



Wicked Intentions

By

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Chapter One

1754

Ruth Urswick strolled through the village, a wicker basket slung over one arm. She was so much one of the locals, hardly anyone took any notice of her. Lord Urswick might be the lord of the manor, the man who lived at the Big House, but Ruth took pains never to put on any airs or graces or to dress in fine clothes. She stood out more that way and that was the last thing she wanted. To be different, to be noticed. Today she wore a simple woolen gown of dark blue and a stomacher she'd had for years, which had once been her best but now served for everyday. Her hat was a practical straw, adorned only with a single faded knot of ribbon, her shawl one she'd knitted for herself the previous winter. People often forgot her father was titled. She preferred it that way.

She reached the place where the cottages, ranked into a street began to be more sparsely scattered and stopped when she heard a familiar voice. "Ruth, wait!"

Turning, she smiled her welcome and waited for him to catch up with her. She hooked her free arm through the crook of his, the friendly gesture speaking of years of friendship. "Morning George! Lovely day!"

"Hmm..." George Thorne squinted up at the sky; a perfect blue studded with puffs of cloud. "We could do with some rain."

She turned a laughing face to him. "Oh George, will you never stop being a farmer?"

He grinned back, his sun-creased eyes twinkling. "Never."

They walked on. Ruth felt as comfortable with George as she would have done with her brother, if he were still alive. No shyness, no artifice marred their friendship. They'd grown up together, played together as children. Ruth loved him, with the love of companionship and comfort. Not the passion of twin souls that she dreamed of sometimes, but George meant a great deal to her.

When they passed the cottages, several people bowed their heads in greeting. Ruth smiled sunnily at them, but didn't stop to chat. The men were mostly working in the fields, but on such a pleasant day many women, children and the old chose to escape the stuffy, smoke-laden interiors to enjoy the sunshine. The kitchen gardens flourished, runner beans and raspberry canes at the back, tied tightly to sticks to prevent the weight of the crop dragging the stems to the ground, gooseberry and currant bushes burgeoning fruit. It was a good year for crops. Nobody would starve this year.

"You shouldn't walk out alone, you know," George told her.

Ruth shrugged. "No one could come with me. Father keeps a small staff these days and everyone was busy. We needed the eggs and I needed the exercise." There was little danger and she had given up all pretence at ceremony years ago.

He persisted. Ruth knew her old friend was sincerely concerned for her safety. These days he was the only one. "Nevertheless you never know who you might meet on the road. There are tinkers, tramps and laborers. It's not safe."

Ruth shrugged. "I've little choice." Besides, she was safer here than she was indoors, though she did not remind her friend of this.

Without her reminding him, George moderated his long stride so Ruth no longer had to scurry to keep up. He gave her a sheepish grin of apology. "Sorry."

She smiled up at his handsome face, tanned from hours spent in the open-air. "So athletic!"

"Good natural exercise." He lost the smile. "Ruth you shouldn't gallivant about like this on your own. You should be in London, courting and being courted, seeing the King and all the things you're supposed to do. A lady of your rank doesn't belong here, doing this." He gestured vaguely.

A bitter note entered her voice. "Visiting Court?" She stared down at her sturdy shoes and pattens, themselves a mockery of what she should be. "What a picture I'd make!" She was comely enough, she admitted but she hadn't powdered her dark hair for a long time and all her best gowns were hopelessly outdated. "I'd be a figure of fun in any centre of fashion."

George sighed. "It's only what you were brought up to do. Given the right clothes you'd fit in as well as anybody else." He looked away from her, up at the blue sky. "It makes me so angry sometimes, that your father doesn't do right by you!" He breathed in steadily. Ruth recognized the signs and knew he was regaining his temper. George didn't lose his temper often, but when he did, it was an awesome sight.

"I've seen more of your father's behavior than most. He's getting worse. You never know what he's going to do next and I'm getting worried about it. About your safety."

