his hand. “Thank you, Katrina, but I will claim the honor.”

Although she caught a faint whiff of alcohol, he appeared steady—and concerned about the Dowager. To support her, he placed his arm under hers. “I shan't be long.”

He then narrowed his gaze in Lord Morelock's direction. Without speaking, Quentin shot a warning at the man. A definite warning—Katrina was certain of it.

Taking their leave, Quentin and the Dowager exited the room.

Lord Morelock settled down on the white settee—too close for Katrina's comfort. He placed his muscular arms, elbows up, against the back of the sofa. His brown tail-coat sleeves stretched so tautly, it was a wonder the material did not rip.

He exhaled deeply. “Well, isn't this cozy? A beautiful home, a roaring fire, and a lovely companion. What more could a man ask?”

Nodding in Therese's direction, he added, “Two lovely companions.”

Katrina inched away from him until she reached the end of the settee. Perhaps he did not intend to frighten, but the sheer size of him intimidated her. He looked as if he could carry an ox upon his shoulders. His skin appeared weathered and leathery, and his rusty brown hair and coal black eyes served to further darken his appearance. Although he seemed at ease in this formal London salon, most likely a country estate suited him better.

Still standing, Therese folded her arms against her bosom, intentionally or unintentionally causing her breasts to bulge out in a provocative way. At her fiancé's slight, her nostrils flared. “You have the manners of a pig, Nathan. You would not recognize a gentlemanly gesture if it hit you on the head.”

She sat in a padded, gilded chair across from the settee and, arms still folded, drummed her slim fingers against her upper arms.

Lord Morelock's smile resembled a smirk. “You are wrong, my dear. I have been known to play the gentleman—with a *lady*, of course.”

Katrina glanced at the salon door. When would Quentin return? She had feared he and Lord Morelock would come to fisticuffs. Instead, it appeared Therese and her fiancé would do the honors. Whatever had they seen in each other to become engaged? Did they truly wish to marry? If so, then why had Therese been wrapped in a passionate embrace with Quentin? Perhaps it had not been a passionate embrace—at least on his part.

Shrugging off her thoughts, Katrina sighed. A more mismatched pair she had never seen.

Lord Morelock must have noticed her puzzlement, for he reached over and stroked her hand.

His touch sent dreadful shivers up her arm.

"You must excuse us, Miss Jones. Therese and I are not happy unless we are embroiled in a domestic tangle..." He lifted his eyebrow and his smirk deepened. "Of one sort or another."

Thinking she just heard a double-entendre, Katrina flushed.

His booming laughter echoed loudly in the large room. "Not your typical love match, I agree." He frowned. "Enough said on that subject. Come, tell me about *your* love match. The great Earl of Udall plans to marry! Such an about-face. How did you and Udall meet? You must forgive my bluntness, but maneuvering him to the altar is quite a feather in your cap. Though I must admit Udall's suitability as a husband leaves much to be desired."

Therese had kept surprisingly quiet, but now she almost seemed to purr. "Yes, you *must* tell us. Dear Quentin has been closemouthed on the subject. And I am dying to learn the ... intimate details!"

All at once, Katrina felt as a lamb might, surrounded by hungry tigers. The true reason could never be revealed—unless she wished to become the laughingstock of the ton. But how could she reply?

She eyed the door again. "My Great Aunt Hattie and the Dowager are bosom beaus from childhood. When my aunt and I moved to London, it was only natural to visit Udall House, and then I met the Earl."

Katrina stopped. Faith, but she felt sharp teeth closing down on her. She lifted her chin. Whether they liked it or not, that was all she would say.

"So Udall was captivated by your innocent beauty and offered marriage? A fascinating story." Lord Morelock cracked his knuckles.

"More like a Banbury tale." Therese snorted.

They clearly expressed their disbelief. It did not matter. What Katrina said *was* the truth—part of the truth.

To her relief, Quentin strode through the salon doors.

"I apologize for the delay." Sizing up the seating arrangement, he paused, then chose to sit in the corner chair nearest to her. "M'mother took some laudanum. She will fall right to sleep."

Katrina nodded. Again, he was being so considerate. Hard to reconcile this aspect of him with his rakish actions of this afternoon.

For the second time, Lord Morelock leaned over and stroked her hand. Did he do that just to see Quentin frown? If so, the Baron accomplished his goal.

"Udall, your bride-to-be was regaling us with the story of how you two met." Lord Morelock thumped his hand on his heart. "Young love is so affecting, is it not, Therese?"

Scowling, his fiancée stood and headed for the decanter-filled sideboard.

"Indeed?" Quentin's voice sounded forbidding.

Katrina had to let him know that she only stated the basics. To stall for time, she poured herself more tea. "Yes, how Great Aunt Hattie's and your mother's past friendship brought us together." Sipping her drink, she inadvertently made a face. Cold.

He relaxed against the wooden back of his chair. "True. Irony how fate places opportunities ... and obstacles in one's path."

Briefly smiling, he turned toward her. "Katrina, I *am* thankful you and your great aunt journeyed to London. Else we never would have met."

Feeling his gaze on her, she burned hot.

From the sideboard, Therese made an inarticulate sound.

Lord Morelock also grunted. "Touching, very touching, Udall."

The Baron stood, then stretched out his back. It cracked. "Sitting too long hardens my bones."

He moved around the settee and stopped in back of Katrina. Placing his mammoth hands on either side of her, he rubbed his fingers against the smooth white fabric.

She stiffened. If he so desired, he could snap her neck in a shorter time than it would take Quentin to reach her side. Why Lord Morelock would wish to kill her, she did not know—except that he might want to spite Quentin.

Leaning forward, she took another sip of tea. Drinking tea, even cold tea, gave her an excuse to poise herself to escape his grasp.

Quentin reseated himself next to her. "Your clumsiness is not reassuring, Morelock."

"Perhaps not." He ceased movement. "Tell me, when are you planning to get leg-shackled? If I were you, I would hasten to legitimize my claim to this beautiful little lady. You never know, someone might steal her away from you."

The Baron twirled one of her renegade curls around his finger. His touch made her shiver.

Turning sideways, Quentin casually brushed Lord Morelock's hand away. "The King's condition does complicate matters. As you are aware, a regency is imminent. In fact, the regency might be declared any day. Our banns have been posted for this month—the twenty-third, but I have procured a special license to be married in private, in case our joyous occasion would be unseemly in light of the royal malaise."

Her ears must have grown as big as an elephant's. December 23! That was news to her. Sixteen more days of freedom. Or less, since Quentin had a special license. In sixteen more days—or less—she would wed a notorious rakehell. A considerate one, perhaps, but a rakehell all the same.

Lord Morelock walked around the settee, then lounged in the chair Quentin had vacated. "I believe your fiancée is a bit green around the gills." Downing the remainder of his port, the Baron twisted his lips. "I cannot imagine why. Marriage to the exalted Earl of Udall is a privilege, indeed."

How bitter Lord Morelock sounded. Katrina regarded his relaxed sprawl and turned down lips. Perhaps he truly had loved Deborah Thornhill. When her father had dismissed him and his position by selecting Quentin as her husband, perhaps the Baron felt his manhood encroached upon.

Faith, if this were so, then he had been dealt a triple blow. He lost his love to another in marriage, and then, in the course of running away together, he lost Deborah and his unborn child.

Katrina now understood the source of his bitterness.

Quentin laid his hand atop hers. His warm touch seemed to absorb the cold from her fingers. "Now that I have divulged our happy plans, what about you, Morelock? When are you and Therese planning to tie the knot?"

Did Quentin truly care about Therese? That he asked drove an icy stake through Katrina's heart. She slipped her hand from his.

Therese left the mahogany sideboard and, with swaying hips, made her way back to her fiancé. She curled her bare arm around his chest. "Yes, Nathan, when are you planning to claim me?"

He ran his fingers up and down the length of her arm. "Why, as soon as possible, my dear, if Udall graciously offers to let me stay the night."

Katrina blinked rapidly. She never expected drawing room banter to include such risqué comments.

Two bright spots of red swelled up on Therese's cheeks. She pulled away from her fiancé.

Quentin appeared to take the suggestive remark in stride. His deep dimple flashed for a moment then disappeared. "I believe the weather has cleared up considerably. No need to subject you to the discomfort of sleeping in a strange bed."

His voice thickened. "Besides, while young Frederick resides under this roof, indulging in the gratification of the flesh is hardly proper. Or had you forgotten Frederick?"

Placing her frigid hands to her cheeks, Katrina hoped to drive away the sting of embarrassment. She had no idea what, *exactly*, the gratification of the flesh entailed but the way this conversation was developing, she would not have been surprised to hear them discuss all aspects of that particular bedchamber activity!

Although she promised the Dowager, Katrina found it exceedingly difficult to remain in the room.

Therese tapped her foot. "I refuse to endure these aspersions on my character. First, alleging that I am not a lady—alleging twice, I might add. And now shunting aside my legitimate question about the wedding nuptials, implying that I am some kind of whore."

Oh dear. Katrina dropped her gaze. This unorthodox after-dinner discussion would be engraved in her mind forever.

"Our virginal shrinking violet is receiving an earful tonight, isn't she?" Therese snorted. "Well, I have had enough of the bunch of you. From Miss Prissy Perfect, from Baron Belittle, to Holier-Than-Thou Udall and his never-ending preoccupation with my son."

She waved her arms as if to dismiss them. "I am going upstairs to one of the empty bedchambers and I shall go to bed—alone!"

Therese stormed out of the room.

"Quite the firebrand," Lord Morelock commented mildly.

"Indeed," agreed Quentin, "some would find such passion desirable." He lifted his brow at the other man.

Katrina had enough. Quentin and Lord Morelock appeared to find agreement in at least one area; the battle that earlier threatened to erupt now seemed remote. Having done her good deed for the day, she felt a substantial cry coming on.

She stood. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I shall also retire. It has been a ... long night. And on the morrow, since the weather has improved, I shall head home to Mincing Lane. Good evening."

Not waiting for them to stand, Katrina quickly left the salon.

Ten

After stepping inside her house at Mincing Lane, Katrina quickly removed her wet half-boots, then handed her pelisse to Hopkins. She did not bother with niceties; she got right to the point. "How is my

Great Aunt?"

The butler shook his head. "We regret we had to send for you so urgently this morning, Miss Katrina—truly, we do. But we fear the worst for Miss Jones. She took sick on the night of the storm. Indeed, the doctor made his way here only yesterday."

Katrina's lips trembled. *Dear Aunt Hattie. This move from East Bergholt to London has proved too much for her.* Such a drastic change in circumstance. That and Katrina's disgrace—finding the Earl of Udall in her niece's bedchamber must have sorely taxed Aunt Hattie's overworked heart.

Looking at the worry lines etched in Hopkin's face, Katrina felt a tug at the strings of her own heart. The staff here must have had a difficult time, snowbound—isolated from the rest of the city. The butler most likely worried about what would have happened if Hattie passed away while Mincing Lane was under his sole authority. The responsibility aged him further. Fewer strands of white hair graced the top of his head—Katrina was certain of it.

She patted his roughened hand. "You must not fret about sending for me. Yesterday, I informed the Earl of my intention to return home. So today's departure came as no surprise."

Quentin had wished to talk privately with her—again. But the grave wording in Hopkin's note enabled her to delay him. She had told him that she was fine.

She lied. Whenever she looked at him, her heart seemed to grow bigger, to swell with more and more love. Then thoughts of his rakish ways would intrude and trample her hopes.