Ruth wouldn't admit her growing concern, even to her best friend, but she knew he was right. "There's little I can do. Father's crippling headaches and sudden bursts of temper are the fabric of my life now. Why should it make you angry? I'm happy enough as I am." A bird sang, high in the sky, soaring up and away from the earth. Ruth envied its freedom.

George gazed down at her and forced a smile, though his eyes remained grave. "It makes me angry because you're my friend and you deserve better."

"You never know, it might come one day." She failed to keep the note of wistfulness from her voice. She wanted more than this. A home of her own, someone to love, children even. No one visited the house any more and Ruth and her father went nowhere, met no one. A far cry from the time when her mother, sister and brother had been alive, when laughter and good company had filled the house. So long ago.

"You need to get away." He stared straight ahead at the big house in the distance, controlled but determined.

"That would be pleasant." Ruth deliberately kept her voice noncommittal.

Ruth and George walked in silence for a while, nearing the house. The Priory was a fine country house. Its state of disrepair was difficult to see at this distance. It wasn't too bad, but since the death of Ruth's mother and siblings, much of it had fallen into disuse. Three large bays reared up from the overgrown green lawns and rose garden; the honey colored stone cracked in the places where the frosts had attacked it. The roof was heavy with mildew and moss; it was ready to be cleaned, had been ready for a long time. Ruth had no idea how old the house was. It had been improved and altered so much in its life it was impossible to detect its origins. Now only she and her father lived there and didn't entertain, it was a sad reflection of what it had been when the house had been full of laughter and love.

She swallowed away her sadness when the tragedy of six years before came back to her mind. "When my father recovers—" she began.

He interrupted her. "How long does he need? He has to think of you one day!"

"Oh, he does," she assured him. "He loves me very much." She hitched the basket

further up her arm.

"Then he should show it better," George growled, still displeased.

They walked on a little further. Then George stopped and turned, taking Ruth's arm. She turned to face him. "Why don't you marry me?"

Silence fell. Ruth stared at him in total astonishment, not sure what to say, not sure what he wanted to hear. She'd been friends with George for years, but she wasn't aware he felt any more than friendship for her. "I know my birth isn't equal to yours," he said, more hesitantly, "but my father is as rich as yours and getting richer all the time. I come from yeoman stock, but I went away to school and I know how to behave. I'll give you a better life than this. I can't bear to see you suffer any longer. We like each other Ruth and they say love grows. We have a good basis for it. Why don't we try?"

She took his hand, pressing it gently, feeling the calluses grown over the years of hard work. "Is that why you are asking me?" She didn't feel the love for him she'd hoped to feel for a husband, but she liked him. That might be the best she could hope for.

He couldn't lie to her. He'd never been able to. "Yes. I can give you a happy life and a family of your own. Wouldn't you like that, Ruth?"

She couldn't refute it. "I'd love it. It would be better than this." She hesitated, but she had to know. "George—you don't love me, do you?"

He met her gaze briefly, friendship flashing between them. "Not in the way you mean. But I'm fond of you Ruth and there isn't another girl I'd like better." Ruth knew George's mother had been nagging him to find a wife. She wanted grandchildren before she died, she said. It might be a solution for him, too.

His offer meant so much Ruth couldn't speak. Staring at him, she studied the familiar smile, the craggy features. She knew she could find happiness with him. She might not reach the heights she dreamed about, but she didn't even know if those heights existed. It was tempting. She'd known George for years; he was kind, thoughtful and industrious. After the discovery of coal on their land, his family's fortunes had increased dramatically, but that had never caused them to despise or mock their less fortunate neighbors. They lived in the house their family had owned for centuries, now much improved but the same house and they continued to farm the land not occupied by mining.

George would be an acceptable match, if not a brilliant one. Ruth could be happier with him than in her case and she would still be with the people she loved, close enough to care for her father. "Talk to my father," she said abruptly.

The bird, until now caroling over their heads, flew away. George smiled and drew her to him for a kiss. It was more a kiss of friendship than of love but Ruth thought they could remedy that in time. On the whole, she enjoyed it. It wasn't too overwhelming and not too hesitant. They had kissed before, but only passing, friendly pecks. Ruth decided she could, after all, give up her dreams of London and glory and be happy with George. It would be infinitely better than the life she had now.

They strolled to the house hand in hand and then separated, Ruth to go to the kitchens to deposit her basket of eggs and George to seek out Lord Urswick. Cook greeted her cheerfully. "Now I can make the coddled eggs your father likes so much," she said, glancing up from the dough board. Her arms were floury to the elbow and a dish of unpeeled apples sat to one side of her. This large kitchen, once a hive of activity, now contained only Cook and a scullery maid. They never entertained, so keeping a large staff was a foolish luxury. Ruth was tempted to stay and help, but today more important

matters were afoot.

Pausing to take off her heavy overshoes, cloak and hat, she hurried upstairs to the main hall. Her sensible shoes clattered on the uncarpeted wooden stairs, the only sound in the house.

Lord Urswick would be in the library, his unvarying habit. Every day he retired after breakfast and unless she went to seek him out Ruth rarely saw him again until dinnertime. George knew where to find him.

Wanting to remain within earshot, Ruth wandered around the musty smelling, paneled hall, looking at the paintings she usually took for granted. A distant Elizabethan ancestor, stiff ruffed, solemnly stared out at her from dead, painted eyes. Next to it hung a view of the house, done fifty years ago when the house was extended and modernized. It was grimy now but Ruth could still see the pleasure gardens clearly depicted. She lingered over it, staring, her mind elsewhere.

The Elizabethan mansion remained at its heart, the Great Hall at its centre, the massive oak staircase leading up to the small suite of state rooms on the first floor. Everything here was clean, but impersonal. Anyone could live here. No belongings lay scattered about, there was no footman waiting for visitors, nothing to indicate anything other than disinterest. The only rooms that were in any way personal were Ruth's own bedroom and his lordship's study. All the other rooms were either swathed in covers to protect the precious furniture, or set out for everyday use, everything neatly arranged, nothing out of place.

Ruth wandered around the hall, waiting impatiently. This interview might set all her future life and suddenly she was anxious to start a new phase. She had waited long enough. She wanted a house and a family of her own. She had waited six years and that was long enough. She'd been promised a season with her cousin Mary, but it came to nothing. When she'd broached the subject with her father, he'd said it was too soon and he needed her. She hadn't mentioned it since.

Her world had stopped six years before when her mother, sister Naomi and brother John had died in the last smallpox epidemic. She and her father locked themselves away, unwilling to let the world see their grief. Somehow, this had become a habit. When the year of mourning was up, only the color of their clothes changed. The habit had been set and had continued unvarying since.

Most of Ruth's wardrobe dated from before the tragedy. She had reached the age of four and twenty without making her come-out. It had not seemed important at the time, not as important as caring for what family she had left and learning to cope with her loss.

Only last week she'd gone to visit the graves. It was as though she saw them for the first time, noticing their condition now, compared to how they had been when first put up. The bleak Yorkshire winters had taken their toll of the grey stone, streaked with damp, their sharp edges softened by wind and rain. She'd had to prune the rose bush she'd planted there, the stems grown long and tangled over the years. When she stood up and studied her handiwork she'd realized how much time had passed.

The realization had hit Ruth like a lightning bolt. She'd started thinking; wondering what life had in store for her, if this was all. When she spoke tentatively to her father about a visit to London, or even York he'd turned away and bade her not to speak of it again. Time was passing and it was becoming clear her father never wanted to go out into society again. The last time they had tried, tragedy had followed.

The whole family had contracted the smallpox on a rare visit to York. The disease

had been everywhere that year. Ruth had taken the illness, but mildly, so hardly a mark remained on her body. She felt guilty, that she had survived where others had died and somehow she had no right to live. That feeling had left her so gradually she'd hardly noticed its passing, but it had passed and she was ready to go on, where her father was not.

A bellow from above interrupted her melancholy thoughts. The house's quiet shattered when a door above crashed open. The sound of heavy feet thundered along the corridor and down the stairs. George, now pale under his tan raced towards her at full, long legged stride.