Taking a steadying breath, she pushed him out of her mind. "Is Aunt Hattie in her bedchamber?"

Hopkins solemnly nodded. He insisted on escorting Katrina up the stairs.

On her tiptoes, she entered the bedchamber. If only she had not been snowbound at Udall House. If only she could have been present when Aunt Hattie took ill. Perhaps Katrina could have done something. Perhaps she could have managed to coax her aunt back to health. A tear slid down Katrina's cheek.

Underneath the brilliant blue satin comforter, Hattie lay motionless. Her scalp glistened with perspiration, visible through her thinning hair, and her face seemed bloodless—as pasty as undercooked biscuits. Devon sat by the four-poster bed, her head and frail shoulders bowed, and her hands folded as if she were praying. She had left Udall House late yesterday, when the weather cleared.

Katrina lightly touched her maid's shoulder. "Devon."

She opened her eyes. "Oh, Miss Katrina!" she whispered. Rising from the chair, she gave Katrina a hug of surprising strength. "'Tis a blessin' you've arrived so quickly."

It was obvious that her maid had not slept a wink last night. Katrina saw the ravages worry wrought to Devon's face. "I am home, Devon. I shall watch Aunt Hattie now. You get some rest."

Katrina quieted her maid's protest and shooed her out of the sickroom.

From the bed came Hattie's wavering voice. "Katrina, my child, is that you?"

Hattie's vibrant booming tone was ... gone. Balling her fist against her mouth, Katrina fought a rush of panic. Faith, her aunt's weak voice shocked her more than Hattie's deteriorated condition.

"I am here, Aunt." Katrina picked up the white handkerchief on the bedstand and mopped her aunt's moist brow.

Hattie reached up and squeezed Katrina's wrist. "Thank the Lord you came back—came back before..."

Coughing, Hattie turned her head away until the spasm passed.

Katrina placed her other hand over Hattie's. Biting down on her lip, Katrina tasted blood. What could she say? The presence of Death hovered over the room. Its acrid stench blotted out the scent of cinnamon and rose sachets deposited on the wooden bedstands. Her lip trembled again. "Oh, Aunt Hattie!"

Her withered eyelids blinking open, Hattie's muddled green eyes focused on Katrina. "Now, child, that is not a tear I see streaming down your pretty cheek?"

Wiping it away, Katrina bit her lip again and gripped one of the bed's walnut posts. She could not lose Aunt Hattie now. She just *couldn't*.

"Good," Hattie continued. "Please sit, my girl. I have something I wish to say." She fingered the carnelian ring necklace still around her neck.

As Katrina complied, the sound of raspy coughing made her heart constrict.

"I have been concerned about you, girl. I have second thoughts about your marriage to Udall. A vile reputation, he has." She shook her head, causing her sagging cheeks to quiver reluctantly. "Are you happy?"

That question caught Katrina off guard. Happy? In Hattie's world, happiness had nothing to do with marriage. What sickbed fancy had taken hold of her aunt?

"I see I have surprised you. You look pale, child. Your eyes are ever-ready to sprout tears. Do you wish to call off your marriage?"

Katrina's sudden intake of air caused her to stumble. "D—Dear Aunt, h—how can I be happy with you —"

"Trussed up like a turkey on Christmas day?" Hattie thrashed about under the comforter as if to protest her unwanted weakness. "Answer me, Katrina. If marriage to that rakehell Udall is causing you to lose the bloom on your cheeks, then I have reconsidered. I shan't force you into a distasteful marriage."

Hattie's sentiments must have been too strong for her. A coughing fit returned. Katrina gave her aunt a fresh handkerchief and waited until the hacking spell stopped.

Katrina's heart pounded. But was it from joy or from sorrow? Her aunt would agree to the cancellation of wedding banns. Katrina would not have to marry Quentin. Free—she would be free again. That news should have made her weep with relief.

That was what she wanted, wasn't it? Wasn't it?

Lowering her head, she did feel like weeping, but not with relief. She *loved* Quentin—for better or for worse, she loved him. But which was better—a lifetime of sadness in an unfaithful marriage or a lifetime without him?

"Katrina," her aunt wheezed, "listen to me. It would please me to see you taken care of before I ... well, as soon as possible. Perhaps I am foolish, but I want you to marry above your station. However, I once had my youthful hopes blighted, my dear. I do not wish the same for you."

"Whatever do you mean, Aunt? Had you been ... been in love?" Hattie in love was as strange a concept as the Prince of Wales reconciling with his wife.

"Shocking, isn't it?" Aunt Hattie's large mouth softened into a dreamy smile. "Yes, my child, once I fell in love with the most ineligible man—a shopkeeper—a jeweler, actually. Paul's shop was in Dedham, across the river from East Bergholt. Every Sunday, my family and I went to church there. And every

Sunday, Paul and I exchanged meaningful glances. I fell in love for the first and last time."

She sighed. "May I trouble you for some water?"

Katrina jumped up and poured some crystal-clear water into a glass. Returning the escaping lemon slice to the pitcher, she handed the drink to her aunt, then propped up her pillow. Still overwhelmed with amazement, Katrina sat back down silently. Aunt Hattie in love!

Hattie took a long gulp. "Eventually, Paul introduced himself, and when Sunday services would end, he and I would go for short walks on the church grounds."

She placed her carnelian ring over the third finger of her left hand. It slid down as far as her first knuckle. The orange-red oval stone glistened in the candlelight. "Paul gave me this ring. A pre-betrothal present, he said."

She sighed again. "Of course you must know what happened after that. Father forbade me to see Paul again and, like a dutiful daughter, I obeyed. A marriage with the local squire was arranged for me—I could attract no higher connection."

Her sad smile tore at Katrina's heart.

"Fortunately for me, before the wedding, the man died—from overeating, I will wager. I never did return to Dedham—I heard Paul had gotten married."

Hattie twisted in bed. "And so here I lay, an embittered spinster. I will not have the same fate for you. One day a man truly deserving will win your heart."

Her heavy breathing signaled another bout of coughing.

Leaning over, Katrina dropped a kiss on her great aunt's clammy forehead. "I am so sorry, Aunt Hattie, I had no idea of your unhappiness."

Katrina tightened her hand into a fist. "Please believe me, I promise to think over what you said. But now you *must* rest."

Hattie slid her hand out from under the comforter, and held Katrina's. "You are a good girl. You will do the right thing."

When Hattie closed her eyes, Katrina wondered, *What is the right thing for me?*

* * * *

A gentle tapping on her shoulder awakened Katrina. "Oh, Devon. I did not mean to fall asleep."

Flushing guiltily, Katrina swiped at her eyes, then glanced over at her aunt. The steady rise and fall of the bedsheets showed that she rested soundly.

"'Tis natural to take forty winks, don't you fret." Devon tut-tutted. "Besides, the doctor plied Miss Jones with enough laudanum to put out a bull. She won't be movin' any time soon, poor soul."

The maid tut-tutted again. "I do hate to disturb you, Miss Katrina, but the Earl is downstairs awaitin' on you. He's got that fine young scamp with him, too. Looks the spittin' image of the Earl except for that yellow hair."

Freddy? Quentin was here with Freddy? She stood and smoothed the wrinkles from her gingham linen skirt. Leaving Udall House so abruptly, she had not had time to say good-bye to the boy. How did he take the news of his mother's impending marriage? Or had he been told?

And Quentin—how would he react to Aunt Hattie's sudden change of heart? He would also be free, no need to be trapped in an unwanted marriage.

Katrina walked over to the cheval looking glass and tried to push her stubborn curls back into her bun. Her face appeared ghastly white, so she pinched her cheeks for some color—or for some courage. She had to tell him; she had to tell him as soon as she entered the front sitting room—"Quentin, I release you from your pledge."

Yes, that was what she must say. To do otherwise would be dishonorable. Didn't he believe he had been tricked into proposing?

When you love a man, you will do anything for him. Her mother's words drifted back into her consciousness.

She straightened her shoulders. *I do love him. Enough to set him free.*

Perhaps this was for the best. Seeing her aunt's vinaigrette on her oak dresser, Katrina picked it up and placed it on the bedstand. Not that Aunt Hattie would need it, but viewing her silver bottle of aromatic smelling salts might cheer her. Something familiar.

Katrina gave her maid a hug. "I have kept the Earl waiting long enough."

Devon returned the hug. "Go on, Miss Katrina. I'll stay here with your aunt."

As Katrina headed out the door, her slippered feet dragged. Try as she might, she could not quicken her steps. How was she to live without him? Too soon, it appeared, she would be ... alone.

* * * *

When Katrina entered the front sitting room, Quentin stood, then motioned for Frederick and his Wellington doll to do the same. Her pale yellow morning gown did little to dispel the wan cast of her complexion. Even her hair appeared more goldenrod in hue than deep coppery brown. The only vivid color to catch his eye was the uneven pink spots marring her cheeks.

Strain. She suffered from strain. On the virtual eve of her wedding, she should be bubbling with barely suppressed excitement; a maiden blushing with unmaidenly thoughts.

Quentin smiled. His male ego preferred to imagine Katrina filled with anticipation for the upcoming nuptials. However, it was obvious she labored under heavy anxiety.

"How is your great aunt?" After peevishly noting she sat next to Frederick, Quentin reseated himself on the Chippendale settee.

She took the boy's hand and rubbed it between her own. "The doctor has Aunt Hattie heavily sedated. She looks rather ... grim."

Lifting Frederick's hand to brush against her cheek, Quentin again felt a pang of envy. Would that she acted so tenderly with him!

"But here is Freddy. I am so happy you came to visit! How are you today, my fine lad?" She softened her voice and tousled his hair.

"Fine. I'm fine." The boy's wooden response reminded Quentin of Katrina's words just this very morning before she left Udall House.

Damn Therese and her malignant ways. She squeezed the joy out of her son *and* Katrina.

She chuckled the doll under the chin. "And the Viscount? He looks bang up to the mark this afternoon."

Frederick tightened his grip on the toy. "He's only a doll, Miss Trina."

Quentin met Katrina's gaze. His feelings reflected in her eyes. Helpless! Now that Therese planned to marry, wrestling Frederick away from her would be that much harder. She had plans for the boy, she

said. Plans to his detriment, Quentin wagered.

Standing, Katrina planted a kiss on Frederick's forehead, then opened the sitting room door. After calling out, "Hopkins," she explained that the bellpull was not working.

Remembering the condition of the room when he first saw it, Quentin glanced around. She had worked wonders. No cobwebs decorated the window draperies, no dust or grime spoiled the fine finish of the fireplace. Three weeks ago this room had not been fit to pass the time of day in. Now, it radiated love of hearth and home.

An image of Katrina with dark hair smiled at him from over the mantel. No, not Katrina, the painting must have been of her mother.

"Hopkins, we have a very hungry boy who would thoroughly enjoy some of Cook's special sugar-glazed tarts. Wouldn't you, Freddy? They are filled with strawberry jam."

He jumped up and clapped his hands, momentarily losing his solemn air and his Wellington. "Good-o! I especially like strawberry jam."

Hopkins extended his arm. "Splendid! Cook loves to have hungry boys visit her in the kitchen."

After picking up the doll, he and Frederick left the sitting room.

Quentin patted the bulging cushion next to him. "Come, Katrina, sit by me."

He had not had the chance to explain to her about Therese and the apparent embrace in the dining room. The incident still weighed heavily on her; somehow he knew this. Although never perceptive of other people's feelings, with Katrina, he was different. He could read her every expression, every thought that crossed her mind.

And right now, as she fussed with the blonde lace decorating the edge of her morning gown, she was working up the courage to tell him something. Something he did not think he wanted to hear.

Perhaps if he could just hold her...

"Come, sit by me," he repeated.

"I cannot. Ah, I mean, the settee's upholstery is too frail. My extra weight would certainly cause a split in the fabric."

Running his hand over his hair, he sighed. "Katrina, sit by me. This settee does not matter. We will be married and living at Udall House in two weeks. Sooner, if you like."

She must have realized how ineffective her protest was for she slowly joined him—at the *opposite* end of the settee.

With her head bent, she said, "I need to talk to you about that. About the wedding."

Pausing, she then met his gaze. "Quentin, I release you from—"

He knew it. He *knew* he *did not* want to hear what she was about to say. "Katrina, dear, first you must let me apologize for what happened yesterday. I ... I suppose I shall have to explain about Therese."

Katrina shook her head with such determination, several maize and copper curls escaped from her chignon. "No, it is quite all right—you do not have to explain. You see, Aunt Hattie has—"

A sudden grip of fear tightened around his heart. He *did not* want to lose Katrina. By God, he would move heaven and earth to keep her by his side.

He slid next to her, and clasped hands with her. Without a preamble, he began, "Therese fancies herself in love with me. She has been living this fool dream for five years now. In fact, that is why she married

Robert—she knew how close I was to my brother. Marrying him was her revenge against me—for ending our ... affair."

Katrina's fingers smoothed comforting circles on his skin. He gave her hand a squeeze. "Therese flaunts either her son or herself in my direction at every possible opportunity. She means nothing to me—she never did. Of course, that rankles her, so she delights in finding new ways to annoy me. Her marriage to Morelock is her latest attempt."

Shrugging, Quentin exhaled. "I worry about Frederick. She dangles the boy in front of me, then wrenches him away. I was surprised she let me take him today."

"Oh, Quentin!" Tears formed in Katrina's eyes. She pulled his hand up to her cheek, and he got his earlier wish. The velvety softness of her skin ignited a burning need down his hand, his arm, and into his soul.

"Katrina." He could not help himself. Reaching out, he hugged her, never wanting to let go. Her perfumed fragrance excited him further, and he buried his face in the warmth of her neck.

As he kissed the sensitive skin along the collar of her gown, she trembled. Her sweet fragrance seeped into his senses. Then she tried to pull away.

Not a chance! She was securely folded within his grasp. He could not allow her to escape. She felt so good, so right.

"But Quentin," she gasped, "you do not understand. You do not have to marry me now. Aunt Hattie has changed her mind."

"No, Katrina," he whispered into her ear, "*you* do not understand. If need be, I will change your aunt's mind back for her."

His feathery kiss on her earlobe caused Katrina to tremble again, pleasing him immensely. "My dear, I have pledged to move heaven and earth to have you as my bride. And I shall. Make no mistake about it—I shall. I need you, Katrina."

With that, he captured her sweet lips, and rejoiced in her awakening response.

* * * *

Exiting the theater district on Drury Lane, Nathan Morelock rubbed his chin. Although Juliet Dufay, the doxy-actress with whom he sought to speak, no longer worked at the tiny playhouse, he did not leave the theater unsatisfied. Indeed, the information he just learned intrigued him far more than what the scarlet-lipped hussy would have told him.

He smiled. Yes, he needed to reflect upon this information. At the intersection of Drury and the Strand, he sat down on a street bench and flipped open his gold enameled snuff box. The strong aroma of vanilla and almonds drifted up. Taking a pinch, he inhaled it, then sneezed.

Good, the tobacco cleared his mind. Something Katrina Jones said yesterday gnawed at him, urging him out on this inhospitable December afternoon. She had mentioned Mincing Lane—returning home to Mincing Lane.

Through his heavy leather gloves, Nathan crackled his knuckles. If he recalled correctly, he suffered a setback in love due to Mincing Lane. No, not love—lust. Just three weeks ago, he offered his protection to the voluptuously enticing Juliet. Her kisses promised a wealth of hot, steamy nights. And what Juliet promised, she delivered. What better way was there to spend a dismal winter?

However, the mighty Earl of Udall somehow had gotten a whiff of her animal-in-heat scent and, as quick as a wink of the eye, snatched her away. As he had snatched Deborah away. Deborah...

When would the pain of losing Deborah ever fade?

Nathan snapped shut his snuff box. Juliet had revealed to him that her new home was to be on Mincing Lane. Too much of a coincidence for Udall's mistress *and* his fiancée to live on the same street—bad *ton*, as well. The theater manager had even more intriguing news. Udall gave Juliet her *congé* without sampling her wares—not once! Blast, the man was no saint, and she was infinitely desirable—for at least one bedding. What happened between them?

But after deriding Udall for a week, the manager stated, Juliet suddenly changed her tune. Evidently, her long-time paramour received a position at one of Udall's northern estates. Juliet and her man were now gone—safely out of pocket—far from London.

Nathan rubbed his chin again. Interesting, very interesting. An unusual story lay beneath those facts, he was certain of it. Perhaps a scandalous one as well. The Earl's fiancée residing on the same street—indeed, what if she resided in the very same love nest he had intended for Juliet?

This juicy bit of gossip discreetly dropped in the ears of society's prattle boxes would cause the toplofty Earl of Udall's world to come tumbling about his shoulders.

Nathan laughed; the harsh sound sent two street urchins scurrying away from the bench. How he longed to see Udall suffer. As Nathan had suffered. Udall did not give a tuppence for the *haut ton's* censure—for himself. But if his fiancée, Katrina, were to bear the brunt of society's displeasure...

Yes, Udall had it bad. He finally had fallen deeply in love. Fallen in love as Nathan had—with his beloved Deborah.

He pounded his fist on the wooden bench. If only he could do the same to Udall's face.

“By Gad, man, go easy, won't you? Another blow like that and you'll set that bench to splinters!”

Who the devil? Nathan looked up ... then snorted. That fool, Sir Ralph Buckingill hovered nearby.

“May I sit?” Without waiting for a reply, he settled down on the roughly hewn planks. His skeletal body seemed almost lost in his huge greatcoat.

A wry smile tugged at Nathan's lips. What a sight the two of them must have made: one man tall like a stick, and the other, broad as an ox.

He narrowed his gaze. Buckingill was a notorious gabster. Perhaps he knew something to Udall's detriment.

Handing over his snuff box, Nathan asked, “So, Buckingill, what brings you to the Strand this raw winter's day?”

Buckingill blinked his vacant blue eyes as if in surprise. “Me? Thank you, don't mind if I do. By Jove, demmed nice of you to ask!”

He took a pinch, then sneezed until tears streamed down his face. For some reason, he seemed to find this funny. His shrill laugh rivaled Nathan's in volume.

“Been going on my rounds, don't you know? After being cooped up with this snow.” He wrinkled his nose. “Nasty snuff. Anyway, just walked up from Somerset House, to see how those artists are getting along. Now I'm headed for Drury to check the playbills for tonight's performances. Before that I—”

Nathan paid no attention to the long list of Buckingill's social calls. But when the Dowager Countess of Udall's name came up, Nathan held out his hand. “You visited the Dowager this afternoon?”

Bobbing his head, Buckingill slapped at his knee. “Damme, yes! Seems I forgot—congratulations are in order for you.”

He playfully punched at Nathan's arm, but ended up rubbing his knuckles. "You're as solid as a rock, ain't you?"

So intent on his retaliation against Udall, for a second Nathan was at sea as to what Buckingham referred to. "Congratulations?"

The answer hit him like a thud. Marriage—to Therese.

Nathan gritted his teeth. On a whim—an unwholesome whim, he had agreed to Therese's proposal. She suggested they had something in common—hatred for Udall, so why not tie the knot to make the Earl's life miserable? The idea had merit—at the time. Only now Nathan believed *his* life would be miserable as well. Therese had a twisted fancy for Udall. If he ever snapped his fingers, she would come running.

Nathan felt a nudge on his arm.

"Morelock, old boy, not nodding off on me, are you? Damme, I'm getting a complex. First, Udall's fiancée, then Udall—"

"You know Miss Jones?" Nathan promptly forgot his own marriage problems. Perhaps here was the information he was looking for.

Buckingham fussed at the lace flowing out of the sleeves of his greatcoat. "Devilish Brussels lace! Never folds just the way it ought to. Give me French lace all the time!"

His bushy brows lowered over his blue eyes. "What was I saying? Oh, yes, Miss Jones. Living at Mincing Lane, don't you know? I won that hovel from old Jenson, then Udall won it from me."

A high-perch phaeton rattled down the Strand, drawing Buckingham's wandering attention. "By Jove, those goers are real beauties! A matched set."

At the moment, horses held no allure for Nathan. He patiently waited until Buckingham's gaze left the carriage.

"The hovel?" Nathan prompted.

Buckingham frowned. "Perhaps it don't signify, but Udall said the place was a rat's trap. So why'd he rent it to Miss Jones?" The shrill laughter rang out again. "Quite a quirk of fate for him to be his fiancée's landlord!"

Nathan's smile stretched his frost-hardened cheeks. He did not mind; he widened the smile. Katrina conveniently neglected to mention she lived in Udall's own house of ill-repute. Nor did she elaborate on how they met. Very, very interesting.

For a second, only a second, an image of her innocent face appeared before Nathan. Her deep green eyes seemed to plead for understanding.

He shook his head. No. There was no room in his heart for compassion. Not anymore.

Standing, he gave Buckingham's bony hand a hearty shake. "Must be on my way. Pleasure talking to you!"

Slack-mouthed, Buckingham said likewise.

As Nathan strode up the Strand, he whistled. Plotting his revenge against the Earl of Udall was ever so sweet.

Leaning against her walking cane, Constance raised her right hand to rap against the bedchamber door. She stopped. Never one to shrink from unpleasant duties, the cringe of hesitation halted her now.

Bother! Dealing with Therese was becoming more and more difficult. If only the woman would disappear out of their lives; if only she would leave Freddy and Quentin alone.

A sound from down the hallway recalled Constance to her task. It would not do for the servants to see their mistress dawdling outside Therese's door.

Constance firmly knocked, then waited. No answer—which was no surprise. Only twenty minutes had passed since the clock struck ten. Therese was a notoriously late riser.

Entering the room, Constance then dispassionately viewed her sleeping daughter-in-law. She lay sprawled on the bed, her dark hair splayed out over the pillow and her face in a tangle of curls. Her uncolored lips turned down in a frown, and a slight wheeze affected her breathing. An empty amber bottle of whisky on the bedstand gave silent testimony to what she indulged in last night.

Constance made a moue of distaste. What had Robert *and* Quentin seen in this woman? Besides the obvious overblown female charms?

Shaking her head, Constance approached the bed. Men were such *boys* when it came to women. “Therese? Therese, are you awake?”

A ridiculous question, to be sure, but Constance asked it all the same.

Therese snorted until her eyes opened. Then she stared at Constance, recognition slow in coming.

“The devil! What are you doing in my room?” Therese rubbed her puffy eyelids.

She would have sung a different tune had Quentin interrupted her sleep! Constance smiled at her private thought. “I *do* apologize, Therese. It is *unforgivable* to disturb you at this ungodly hour of the morning. But Quentin wished me to ask you—”

“Quentin?” Therese propped herself up on one elbow, unmindful of the excessive display of cleavage she revealed. “What does he want?”