"He's mad!" He took her hands and gripped them hard. "It won't stop here. I'll do my best to get you away, I promise." His eyes stared into hers, stark and shocked.

At the sound of chasing footsteps he flung away and threw open the front door. He turned to her, with a vestige of a grin, meant to reassure her, went out and closed the door behind him. Dear George! Impulsive, quick-tempered, but infinitely kind and well meaning.

Ruth turned to see her father standing on the half-landing. "Did you put him up to this?" His craggy face was mottled red with fury, his hands fisted by his sides, his eyes squeezed almost tight shut.

Mutely, she shook her head. Lord Urswick looked over her head to the front door. "Impudent puppy!" He stared back at his daughter, his hard, blue eyes studying her. His voice quieted and he held out his hand. "Come upstairs."

Ruth followed her father into the library with head bowed, the picture of meek obedience. No sense deliberately provoking him.

Lord Urswick sat in his favorite chair by the fire and Ruth stood before him, hands clasped before her, head still bowed. "As if I would let you throw yourself away on him!" A note of disgust colored his voice.

"The Thornes are doing well for themselves," she ventured.

"You're an Urswick! We've been here for centuries, always masters! You can do better than that!" came the furious response.

Ruth looked up, dared to meet her father's gaze. She swallowed. "Not if I never go anywhere."

The silence was thick with menace. Her father's temper, never predictable even in happier times, might explode and engulf her. She was ashamed of herself for being so afraid, but the fact remained that she was. His tempers were unnatural, violent and explosive, although he had yet to lay a finger on Ruth in anger. She rarely crossed her father, often tried to avoid him, but this time she felt so strongly she had to say something.

Lord Urswick stared at his daughter, daring her to say more. "You know why that is,"

"Yes, father."

He stared at her for a full minute. Ruth suffered agonies while her father's temper ebbed away. She waited. It proved worth the wait.

He watched her carefully. Ruth schooled her features to calm. "As it turns out, I have to go to London on business soon. I planned to leave you here, but I am not sure I can trust you. I cannot believe you gave Thorne no encouragement at all." He paused, staring at his daughter through red-rimmed eyes. "If I leave you here, who's to say what you might not do? No, you're safer under my eye. Even if it is in the City of Sin." Ruth's heart soared at the news, but she kept her face set in a careful mask of obedience. Her father did not consider joy an appropriate emotion these days. "Well? How long has this been going

on? What gave young Thorne the impudence to approach me?"

"He asked me and I said he should discuss it with you before we took it further," she replied. Best to keep it simple.

"Very proper." Lord Urswick's voice was grudging. His deep graven frown made more forbidding by a pair of bushy eyebrows lifted a little. "The young man thinks you are suffering here. Is that true?"

She shook her head, anxious to disabuse him. "No, of course not, though I am lonely sometimes."

"You never told me," he said. It was true. Ruth had hoped he would notice for himself. He had not. "I'll take you to see the sights and you will be only too happy to come home again once you see how trivial society is for yourself. London is busy, dirty and full of sin."

Ruth kept her face carefully schooled but she couldn't stop her eyes widening in hope and joy. "May I go to the theatre?" It was a way for her to see the society she might have joined several years ago, except for the tragedy. She dared not hope for too much.

Her father took her desire another way. "Yes, it's a long time since we saw a play. I think it might be pleasant." His temper eased as quickly as it had risen.

Although she concentrated on keeping her outward demeanor calm, Ruth's head spun. She had not dared hope for a visit to metropolis. York had been the extent of her ambitions. Six years ago, her gratitude would have been more voluble, she might have shown him a glad face and thanked him. Now she knew better. If she showed too much joy, she might make him change his mind. His perversity had increased recently, so it was no longer predictable. "May I order a new gown?"

"You may order two. One for the day and one for the evening."

Rapidly, Ruth began mental calculations. She had a secret store of money; saved over the years from small disbursements her father had given her for household expenses. With that and the money for two new gowns, she might contrive a couple more. She would go to see Mrs. Peterson in the village. Before her marriage, Mrs. Peterson had worked for a mantua-maker in York. She still made clothes for local residents and her prices were reasonable. Ruth knew she couldn't approach the elaborate toilettes worn by ladies of fashion, but with a few new gowns, she wouldn't stand out too much and perhaps cut at least a respectable figure.

"We will leave in a week," her father announced. That didn't leave much time, but Ruth could help. Instead of sewing her father's shirts and mending linens after dinner, she could work on her own garments. Inside, her heart soared. Perhaps George would not be her only suitor; perhaps she would meet the person she had always dreamed of, the compliment to her, her natural partner. Even if no such person existed, she might meet someone her father would consider as a suitable husband. Anything was possible.

Chapter Two

Three weeks later, Oliver Bridgman, the Earl of Iveleigh, peacefully dozed in a quiet corner of White's. He was startled precipitately awake by a heavy hand clapped on his shoulder, but recognizing the owner of the hand and his own incapacity didn't start to his feet. "Two years ago you might have got a sword in the gut for that," was his grumbling reaction.

Still slumped in the chair he watched Edmund Urswick drop into the chair opposite him, not at all put out by Oliver's darkling stare. "Two years ago you weren't such a bear," Edmund replied.

"Two years ago I was Major Bridgman. I'm still not sure why I sold out. I could have been Major Lord Bridgman, the Earl of Iveleigh instead of plain Major Bridgman."

"Family duty, dear boy." Edmund signaled to a waiter.

"I have no family. Only ancestors." Oliver grunted and sat up when the waiter returned but shook his head when the waiter made to pour him a glass of wine to join his friend. Instead, he took a long draught of water from the mug at his side.

"Pushing the boat out again?" Edmund, neat as a new pin and clear-eyed studied his friend.

"It was either that or another damned ball with all those blasted matchmaking Mamas!" Oliver was seriously thinking of rejoining the army. Since the age of fifteen, the army had been his family and to lose the comradeship he'd found there and at the same time his only brother, had been such a blow he was still sore from the double wound.

Edmund regarded him, exasperation clear on his pleasant features. "You'll have to marry sometime. You're the last of your line. If you do, they'll leave you alone."

"Not enough eligible bachelors this season." Oliver yawned.

"They're beginning to talk about you."

Oliver's eyes opened a fraction wider. "Why?"

Edmund lifted a delicate eyebrow. "No interest in the nubile maidens society has to offer, no mistress—well, you can imagine what they're saying!"

"They can say what they like." Oliver stretched up a hand to smooth back his dark hair, ruffled from sleep. "It doesn't matter to me."

"Actually, old man, I came to ask you a favor." Edmund took a sip of his wine. "But you're so bearish I think I'll go and find someone else."

Oliver sat up a little straighter, a feeling of wariness coming over him, headache temporarily forgotten. "What? You might as well ask."

"Well," said Edmund doubtfully and then shrugged. "As you say, I might as well ask." He poured himself another glass and offered Oliver one. He shook his head and prepared to listen to his friend's request. "My uncle has come to town and he's brought his daughter with him. He has legal business, some boundary dispute I gather, but he wants to show Ruth the sights."

Oliver became even more wary. Surely Edmund wasn't matchmaking? He felt hunted in earnest now. He'd looked on White's as a refuge, but even here, he wasn't safe. "You know I want to—further my acquaintance with Emma Rising?" Oliver nodded. A pretty little blonde girl, he recalled, Wentwater's fifth. Not his type. Too insipid, but he wished Edmund well with her. Edmund watched the wine swirl around his glass.

"Pleasant girl, my cousin Ruth." Oliver's apprehension grew. "All I want you to do is to help me amuse her. Perhaps dance with her once or twice, that kind of thing. Con Verrier's well on the way to cutting me out with Emma and I like her more than the usual girl, you know." He flushed.

"You're not after pushing me into your cousin's arms?" Nothing like asking directly, Oliver reasoned.