Not you, Constance thought. *That is your tragedy. Quentin does not want you.* Thank the heavens! She tightened her grip on the cane. By the set of Therese's lips, a storm was brewing—an out and out bloody tempest.

“He wishes to take Freddy shopping this morning.” Perhaps Therese would not demand more information.

Wishful thinking.

Sitting up in bed, Therese pushed her hair away from her face, then her icy blue gaze narrowed. “Why does Quentin want to take my son shopping?”

Constance sighed. A tickling sensation of a sneeze settled at the tip of her nose, but refused to come any further. She withdrew her handkerchief from the sleeve of her gown in the hopes of a sudden release, but the sneeze eluded her.

“Why? Well, I believe...” she fluttered her hanky, “...Quentin wants Freddy, you know, fitted, for the, er, wedding.”

Wiping her forehead instead of her nose, she sighed again.

Therese's eyes turned the color of a moonbeam—a cold, heartless moonbeam. “For *my* wedding?” She then answered her own question. “No, of course not, for his.”

For a dreadful minute, Constance trembled. She latched onto the cane with both hands.

Surprisingly however, Therese smiled. "How thoughtful of Quentin. I think that is an excellent idea. But not today. I have plans for Freddy today. Will tomorrow do?"

Another trickle of wetness popped up on Constance's forehead. Her daughter-in-law was an evil woman. The scent of evil burst from her pores as naturally as goodness radiated from a baby. Yet, she agreed; she agreed that Quentin could take Freddy. Surely tomorrow would do just as well as today?

Eager to take her leave, Constance nodded. "Tomorrow will be fine. I will tell my son. So sorry I disturbed you." Her tiny neck hairs stood straight up. Danger—they signaled danger.

Fretting over the warning, Constance hobbled out of the bedchamber as fast as her sore hip would allow her.

* * * *

After the old woman left, Therese flopped back on the bed. "Damn him! Damn him to Hades!"

She spat through gritted teeth. So Quentin persisted with his charade. He intended on going through with that ridiculous wedding.

She thrashed from side to side. He could not possibly love that mealy-mouthed slip of a girl. He just *couldn't*! In the first place, there was not enough woman in Katrina Jones to love. She had no idea how to please a man—especially one as virile as Quentin. She would bungle the job. Her naiveté would eventually disgust him. Therese would lay odds that he would turn from his virgin bride, and seek his pleasures elsewhere.

Hammering her fist into her open palm, Therese bit her lip to prevent her cry of frustration from escaping. Damn the man. He loved *her*! Deep down, he loved her. He had loved her once; he all but said the words. The twinkle in his eyes told her all she needed to know. The way they made love had proven his feelings for her. She did not require him to say the words.

She hugged her knees into her chest, and rested her head against them. Five years. It had been five long years since they were as one. A trickle of a tear slid down her cheek. Everything she did since then she did for the purpose of gaining him back. Marrying Robert, bearing his son, even acting as a loving mother. Nothing worked. She tried everything she could think of but nothing had worked.

Every time she looked at Freddy, she saw Quentin. His rejection of her shone back in Freddy's dark eyes. Lord, she could not bear the sight of her son. He was a constant reminder that she had lost her heart's desire.

Standing, she paced the room and tugged at her hair. "Mama, Mama, Mama," he used to cry, day and night, night and day until it drove her crazy. How could she pretend to be a mother when her very soul clamored out for fulfillment—fulfillment with Quentin?

One day, five years ago, everything had seemed perfect—as paradise. The next moment, he destroyed her world as surely as if he plunged a knife into her chest. First he said something nonsensical about her devotion to him being excessive—even fanatical. Then he offered the ultimate insult: a farewell gift. A farewell gift for the incomparable Therese. Fool!

She marched over to the dresser and stood before the looking glass. Using a pearl inlaid brush, she untangled her disheveled hair, and smiled at her image. Her dark beauty could still excite the most jaded of palates. Too bad her ploy to marry Nathan failed to generate the desired response. Too bad Quentin had not forbidden her to wed the blackguard. Despite his plans with Katrina, he should have proposed marriage himself.

Therese applied a little salve of alcanna root to redden her lips, then swallowed some eau-de-cologne to freshen her breath. She made a soft pucker. Nathan was becoming a bit of a bore. His treatment of her rankled. There was no excuse for his ungentlemanly behavior. Even his lovemaking seemed indifferent now. It was time to cast him aside.

Walking over to the bellpull, she began making her plans while she waited for the servant. Quentin's insistence to purchase fine attire for Freddy only hastened her determination. She would not give Quentin the satisfaction; she would attack him where he was the most vulnerable: with Freddy. She was the boy's mother; if she wished to remove the boy from London, no one could stop her. Lord, she could arrange that Quentin and his querulous mother would never see Freddy again.

Therese pulled her silk nightgown over her head, then threw it on the floor. Cold air rushed at her skin, raising hard goose bumps. She would have a bath—a nice, warm, luxurious bath. And afterwards, she would take that troublesome boy far away from Udall House. To see him again, Quentin would have to crawl to her on his knees—his big, strong masculine knees.

She slowly ran her hands over her hips and breasts, enjoying the sensation of her own flesh. She would make him pleasure her—repeatedly—before allowing him to see Freddy even once more.

And when she was through with Quentin, he would sing a different tune. He would beg her to take him back—forever.

Therese smiled. Yes, Quentin Thornhill was quite unaware of what, exactly, she had in store for him.

* * * *

Sitting in her great aunt's bedchamber, Katrina lifted her cross-stitch closer to her eyes. The pale yellow thread held little contrast against the sampler's muslin material. And in this dim light, it was easy to make a mistake.

She hummed a pleasant tune. Things were working out so wonderfully, why worry about making a mistake on a cross-stitch sampler?

“Harumph! I see my being on my deathbed does not prohibit you from warbling loudly. Whatever are you singing?” Aunt Hattie rested her shoulders against the pillow, then leaned over to take a drink of water.

Katrina dropped her work. “Oh, did I wake you?”

Her aunt shook her head vigorously. “It is as dark as the devil in here. Open those drapes—let in more light. You will strain your eyes this way.”

Smiling, Katrina obeyed the order. With the heavy drapes parted, the entering afternoon sunbeams revealed dust particles dancing in the air. Oh, to raise the window just a crack!

Back at her chair, she returned to the sampler. “I was just humming a Mother Goose nursery rhyme. You know, the one about Saturday night powdering my hair?”

“If I recall aright, child, it goes on to say, ‘On Sunday morning my love will come in, and marry me then with a pretty gold ring.’”

Katrina flushed. “Yes ... but I was not humming so loudly. And you certainly are not on your deathbed. Not anymore, thank heavens.”

Placing the glass back on the bedstand, Hattie sighed. “Thank the Lord. Even that fool of a doctor thought me six feet under. I daresay, when he arrived this morning, he was ready to call the grave diggers.” Her laughter turned into a cough. “Being in the presence of young love does perform miracles!”

Katrina flushed, again. She took her aunt's warm hand and squeezed it. "I must thank you for understanding about Quentin and me. He is not the person you or I thought he was. He says he truly wants to marry me. Me—can you imagine? I do believe him, but I find it difficult not to question my good fortune."

"Nonsense, girl." Hattie snorted. "Udall is the fortunate one. Never forget that. You have a heart of gold."

A coughing spasm overcame her. "And I ... I will become a great aunt to a countess!"

Katrina laughed. As if titles mattered. "You must relax now for I am certain you wish to attend the wedding ceremony. Two weeks from today."

She shivered. Not from worry or dread, but with anticipation. Remembering yesterday's kisses in the sitting room made her whole body tingle. The touch of his lips sent delicious quivers across her skin ... and inside her soul.

Heat rose on her cheeks. When would she ever stop blushing? He did not tell her that he loved her, but then again, she did not say those words either. Perhaps she could not expect him to love her—not yet, anyway. However he did say he needed her, wanted her. That was far more than she expected. When the time was right, she would let him know about her own feelings. Maybe on their wedding night...

When a knock at the door sounded, she looked up guiltily.

Devon entered. "Pardon me, Miss Jones, but 'tis the Dowager Countess of Udall. Are you feelin' fit for the company?"

"Balderdash! Why does everyone treat me with velvet gloves? I am fine, dash it, fine—" Hattie's coughing made speech impossible.

Dear Aunt Hattie. She thinks she can bully Death into waiting.

Katrina glanced at her great aunt's now-pink cheeks. Perhaps she *could* cheat Death. She had made a miraculous recovery.

Devon led the limping Dowager into the bedchamber. Easing herself into a chair, she smiled her thanks at the maid. "For Gad's sake, why were stairs ever invented?"

A rhetorical question, to be sure. Katrina smiled along with her aunt.

"Well, well, Hattie! Let's have a look at you. They tell me you are not long for this world. Nonsense, utter nonsense! You have the look of an elephant about you." The Dowager's blustery words could not hide the trembling of her lips.

Rising, Katrina gave the Dowager a hug. "Aunt Hattie's condition has improved, have no fear. She would do much better..." Sliding her aunt an admonitory glance, Katrina continued, "If only she would rest."

While Hattie made gruff noises, the Dowager patted Katrina's hand. "I know, my child, I promise not to tire out your aunt." Quentin's mother sneezed. "Do be a dear and bring me a cup of some nice, hot, sassafras tea."

The Dowager might as well have said, "Katrina, why don't you leave your aunt and me alone?" Sassafras tea—a definite contrivance to get Katrina out of the room! No doubt these two old friends wanted to discuss the upcoming marriage.

She smoothed her aunt's thin hair off her forehead. "Anything I can bring you? No? Then I will return shortly."

"Take your time, child," the Dowager called out. "And by the way, Quentin and I are expecting you for dinner this evening."

Katrina hesitated. She had not expected to see him so soon. It would be heavenly if she could. Dreamy sensations filtered down her spine. Perhaps he would kiss her again. She inhaled deeply.

But what about Aunt Hattie? Should she be left alone tonight?

Gesturing with her large hand, her aunt shooed Katrina out the door. "Do not worry about me. Plan on dining at the Udall house. You may leave with the Dowager."

Thus freed, Katrina happily anticipated tonight's visit with her fiancé.

* * * *

With some difficulty, Constance moved her chair closer to the bed. "You look like Death," she stated bluntly. Friends could tell the truth with each other.

"Always did have a way with words, didn't you, Connie?" Hattie wiggled under the comforter, then fixed her withered gaze on Constance. "This is not a social call. Do not pretend otherwise. Something has upset you. Something to do with my Katrina."

"Perceptive old woman, aren't you? Though you do me wrong to suggest that I am not concerned about your aging bones."

Leaning closer, Constance lowered her voice. "It is that Therese. That dreadful Therese. I am afraid she is planning some mischief to separate Quentin and Katrina. The children are getting along so beautifully—you should see them together! It is love—pure and simple."

Constance sighed. "But that witch is hatching something. Not only is she staying at Udall House, for Gad's sake, but she is thrusting those big ... big bosoms of hers in Quentin's face every chance she gets!"

Wiping her forehead with her hanky, Constance shuddered. "Forgive my language. I am overwrought."

"Nothing to forgive, Connie. Your daughter-in-law is an evil woman—and well endowed. Let's not mince words." Hattie frowned. "But we should not underestimate the power of love, my friend. From what I have heard tell, Quentin has had more than his share of big bosoms. But he has never been in love before, has he? Between him and Katrina, they will devise a method to thwart Therese. I lay odds on it!"

Constance wiped away a tear. "I hope you are right. Dear God, how I pray that you are right."

* * * *

As soon as she entered Udall House, something alerted Katrina. Perhaps it was the set of Perkins' craggy face as he greeted her and the Dowager. Or perhaps the sight of one of the chambermaids, red-eyed, blowing her nose, cautioned Katrina. She braced herself. The smoothly efficient Udall staff suffered an upset, affecting the upper servants as well as the lower. What had happened?

Removing her pelisse, she stood on tenterhooks. Perkins would tell them, but not until he had her and the Dowager's outer garments.

His arm laden with coats, the butler cleared his throat. "Milady, it grieves me to tell you this, but circumstances being what they are—"

"Out with it, man!" The Dowager pounded her cane on the marble entryway floor. "Don't ramble. You try my patience."

She was as apprehensive about the news as Katrina. Just had a different way of expressing it.

Raising his watery gaze to meet his mistress', the precise Perkins stumbled over his words. "Tis the b—boy, Milady. The boy is—"

A shuffling noise diverted Katrina's attention. From the top of the stairs, a muffled oath filtered down. "Hell and damnation! Why am I surrounded by fools?"

Stuffing clothes into a small bag, Quentin came into view. "Good Lord, must I do everything my—"

Katrina rushed up to meet him. Something happened to Freddy. She was certain of it.

"Mother, Katrina, er, I..." Quentin ran his hand over his hair, then allowed her to take the bag. She had more success in fitting the bulky, woolen clothes into the container. Freddy's clothes—Quentin was packing Freddy's clothes.

Quentin descended the stairs, gave his mother a kiss, then looked at Perkins. The butler shook his head, and quietly left the entryway.

"Mother, I want you to sit down." Quentin steered the Dowager to a chair. "She has taken Frederick. That ... er, Therese has packed his clothes and taken Frederick. Packed all his *lightweight* attire, that is. Feather-brained woman."

The Dowager's cane clattered to the floor. Her voice wavered. "Freddy gone ... in th—this weather? Where has she taken him? Will she bring him back?"

Katrina gripped the bag handle. New snow started to accumulate again. The frigid air could penetrate even the most well appointed carriage, and the hour would soon strike seven. Why did Therese journey forth with her son?

Meeting Quentin's gaze, Katrina felt his despair. His tightened jaw and shadowed eyes announced the turmoil that raged within. If only she could do ... something.

The Dowager moaned. Her now-pasty, white color reflected how she must have been feeling. Quentin knelt by her side. "Courage, Mother, we shall need it. Therese intends to leave London, I will bet a purse of guineas on it."

From inside his dashing pea green tail-coat, he pulled out Freddy's cloth doll. Crumpled, Wellington looked much the worse for wear. "I found this near the window in his bedchamber—as if it had been thrown. Frederick and this doll were inseparable."

Quentin did not need to explain. Freddy would not have left the doll to go to the next room, let alone out of the house. Katrina shivered.

"Just so," Quentin said softly. "I have exhausted Therese's usual haunts. From her lodging, to her dressmaker's. Lord, I have even tried the gaming hell she frequents."

He patted his mother's hand, then continued, "However, I am not finished. I have just unearthed the whereabouts of that blackguard Morelock. He is holed up in Limmer's Hotel—filthiest spot in London, for God's sake. Perhaps Therese plans to rendezvous with him, then rent a carriage.

"Perhaps she means to travel east—to Bath. She has relatives there." The Dowager's hand shook.

Katrina shivered, again. Proceeding east on the toll road to Bath—in this icy storm. At this hour of the night. An arduous trip in the best of circumstances. She could not bear to think about poor Freddy. It was a wonder the Dowager did not swoon. Kneeling down on the other side of her, Katrina handed the Dowager a handkerchief.

Quentin's hand strayed to Katrina's. She took comfort in the warmth of his touch.

"My thoughts exactly, Mother. Therese is reckless enough to plot such an excursion." He stood. "So I am headed for Limmer's. May your prayers be with me."

Katrina also stood. "More than my prayers. *I* am going with you."

Freddy's huge brown eyes and sweet round face haunted her. She could not rest; she could not remain at Udall House. She had to help; she *had* to go.

Taking her hand, Quentin brushed his lips against her skin. She thrilled to a strange emotion—anticipation?

"Your courage becomes you, my dear Katrina, but I cannot allow you to endanger yourself. Limmer's has a wild reputation. The sporting crowd, you know. You would only be in the way."

She stuck out her chin. "I cannot remain behind while Freddy is far from his rightful home. Either I leave with you, or I leave by myself."

Her ultimatum came haltingly to her lips. But she had to insist; she had to look for Freddy. Therese would not knowingly hurt her son. However that was the point. She acted on her own needs, her own desires. The woman did not think about Freddy's.

Quentin's gaze shuttered. "As you wish. I will not waste valuable time arguing." He gave his mother a kiss. "I shall keep you informed."

Turning to Katrina, he ordered coldly, "We leave immediately."

"I just need to get one thing."

Picking up her skirts, she dashed up the stairs before he had a chance to forbid her. She moved as she had never moved before, and found Freddy's bedchamber. A quick glance around the room, and she found the desired object. The silhouette she made of him was propped up against his bedstand. Grabbing it, she then headed downstairs. She had a feeling Freddy's portrait would come in handy.

Twelve

Inside Quentin's fine carriage, Katrina shivered. The warm brick at her feet did much to alleviate the frigid air seeping into her half-boots, but it could not erase the fear that had taken hold of her heart. Little Freddy—at this hour, was he tucked safely in bed for the night? Warm?

Or was he traveling dangerous snow-covered roads? As the driver of Therese's rented coach made reckless turns, was Freddy tossed from side to side like his limp rag doll, Wellington?

An icy, foreign lump settled at the bottom of Katrina's stomach. Worry. Fear. Apprehension. These mind-numbing sensations gnawed at her insides.

She shivered again.

Quentin reached over and clasped her hand. "I understand, I am also anxious about the lad. His mother uses him as an instrument of revenge. In the battle between men and women, little ones often become innocent pawns."

"But Therese would not hurt Freddy. She would not do anything that would in—injure him." Looking for reassurance, Katrina heard her voice crack. She clenched her free hand tightly.

Quentin peered out of the opening in the carriage. "Not intentionally, but I am afraid Therese's wits have gone begging. Her reasoning cannot stand the scrutiny of logical thought. In her twisted mind, she believed bearing Robert's child would somehow return me to the fold."

Quentin shrugged. "She has never forgiven me or Freddy for that frustration."

Straightening, Quentin released Katrina's hand. Pulling on his leather gloves, he announced tersely, "Limmer's."

The tall, brick hotel came into view. Snow rested on the window ledges, making an already-torn canopy sag. Despite the storm, the walkway was not deserted. Several indifferently dressed men passed by Quentin's carriage and made their way up the slippery stairs.

The carriage stopped. Brushing his cheek against hers, Quentin whispered into her ear. "You will remain inside the coach, my dear."

"But—"

His voice thickened. "No. You will stay here. I allowed you to accompany me—I understand your desire to help find Freddy. But I cannot permit you to enter Limmer's portals. In the blink of an eye, the mood of the sporting crowd within can turn from congenial to vicious. You are too precious to me..."

She wanted to protest; she did not accompany him all this way to just sit in the carriage. However, Quentin leaned forward and his soulful kiss erased her arguments.

He smiled. "I shan't be long. In my absence, Dibbs will watch over you."

Faith, the ice-particled wind that entered the carriage as Quentin opened the door could, in no way, cool the blaze of heat his kiss engendered.

After he left the carriage, Katrina watched him hold onto his beaver hat and brave the blustery gusts up the hotel stairs. She was proud of him. If anyone in London could find Freddy, it was Quentin.

* * * *

After thirty minutes of inactivity, Katrina's teeth started to chatter. Flapping her arms against her sides, she hoped to slap some warmth into her. For the hundredth time, she gazed at Limmer's entrance. For the hundredth time, she did not spot Quentin. With every passing minute, her hope sank lower. Dear Freddy. If only she knew whether he rested in a cozy, safe bed.

The scant light entering the carriage suddenly disappeared. She looked outside. Standing in the path of the light was a dark, bulky man. He hesitated in front of Limmer's, then turned and proceeded past the carriage.

Katrina gasped. Nathan Morelock? Goodness, it *was* he! Hugging the carriage opening, she watched him approach a corner tavern—the Cross and Swan. He disappeared inside.

Where in the world was Quentin? How could she tell him about Morelock? If too much time passed, he might leave the tavern for parts unknown.

Her heavy breath dissipated into the night. She had to do *something*. Perhaps Dibbs could find Quentin. Bracing herself to face the bone-chilling cold, she stepped out of the carriage.

The wind whipped at her face, grinding ice crystals into her skin. The storm had gotten worse. Shielding her eyes, she trudged to the front of the carriage.

"Dibbs? Dibbs?" Her voice seemed lost against the howling of the blizzard.

"Dib—" He was gone! She propped herself against the carriage and peered out at the surrounding snow. Dibbs stood across the street, talking with another coachman.

She had to think quickly. Already, the cold was beginning to numb her. Should she alert Dibbs to Morelock's whereabouts, or should she confront the man herself.

Eyeing the extreme distance from the carriage to Dibbs' position, she made her decision. The welcoming lights of the Cross and Swan were much closer.

An eternity later, she entered the tavern. Falling against the closed door, she inhaled deeply to force warm air into her lungs. Her face burned; her hands felt raw. She closed her stinging eyes. It was useless to try to wipe the snow from her eyes. Her gloves were encrusted with the white flakes and had hardened into a second skin; she could not peel them off.

Hearing footsteps, she opened her eyes, then squinted to see.

"Wot 'ave we 'ere? A bloomin' ice maiden, I'll wager."

Her blurry vision revealed a grey-haired man wearing a large, stained white apron. The tavern-keeper?

He stepped closer. "Blimey! She's almost froze, she is!" He took her hand. "Step by the fireplace, miss. I'll get something for you to drink—to warm yer insides."

Following him to the fireplace, she slowly flexed her stiff fingers. What a fool she was! How did she ever think she could confront Nathan Morelock? Right now, she was nothing more than a frozen mound of flesh.

The tavern-keeper positioned her by a snapping, crackling fire, wiped his hands on his apron, then apologized. "I be short-handed tonight. I'll fetch the drink meself." He scurried off to the kitchen.

In the background, the buzz of voices—male voices halted. They probably did not think much of her. Wet, dripping, cold—she did not think much of herself, either. She dismissed the tavern patrons as they dismissed her. The sooner she could accomplish her mission, the better.

The act of untying the strings on her bonnet involved more pain than she would have believed. Removing it, she then covered the tips of her cold-reddened ears with the insides of her wrists. Quentin would never let her live this muddle down.

"Miss Jones? Is that you?"

Blinking, she looked over at Nathan Morelock's broad face. She never thought she would be glad to see him. Maybe luck was with her after all.

"The devil! *It is* you. What the deuce are you doing out on a night like this? And without Udall?"

She tried to answer, but for some reason her teeth refused to unclench. While the warmth from the fire felt heavenly, it would take more than two minutes to thaw out.

"Never mind." Morelock led her to a screened booth and helped her sit. She did not protest. A single plate with the remains of a mutton steak and a lone pewter mug were the only items on the wooden table. He pushed the plate off to the side, then sat opposite her.