Edmund laughed. "Good Lord no! Taking little thing, but countrified. She's never been to town in her life."

"How old is she?"

"Four and twenty."

"Never had a season?" Oliver was incredulous. The Urswicks were an old established family and far from impoverished.

"They shut themselves up together after the rest of the family died and never came out," Edmund explained.

Oliver frowned. It sounded dire, gloomy, the last thing he needed in his present state of mind but he had to acknowledge he owed Edmund a favor or two. Squirring a country girl about might keep him amused for a while and keep the rest of the matchmakers off his back. As long as he didn't make his attentions too particular, it should be all right. "When are they going home?"

"Oh they won't stay long," Edmund assured him airily. "I've had a summons for tonight, in fact. Ranelagh. The devil of it is, Emma will be there and I promised to show her the water grotto." Oliver grinned. Ranelagh was a useful place for trysts; a place of shadowy avenues where a girl could easily find herself separated from her family. No doubt Edmund intended to make the most of it.

Edmund frowned and Oliver stared at him, knowing his old friend wanted to say more. "Out with it!"

Edmund glanced at him sheepishly. "Good job nobody knows me as well as you. Very well. I went to visit the old man when he came to town and I offered to show Ruth about a bit. I could always ask one of my sisters to help. Old Urswick's getting on in years and he might not fancy the Park and the shops. Bit of a squeeze at the best of times. I used to know Urswick and his family pretty well once but we've lost touch in recent years. Well, he said no and so when I went back the next day I asked about Ruth. He told me she was confined to her room for the day." He frowned. "There's something not right there, Iveleigh, something not right at all. He's not like I remember him. He was always a bit strict, but he doesn't want to let her out of his sight these days. I want to find out what's wrong. Got a notion Ruth might like to visit my sister Mary in the country for a while, so I suggested it to him. Mary can bring her out properly and Ruth is a taking little thing, she'll do well once she's got a bit of town polish. The man snapped my head off and showed me the door. I want another opinion."

"You think he's keeping her too close?"

"Devilish close. There's no one I trust more than you, old man, and I'd like you to tell me what you think. I did think I might take her to visit Mary anyway. She don't look happy, Iveleigh and she was always such a cheerful child."

Oliver roused himself to consider what his friend was telling him. It was clear to him that Edmund was sincerely worried about his cousin. He found it intriguing and not a little disturbing, but it might just be a case of over protectiveness on Lord Urswick's part. "And if I agree with you?"

"She's over twenty-one, she may go where she pleases," Edmund said. "If you agree, I'll try to persuade her to visit Mary. Get her away for a while, give her a chance. That's all, I swear. I always liked Ruth and I wouldn't like her to molder her life away looking after her aged parent."

Oliver resigned himself. "Very well," he said. "Count me in."

Oliver and Edmund arrived at Ranelagh just after ten that evening. By that time, Ranelagh was in full swing, but several people stopped to stare at them on their way to the Urswick's box. They were said to be a good-looking pair, Oliver slightly the taller, wearing his own dark hair loosely tied back in vivid contrast to the powdered wigs sported by most of the men present. The rest of his appearance was more conventional; a stiff-skirted embroidered coat in dull blue silk, waistcoat and breeches of fine white, the waistcoat embroidered in dazzling detail. Edmund was just as striking, in green cut velvet. It added to the sparkle in his clear blue eyes.

Some mamas deplored their daughters' wistful gazes at the two young men; some preferred to court them. Oliver's gentle smile took on a cynical twist when he saw one particular lady making a beeline for them.

Just before she arrived, he took Edmund's elbow and steered him away, hearing his friend's soft chuckle as he did so. "Too rich for me," he murmured. "Three daughters, all plain as a pikestaff. It might be worth getting married, to avoid the designs of determined mamas."

"Ah, then they come after you for a different reason," Edmund said softly. Now it was Oliver's turn to chuckle at the reprehensible suggestion.

They walked around the dance floor towards the gilded supper boxes and it became obvious why Edmund had chosen to take the long way round. That way they reached the Wentwater box first and Edmund was able to exchange a few words with the delectable Emma.