When the tavern-keeper returned, bearing a steaming mug, Morelock waylaid the drink. Speaking in low tones, he gave his greatcoat to the tavern-keeper. The host of the Cross and the Swan nodded, then withdrew.

Katrina paid no attention. Her hands itched to be free of her hardened gloves. Unsuccessful in removing one, she tried the other.

"Here, Miss Jones, drink this hot buttered rum. A hot toddy will always set you back on your feet."

He placed the mug in front of her. "I will get those gloves off." In less time than it took to say the words, he did what she had failed to accomplish.

Her hands appeared almost skinned. When he rubbed them between his own mammoth hands, again,

she did not protest.

After a sip of the buttered rum, she coughed. “Th—This t—toddy is so strong!” The alcoholic fumes from the mug watered her eyes and made her nose run.

He handed her a handkerchief. “I believe you need a potent restorative.” Stroking his weathered chin, he scrutinized her. “Perhaps you are recovered enough to tell me. What mission is so urgent for you to be out and about on this foul December night?”

Although the toddy burned her throat, she was thankful for the warm flame now in her stomach. The drink also seemed to clear her head. “I saw you come here, My Lord. I must speak with you—about Freddy. This afternoon, Therese packed her things and left Udall House, taking Freddy with her. No one knows where she is. Quentin has looked everywhere. We think she might be headed for Bath.” Katrina crossed her fingers. “Perhaps you know where she has gone...?”

From across the table, Morelock held her gaze. If possible, his eyes looked even darker than black—darker than the depths of the ocean. What was he thinking?

“Therese has taken flight, eh? I had no inkling of her plans, but that does not surprise me. Does not surprise me at all.” He leaned back against the booth and withdrew a cheroot from his tail-coat. “Mind if I smoke?”

Katrina slowly shook her head. What an odd man! The news that his fiancée disappeared for parts unknown disturbed him not in the slightest. He answered so smoothly, Katrina had no doubts about his sincerity. Perhaps those two never truly planned to marry. And perhaps that was just as well. Such a tangle.

She let out a discouraged breath. But what about Freddy? Where could she look for him now?

Morelock blew a cloud over his head. “Is Udall aware that you are talking with me?”

“He is at Limmer's Hotel. He—”

“Upon my honor! Devil take it, how could I have forgotten?” Morelock extinguished the cheroot in his own mug. After a low hiss, a tiny trail of smoke filtered up. “Earlier today, while I was out, Therese stopped by my lodgings at Limmer's and left a note for me. I stuffed it into my coat, thinking to read it later. Slipped my mind. Do you suppose she wrote me her intentions?”

An overwhelming elation bubbled up within Katrina. “Yes! Yes, of course Therese would want to tell you where she went—so you could find her. We *must* read the note. Where is it?”

He stood. “It is still in my coat. I believe the tavern-keeper took it upstairs. I shall ask him to get it.”

Quickly covering the distance between the kitchen and their booth, Morelock then returned with his hands spread wide apart. He leaned over to Katrina. “Our gracious host says he is too busy. Naught but him serving these raucous patrons. I will fetch the coat myself.”

He hesitated. “I cannot, in good conscience, leave you alone in the taproom, Miss Jones. Udall must have warned you to be wary of unsavory characters—and about the hazardous consequences of a young woman traveling by herself. The Cross and Swan's clientele consists of more street rabble than most.”

The Baron sighed. “But then, even the gentry and the aristocrats have been known to take liberties with an unwilling female. An unescorted upper-class lady in a tavern would be quite a treat for these men, I fear.”

She felt the blood drain from her face. Peering around the booth's screen, she scanned the taproom. Morelock's eloquent but disturbing words were the truth. Not one lady—nor woman, for that matter,

graced the Cross and Swan this evening. On the contrary, more than twenty hard-edged men sat nearby, drinking their ale.

And a few of them leered in her direction.

Swallowing a lump of fear, she stood. "I will come with you."

Morelock extended his arm. "It is for the best, Miss Jones. I am certain Udall would rest easier knowing that you left with me."

Taking Morelock's strong arm, Katrina gladly followed him out of the taproom. Only one thing bothered her, however. As they passed by the kitchen, the Baron handed several coins to the tavern-keeper—payment for the mutton and the drinks. Nothing strange there, but she could have sworn she saw a flash of gold. Gold—as in gold guineas. But the refreshments could not have cost more than a few farthings.

She must have been mistaken.

* * * *

Nathan Morelock could not believe his good fortune. The answer to his long enmity was within his grasp. Or, to be literal, was daintily walking by his side. Katrina Jones was an innocent—as innocent as the day she was born. She had no idea how he struggled to contain his unholy glee! No idea at all. In her mind, they were headed up the Cross and Swan's stairs in order to read a note written by his dear fiancée.

He grinned. The reality differed enormously from Katrina's notion. No message from Therese awaited Katrina's perusal inside the private room he so recently engaged for the night. Instead, at long last, Nathan planned to even the score against the mighty Earl of Udall.

As Udall had stolen Nathan's beloved Deborah, so he would now dishonor the Earl's cherished Katrina. Although almost four years had passed since Deborah's death, the bitter taste of revenge still burned Nathan's mouth.

Reaching the upper floor of the tavern, he pointed to the left. "This way, Miss Jones."

He could not let his excitement show; he could not alarm her—not yet. Once behind the solid mahogany door, then he would be free to release his pent-up rage.

Raking his gaze over her huddled form, he grinned again. A jolt of desire shot through him. She was a delectable morsel; he would enjoy pleasuring himself with her—at Udall's expense!

Stopping in front of the private room, Nathan opened the door, and gestured inside. "After you, Miss Jones."

She demurred, then fixed her wide-eyed gaze on him. "My Lord, perhaps I should wait out here for you—while you get the note."

Although he preferred not to force her inside, he might have resign himself to dispense with the niceties. He exhaled slowly. "As you wish..."

Before he had a chance to propel her through the doorway, she surprised him by walking in first. "I do trust you. You are a gentleman."

Oh, the fates were kind! He followed her, then thrust the door closed. While she looked for his coat, he locked the door. The key fit snugly in his waistcoat.

"I appreciate your vote of confidence. However, I fear you are in for a disappointment."

She swung around, facing him. Her hair had dried, revealing its unusual color once more, and her feathery brows were drawn to the bridge of her nose. "What is it? Have you misplaced Therese's note?"

Katrina did not grasp the situation. Any other woman would have instantaneously understood that he had designs on her virtue. But this female was little more than a schoolroom chit. That irked him. What did he have to do—write out his intentions in black and white?

He shrugged out of his tail-coat. Laying it on a high-backed chair, he took a step towards her. "The note does not exist, Katrina."

The little fool still did not understand. Frowning, she folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot. "Not exist? Then why—"

Perhaps it was a gleam in his eyes, or perhaps she saw him lick his lips. By God, the rise and fall of her bosom *did* arouse him. In any case, she now knew; she now knew the purpose for the trip upstairs.

He had to admire the woman. Her only outward sign of fear showed in her green eyes; they darkened to stormy amber. She held her ground. However, there was no point in her moving backwards. A sturdy bed blocked her escape.

"Have you no honor, Lord Morelock?" she gamely questioned. "What benefit could you reap from this contemptible action? Quentin will kill you."

The heaving of her breasts increased. He had an urge to rest his head on those yielding mounds. "You underestimate your charms, my dear. The list of benefits is too numerous to mention. And maybe death would be a small price to pay to sample your purity."

Although she blushed, she did not bulge from her position. He had misjudged her. It seemed she possessed a will as strong as his own.

Dropping his waistcoat to the floor, he set about untangling the knot of his cravat. "You would do well to remove your clothing. Else I will have the pleasure of ripping your garments from you." He spoke gruffly. Her steady green gaze began to unnerve him. This ravishment was not progressing as he planned.

Instead of obeying him, she moved to his side, then sat down on a chair next to the bed. She calmly surveyed him—as if he were a recalcitrant schoolboy. Damn the woman!

"I do not believe you." Her composed air astonished him. "It is not that I am calling your bluff but, deep down, Lord Morelock, I do not think you are capable of such a heinous act." She paused. "If you truly are a despicable monster, it would have been impossible for Deborah Ivanbraugh Thornhill to fall in love with you."

Anger roared through his veins as suddenly as a thunderstorm brewed on the open seas. "Deborah?" He towered over Katrina, ready to wring her pretty neck. "What do *you* know about Deborah?"

To her credit, Katrina refused to cower. When Nathan gave full vent to his rage, lesser women, or indeed, many men, cringed and begged for forgiveness.

Her jeweled gaze softened. She reached up and touched his hand. He pulled it away, as if fire singed his skin.

"I know that you and Deborah were thwarted in your love. That her father's ambition separated you both. That because of Lord Ivanbraugh, many innocent lives have been shadowed. Two lives irrevocably ended—Deborah's and ... and her premature baby's."

Katrina's words penetrated Nathan's self-imposed armor. He dug his fingers into his hair. "*My son*," he whispered.

Standing, she took his hand again. "I am sorry. I did not know."

Her sympathy, her compassion—even her silence as he grieved—offered him more comfort than all the ill-turned phrases his family and friends mouthed over the years. For this, he was grateful. And this comfort seemed to dispel any further need to grieve—now, and in the future.

Perhaps it was time to bury the past.

He picked up his discarded waistcoat, and eased his arms into it. "You are a wonder, Miss Katrina Jones. I am certain Quentin Thornhill does not deserve you. But then again, neither do I."

Her small blush rewarded him as no words could. Had he really sunk so low to have actually considered...?

He shook his head. How could he make amends to her? "So, back to the matter at hand. You say Therese has resorted to abducting her own son, eh? And you are concerned?"

He accepted Katrina's nod. "If he were my son, I would be concerned, too. Let me think. Perhaps I can hit upon Therese's hiding place." Scratching his chin, he frowned. "She might have—"

A solid booming through the door stopped him. "Katrina, Katrina, are you in there? Morelock, God help me I will—"

She exchanged a look with him, then ran to the locked door. "Quentin! Oh, Quentin!"

To Nathan, she gestured, "Hurry! Open the door!"

"Keep your boots on, Udall. I am coming." Fishing the key out of his waistcoat, Nathan ambled over to the barricade. "Are you sure you want me to open this?"

She rolled her gaze.

Chuckling, he put the key in the lock, then took a breath—perhaps the last breath he would be allowed to take.

Udall barged in, looking like a wild man. He then halted. Torn between his enemy and his fiancée, he made a wise decision and submitted to Katrina's hugs.

Nathan envied the man. But once satisfied that she was unharmed, Udall would unleash his fury on Nathan. In preparation, he stiffened his back.

Over Katrina's small head, Udall narrowed his gaze, lancing Nathan clean through. A formidable opponent, to be sure.

If he expected to leave the Cross and Swan alive, he better defuse the moment. "No cause for alarm, Udall. Your fiancée has suffered no ill effects. In fact, I admit losing my touch. As you can see, her pelisse is still intact. I am not half the Don Juan I thought I was."

Once upon a time, Nathan would have thoroughly enjoyed the sight of Udall's clenched jaw and fierce grimace. If it were possible, smoke would certainly be issuing from his ears. But now, the thought of the years wasted on hatred drooped Nathan's shoulders. They both had been victims. Victims of Lord Ivanbraugh's selfish, single-minded desire.

Although Katrina was a tiny thing, she somehow managed to hold Udall back. "I am fine, Quentin. Truly. Lord Morelock has agreed to help us find Freddy. Isn't that so, My Lord?"

Nathan bit back a grin. The woman was incredible. A natural mediator in the art of smoothing over differences between deadly adversaries. Perhaps she had missed her calling. A certain French emperor could benefit from her pacifying presence.

"Yes, that is so, Miss Jones," Nathan agreed. "As it is, I have nothing much better to do than take to the ice-strewn roads of England, searching for a small boy and his addle-pated mother."

Clasping his fiancée by his side, Udall darted his gaze from her face to Nathan's. Whatever the Earl saw must have satisfied him. "We could use the help, Morelock. Therese can be a bit ... unbalanced."

Nathan turned away from the display of tender affection before him. A deprived man could only stand so much. He picked up his tail-coat and shrugged into it. "Unbalanced? You mean a candidate for Bedlam!"

A rare smile lit Udall's face. "Just so."

After nearly four years of being at daggers drawn with each other, he and Nathan then sat together to discuss where next to look for Freddy.

Thirteen

The night seemed to go on and on. Katrina tried to stay awake; she truly tried. But the steady vibrations from Quentin's carriage acted as a natural sleep-inducer. Before she could stop herself, she was nodding off—again. Falling against his hard shoulder, she blinked her eyes open.

"Oh, pardon me!" Reluctantly, she moved away from him. His bayberry scent and the roughness of his kerseymere greatcoat filled her with a sense of security that she never experienced before.

With his ungloved hand, he turned her face toward him. "You need to sleep, my dear. The hour grows very late. Indeed, a new day is almost upon us."

As he stroked her cheek, he sighed. "If only you were safely at Udall House and not here on these God-forsaken roads."

Gazing into his dark brown eyes, she felt an inner warmth of contentment settle over her. A gift—a holy blessing. She smiled at him, and spoke as if her life depended on her response. "I would not be anywhere else in the world, Quentin."

The color of his eyes deepened. Murmuring her name, he leaned closer, then his lips captured hers.

Heaven could not have been more blissful than right here—right now on this bumpy road to Bath.

Quentin's lips swept her ear. The pounding she heard came not from inside the carriage, but from inside her own heart.

"I need you, Katrina," he whispered. "I think I have always needed you."

Closing her eyes at these caressing intimacies, a wave of desire overtook her. She silently chided herself. This was not the time nor the place, but by the good Lord above, she wanted more!

Taking her into his arms, he held her tightly. "I cannot begin to describe the overpowering dread that consumed me when I returned from Limmer's and found you gone. I fear I aged ten years in those ten minutes, Katrina. *Never* again will I lose you."

Once more, their lips met; once more she rode on the wings of an angel.

A low "harumph" startled her, and she pulled away from him.

"Must you two indulge? I am afraid I cannot feign slumber any longer. Rather difficult on a man's sensibilities, you know, watching true love blossom in front of him."

On the opposite seat, Nathan Morelock removed a cheroot from his tail-coat, then twirled it between

his fingers. Instead of lighting the cigar, he placed it between his teeth and bit down hard.

Katrina flushed. In her drowsy state, she had forgotten Nathan's presence. She could not raise her gaze to meet either his or Quentin's.

Quentin patted her hand and gave a growl. "Stow it, Morelock. Since when have you had sensibilities? In truth, I don't believe you can spell the word."

She caught her lip on the edge of her teeth. He and Quentin had been getting along swimmingly. Were they going to come to fisticuffs now?

"Touché, old boy. But perhaps you and Miss Jones would like some privacy? I can always join the coachman outside."

A laughable suggestion. But how would Quentin take it?

Shaking his head, he grinned. "Peace, then. I will cry 'truce.' It has been a long night. All of us are on edge. All our *sensibilities* are disturbed. Lord knows we have stopped at every posting house this side of London."

With no luck. Katrina wrung her hands in her lap. At the posting inns on the road to Bath—from Stoke Poges village to the town of Reading, not one hostelry owner admitted seeing Therese or little Freddy. Or so the owners said.

Katrina looked out of the carriage opening. Sharp contrasts of velvety black and pristine white greeted her. The diverse landscape was reduced to black, white, and countless shades of grey. How could they possibly find a small boy in the vastness that was England?

Forgetting her embarrassment, she asked, "Are we almost at Newbury, Lord Morelock?"

That was where they were headed. He had said Therese was fond of staying there—at the Pelican.

He nodded, and stretched out, cracking his back. Idle hours spent in a coach did not agree with this nonsense man. "Therese has been known to wile away the hours at the Pelican. I first met her there."

Quentin coughed. "Indeed? So did I."

The air seemed to grow heavy with regrets. Katrina did not disturb Quentin's or Nathan's thoughts. Perhaps it was good for them to reflect upon their common source of woe. They were more alike than they realized.

Bowing her head, she said a little prayer. Soon they would arrive at the Pelican. Although the hour was very late, Quentin's wealth and position would assure the scurrying of postboys to his carriage. After the horses had been seen to, she and Quentin then would learn what they traveled all this way to find out. A moment of truth. They would ask their momentous question of the innkeeper: Was Therese Thornhill inside the posting house with Freddy?

Katrina shuddered. But what would they do—what could they do—if the innkeeper, once again, answered, "No"?

* * * *

As Quentin's team of horses turned into the Pelican's courtyard, Katrina crossed her fingers.

Please let Freddy be here. Please let Freddy be safe and be here.

The carriage roared to a stop, and two sleepy-eyed postboys dashed forth from the inn. Slamming their white beaver hats on their heads, they slipped and slid on the icy pathway to the coach. After reaching it, their eyes brightly sparkled. They must have noticed Quentin's family crest on the carriage door.

"We made good time, considering the snow," Quentin commented. He alighted the town coach, then helped her descend.

Nathan jumped down next. "Best time on the books for an ice-strewn journey, I will wager."

They talked to conceal their disquiet. She did not need to view Quentin's clenched jaw or Nathan's whitened lips to know that they were as anxious as she was.

Stamping snow off his boots, Quentin asked one of the lads for the inn's proprietor. At two o'clock in the morning, the man was bound to be in his bed.

Katrina had no qualms about waking him up. If need be, she would search every room in the Pelican herself for Freddy.

One postboy hurried off. The other unhitched the horses. Quentin tipped him, then led her and Nathan into the anteroom.

Pausing only to shake snow from their clothes, they entered the darkened, deserted taproom and stood in front of the dying fire. The smell of stale whisky and spilt ale greeted them. As a welcoming room, it left much to be desired. Quentin and Nathan remained silent; no doubt they shared her apprehensions.

A smiling man rushed into the taproom. "My Lord! My Lord Udall! I am honored you have stopped at my humble establishment—"

Quentin held his hand up. "It is late, good sir, and we are all tired. We seek my brother's wife, Therese Thornhill. Is she within?"

Although Quentin spoke quietly, his tone held a hint of steel.

The innkeeper flinched, as if aware of Quentin's impending displeasure. "Ah, I fear I must say n—no, Your Lordship. Mrs. Thornhill has not stayed at the Pelican since the time she, um, arrived with this gentleman." He pointed in Nathan's direction.

"Some time ago," Nathan interjected.

"Yes, indeed." The proprietor wiped his shiny forehead. "Yes, about two months, now."

Katrina turned back toward the fire. *Where was Freddy?* The sting of sadness suddenly overwhelmed her.

Quentin placed his arm around her. "Two months ago does not matter. You have not seen Mrs. Thornhill nor her young son today?"

"No, Your Lordship. Upon my honor, I have not."

The man's honest words burned a hole into Katrina's heart. There was nothing more to say—nothing more to do.

Tightening his grip on her, with his other arm, Quentin gestured at the bar counter. "We require rooms for the night, good sir."

The man nodded, then hurried off.

"Katrina, rest here. I shall make the arrangements. Would you like some hot tea?" Quentin's voice brimmed with concern.

Shaking her head, she was glad to be left alone with her thoughts. Any second, a flood of tears threatened to cascade from her eyes.

Her mind refused to stop thinking. A legion of "what ifs" and "what nexts" paraded in her head. To drive away her troubled thoughts, she paced up and down the fireplace's flagstones. What if...? What

if...? What—

She stopped. Looking over, she saw Quentin leaning against the bar, a tankard in his hand. Nathan also had a drink. Engrossed in their conversation, they would not see her slip outside.

As silently as she could, she left the taproom, walked out into the cold, and headed for the stable. Perhaps a postboy still labored on Quentin's horses, preparing them for the night.

Clutching her reticule, she entered the stable—and prayed. An assortment of odors—not all of them unpleasant—wafted up from the hay.

Fortune smiled at her! In one of the stalls, she heard someone brushing down a horse. She tiptoed over, and spotted a young man of about ten and six years. “Pardon me.”

The postboy jumped, then slapped his hand over his heart. “Blinkers! You scared me, you did!”

She apologized. “Sorry. I was hoping you could help me?”

He peered at her, probably wondering what she had in mind. “M—Ma'am?”

Clearing her throat, she explained. “I am looking for a lady—a lady traveling with her little boy.” Digging into her reticule, Katrina pulled out her silhouette of Freddy.

She handed it to the postboy. “This is the only likeness I have of him. Have you seen him?”

Although the light was dim, she saw the postboy's eyes widen. He recognized Freddy. She knew it. But, the lad hesitated. Chewing on his lower lip, he obviously debated on what to say.

She had to coax. “Whatever the woman paid you for your silence, I will pay double. Please, I am the boy's ... aunt. I have come all the way from London—in this storm—to see him.”

The Pelican's hireling remained mute.

“I am *begging* you! I know innkeepers are not aware of everything that goes on in their establishments. But the postboys are. They know everything. That is why I came outside to find you.”

While she pleaded her cause, she felt an immense sense of relief—not necessarily a contradiction in terms. The boy *had seen* Freddy. At least outwardly, Quentin's nephew *must* have been unharmed. Else the postboy would not have appeared so unaffected by her entreaties. Seeing Freddy again was only a matter of time.

The postboy shuffled his feet. “I dunno, ma'am. The lady, she gave me a handful of the ready. She dinna want anyone to know—”

Katrina resorted to feminine wiles. She batted her lashes.

He caved in. “At m'mother's house—the Plummer house. Down the road aways. The lady be staying there. She wanted help with her son, so I offered m'mother's house.”

His Adam's apple bobbing, the postboy looked anxious. “If you wouldn't tell m'master, ma'am. I could lose m'position.”

“Not a word. I promise.” Katrina felt as light as a balloon. Journey's end. This journey's end would close successfully. But, what would Quentin say to Therese? What could he do to persuade her to release her son?

After thanking the postboy, Katrina almost floated back to the Pelican. She did not know what Quentin would do, but she did know that somehow it would be the right thing.

* * * *

Standing outside a thatched-roof cottage, Katrina had a moment of doubt. Should she wait until the sun rose to knock on the door or should she disturb Mrs. Plummer now?

Quentin, suffering from no such quandaries, boldly rapped on the wooden door. Almost immediately, a woman peeped out from behind a window, then opened the door.

“Oh, Your Lordships, Your Ladyship! I would be honored if you enter my humble home.” The woman curtsied low. Her silver hairs interspersed with blonde, shimmered brightly in the candlelight.

Quentin, Nathan, and Katrina stepped inside a sparsely furnished but clean room—a combined kitchen and a parlor. Looking around, Katrina saw two other doorways, most likely bedchambers. Did Freddy and Therese sleep behind one?

“Please, please you must make yourselves comfortable.” The woman lifted a worn kitchen chair to bring into the sitting area. “I do apologize for my...”

She obviously felt embarrassed at her meager possessions. The dear woman. Didn't she know that possessions were not required to make a home? The love shared by the family was truly the most important part of hearth and home.

Nathan finished the woman's task for her. “Thank you for your hospitality, ma'am.” He performed the introductions.

The woman blushed, then curtsied again. “I am Iris—Iris Plummer. Your Lordships and Miss Jones' visit must be about Mrs. Thornhill and her son.”

Katrina spoke before she had intended. “How is Freddy? We have been so worried about him.”

Still standing, Mrs. Plummer sighed. “Such an engaging little tyke, he is. But his sad brown eyes—they fairly wrench your heart out. He's got the sniffles, poor boy. And the makings of a fever, I'll wager.”

“We would like to see him.” Quentin's simple statement must have seemed like a command.

This request alarmed their hostess. “Oh, but Your Lordship, you cannot. He's only just fallen asleep—in my bed. I have only one bed, you see.”

Nodding at one of the doors, she explained, “My children sleep in that bedchamber, on the floor. In the other room, the boy is in my bed with his mother. So you c—cannot. But Miss Jones could enter.”

Next to her cushioned chair, Katrina spotted a woolen blanket. Mrs. Plummer had curled up here; that was why she answered the door so quickly.

A loud creaking attracted Katrina's attention. The bedchamber door opened. Rubbing her eyes, a disheveled Therese swayed into the sitting area. She had not bothered to pull her wrapper closed.

“God in Heaven! What does a person have to do to get some sleep around here? That blasted boy—with his twisting and rolling! And the bed—the smallest and lumpiest bed I have had the misfortune to share. By God, when I finally nod off, you hold a gabfest in the wee hours of the morning! What the devil is going on?”

She blinked, then came to an abrupt stop. “Quen? Nathan?” For a second, her voice wavered. “Wh—What are you both doing here?”

Quentin stood. “A rhetorical question, of course, Therese.”

He gestured for her to sit in his chair. “And I suggest you tie your robe. There are ladies present.”

Mrs. Plummer made the sign of the cross, obviously expecting a knock-down, drag-out fight. When emotions ran high, the nobility could use excessive force in displaying their displeasure.

But Quentin had not forgotten the woman. He escorted her to her children's bedchamber door. "Perhaps you would care to retire for the night, Mrs. Plummer. You have my word we shall not remain upwards of fifteen minutes. And we shall keep our voices low."

Darting a glance over at Therese, Mrs. Plummer then gave him a grateful look. "If it pleases you, My Lord, you and your party are welcomed to spend the night."

After he thanked her, she entered her children's room and shut the door behind her.

"You show that common peasant more courtesy than you show your brother's wife." Therese sniffed, then pulled her wrapper closed.

Katrina found it difficult to restrain herself from shaking Freddy's mother. She deserved a full dressing-down. Instead, Katrina carefully modulated her tone. "How is Freddy?"

Flicking back her long dark hair, Therese sat in the chair Quentin vacated. She yawned. "Tolerably well, I suppose. A damned poor traveler, though. His many complaints drove me to distraction."

If she expected sympathy from anyone, she was clearly in for a disappointment. Nathan shook his head, probably in disgust.

Quentin paced the room. "What did you hope to accomplish with this kidnapping, aside from garnering my profound loathing?"

A pulse beat at his temple in a furious fashion. What would happen if he lost his temper?

Therese jumped up. "Kidnapping? What—"

Before she could move, Nathan also leapt out of his chair—an amazing sight for such a massive man. Blocking her path, he folded his arms across his chest. Evidently, she was not going anywhere.

She sat back down. "What kidnapping?" she continued weakly. "Freddy is my son. I had a sudden desire to journey to Bath for the holidays. What could be more natural than to bring my son along?"

"You left Udall House without his winter garments." If ever a voice could reek disdain, Quentin's did.

There was nothing she could reply to that charge of neglect, so she remained silent.

Katrina leaned forward. "Has Freddy contracted a fever?"

"He is ... warm," Therese admitted.

Glancing at Quentin, Katrina received his nod of approval. She left the room and entered the darkened bedchamber. With one arm hugging a bunched-up quilt as he previously had hugged his Wellington doll, Freddy lay sprawled across the small bed. Although his breathing was labored, his forehead only felt warm to the touch—not hot.

Thank God. She dropped a kiss on his cheek, and tenderly placed his rag doll by his side. She then returned to the main room.

Quentin must have seen her relief. With a level expression, he turned toward Therese. "Now it ends. I will no longer allow Frederick to be a victim of your reluctant mothering. As my brother would have wanted, I shall assume responsibility for my nephew. Lord knows I have waited too long for this drastic step."

"And how do you propose to take Freddy?" Her lips curved in a sneer. "*I* am his mother."

By the looks of her hands gripping the arms of the chair, she readied herself to stand again. Nathan lifted his rusty-colored eyebrow. She squirmed back into the cushions.

Quentin smiled. When his brown eyes glittered, a chill trembled down Katrina's back. "I am not

without influence, my dear Therese. I shall argue my case in the Court of Common Pleas in Westminster Hall. Proving you to be an unfit mother should not tax my persuasive abilities in the least bit. And when word leaks out of court—as it always does—whatever reputation you have left should be thoroughly destroyed."

Katrina spotted Therese's slight blanching in color. The woman's slim shoulders shook; she must not have doubted that Quentin would keep his word.

Jutting out her pale lower lip, she raised her chin. "There is no need to go to extremes, Quentin. I have changed my mind—I find the boy tedious. I shan't trouble you further over him."

Quentin nodded. "Wise choice. Lest you complain that I am being unfair, you may visit him whenever you wish."

Staring at Nathan until he moved out of the way, Therese stood, then smoothed down the wrinkles in her robe. "No need. I no longer care to have anything to do with Freddy ... or with you, Quentin. You have become too ... domesticated ... for my tastes."

Katrina winced. This tigress had very sharp claws. She looked up at him. Did he resent Therese's insinuation?

Instead of growling, he winked at Katrina. "We each have our own tastes, Therese. May you be as fortunate in discovering yours as I have been in discovering mine."

With tightened lips, she twisted away from him. "I am not staying in this rat-infested hovel one second longer."

Grabbing her pelisse, she hastily put it on, then stormed to the front door. "Well, Nathan, aren't you coming?"

Her arrogant assumption that Nathan would meekly follow her, especially after what she just said took Katrina's breath away.

Grinning a mischievous grin, he opened the door. "Why don't you wait outside for me, Therese? I have some unfinished business to clear up."

She huffed out, slamming the door for all it was worth.

"Impossible woman, eh?" Wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, he then held out his hand to Quentin.

Seeing this reconciliatory handshake between these two former adversaries brought tears to Katrina's eyes.

"You do not wish to move Freddy at this hour of the night, do you, Udall? Good. I shall escort Therese back to the Pelican. In the morning, she and I will depart for Bath. I know a few eligible bachelors in residence—I will introduce her. Perhaps they can keep her occupied."

Quentin tightened his grip on Nathan's hand, then released it. "Our thanks. We are in your debt."

Leaning over, Nathan kissed Katrina on the cheek. "A pleasure, my dear. I am in *your* debt—for opening my eyes to what is right."

He squeezed Quentin's arm. "You are a lucky devil, Udall."

Nathan's departure left an almost tangible silence in the cottage. Without a word, Katrina took Quentin's hand and led him into the back room to see Freddy. In his sleep, the boy had found his doll. A tiny smile lit his angelic face.

Putting his finger to his lips, Quentin left the room with her. "So, here we are." He unbuttoned the top button on her pelisse. "If we are to stay the remainder of the night, we might as well be comfortable."

A tingly warmth spread across her cheeks. As she finished undoing the fasteners, he helped her out of her coat.

Placing his hands on her shoulders, he gazed into her eyes. "What do you think, my love? Have I become too domestic for *your* tastes?"

Her flush spread even deeper. "Of course not! I—" She dropped her gaze. The lack of sleep was causing her to speak without thinking. She needed to guard her tongue.

"You what? I do wish to hear the rest of your sentence." He edged closer to her, and feathered the outline of her forehead with kisses.

"I—" Her heart drummed a delirious beat. All thoughts of slumber vanished. She leaned against him. His own heart pounded in rhythm with hers. Love pulses.

She lifted to her toes to kiss him. Why should she guard her tongue? She was committed to him. For better or for worse, she belonged to him.

For better—definitely for better.

"I was going to say, I love you, Quentin. Just as you are."

There! She finally said it. Once out, it was easy to say again. "I love you," she repeated.

He embraced her as if he would never let go. "Katrina, my darling," he breathed into her hair, "my darling, I thought I would never hear you say those words. How I love you, too!"

After a space of time as short as a second ... or as long as an eternity, he released her, somewhat shakily. "Come, my dear. In but a few hours, the sun will rise. Let's rest our eyes for the morrow."

He sat down in the largest cushioned chair, then pulled her onto his lap. "There. Aren't we more cozy?"

How could she possibly sleep when her body seemed to quiver at his every touch? She laid her head against his shoulder and snuggled. Faith, it would take her a lifetime to tire of this.

He sighed. "After breakfast, before we head back to London, we will make a brief stop at the church here."

"Why, Quentin?" She closed her eyes, enjoying the even cadence of his breathing.

"I know the minister. He will be happy to perform a favor for me."

"Favor?"

Quentin smiled. "Yes. I brought the special license with me. We are getting married today."

She sat up. "But—"

"No buts, Katrina. As I told you in the carriage, never again will I lose you. I want you as my wife—now and forever. I cannot wait another second."

He eased her back down against his shoulder. "Or, perhaps you had not thought about the tatters your reputation will be in if word of this compromising situation ever got out."

Curling a lock of his hair around her finger, she smiled. "Do you still wish to ally yourself with such a fallen woman?"

His laughter gently rocked her.

She cuddled closer. "Actually, I was thinking of Great Aunt Hattie and the Dowager. They will be so disappointed to miss our wedding."

"We shall have the services performed again in London. That is a minor detail. I will have you as my wife now."

She sleepily curved her arm around his chest—an infinitely desirable pillow. "Do you always get your own way, my Lord Udall?"

"Indeed, I do. And I want you, madam wife. As your landlord, I insist upon it—now and forever."

His stirring kiss signaled a promise of hope, of new beginnings, and of love to carry them into tomorrow.

Meet Susanne Marie Knight

Susanne Marie Knight works as a writer for a fitness program shown on public television. Multi-published with books, short stories, and articles, she specializes in "Romance Writing With A Twist." In addition to THE RELUCTANT LANDLORD, a Regency with Wings ePress Inc., her Regencies include THE MAGIC TOKEN and five-star time-travel Lord Darver's Match, both with LionHearted Publishing; and upcoming time-travel TIMELESS DECEPTION with NovelBooks, Inc. For science fiction enthusiasts, she has Janus Is A Two-Headed God with Awe-Struck Ebooks; plus Tainted Tea For Two, a romantic murder mystery with Hard Shell Word Factory; and Grave Future, a paranormal romantic suspense novel with LTDBooks.

Originally from New York City, Susanne currently lives in the Pacific Northwest, by way of Okinawa, Montana, Alabama, and Florida. Along with her husband, daughter, and feisty Siamese cat, she enjoys the area's beautiful ponderosa pine trees and wide, open spaces—a perfect environment for writing. She has her own website domain: www.susanneknight.com and received her Master of Science degree in Natural Health. Sign up for her newsletter, Knight Dreams, at:

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