Her mother smiled sweetly down on them both, a lady of formidable dimensions, gowned in a virulent shade of puce. Her daughters surrounded her, a froth of multicolored frivolity. "My lord, Mr. Urswick," she murmured.

They bowed. "A pleasure, Lady Wentwater," Oliver replied mendaciously. "How are your charming daughters today?"

Lady Wentwater leaned forward and placed a gently commanding hand on Oliver's sleeve. "My poor Mary has done nothing but ask after you since we saw you last, my lord. Won't you make her evening and dance with her?" Mary Wentwater was a pretty girl, well dowered, but not one that caught Oliver's fancy. She lacked something, whatever it was. Or perhaps, he thought, smiling gently at the girl, now leaving the box to stand before him, he was being too picky. He had to marry sometime and if he did, the world might be a more tranquil place without the constant pursuit by the mamas of hopeful damsels.

Miss Mary Wentwater accepted his lordship's invitation to dance and allowed him to lead her into the next set. He studied her covertly while they performed the stately measure. Pretty, but would she make a good countess? His mother had been exquisite, or so he'd been told, a daughter of one of the noblest families in England. She'd brought more than beauty to her marriage. His brother Charles' wife had been a lovely creature, if haughty. He couldn't let standards slip in his own choice. Love meant little to Oliver. He'd never seen that phenomenon, except as a fleeting fancy or by repute and he doubted its existence. It definitely had no place in deciding a dynastic marriage.

He smiled and bowed to his partner and when he carried her hand to his lips at the end of the dance, he allowed them to brush the back of her hand in a deliberately flirtatious gesture. She stared at him, eyes wide. *Oh God*, he thought suddenly, *she looks exactly like a cow*. The large, brown eyes and full lips, taken with the long nose bestowed on her by centuries of breeding gave her just that appearance.

He returned Miss Wentwater to her mother, smiled charmingly, but refused to be drawn into any dalliance. He waited for Edmund to return from the dance he'd solicited from the lovely Emma. He made desultory conversation with the Wentwaters, which mainly consisted of agreeing with her ladyship's decrees and comments on the other people present.

Then he saw her. A jolt went through his whole body, as real as a bolt of lightning. His gaze roved over her greedily. She sat a box or two away from where he stood, the only person with her an old man, face lined, clothes severely delineated.

She had dark brown hair and her eyes glinted dark when she surveyed the dancers, but she was no milk-cow. One of the few ladies without powder, her gleaming, dark mane swept up to a simple loose knot. Her appearance should have made him aware of her from the first. She astounded him. She was dressed very simply with none of the frills and furbelows sported by the other damsels, in a hyacinth blue gown and matching petticoat. Her lace was modest and her stomacher adorned only by a line of bows. All this only impinged on his consciousness later. He just wanted to look at her, drink her in like a cool glass of water after a long drought. Something inside him called to her and he knew, somewhere deep inside, that this was what he wanted.

The dance ended and Oliver, lost in his reverie, started in surprise when Edmund rejoined him. His gaze followed his friend's and to Oliver's surprise, he grimaced.

"Who is she?"

"That's my cousin, Ruth. And her father."

"Introduce me," Oliver demanded. "Now."

Edmund lifted his eyebrows in surprise, but he led the way. They set off in a leisurely stroll around the perimeter of the room. They had to stop to greet several people and every time they did, Oliver glanced across to where she sat. She was still there, not a vision of a fevered imagination. Ruth. It suited her.

It took some time for them to reach their target, but when they did, the girl was still sitting, her father standing behind as though on guard. When they got closer, Oliver became aware of the porcelain skin, the air of tranquility. She drew him like no one else he could remember. Through it all, he kept his air of fashionable hauteur, but he had to concentrate to keep it up. What was happening to him?

"Dear uncle," Edmund murmured. "Allow me to present my friend to you." He performed the introductions simply and Oliver looked at Ruth as much as he dared without being impolite. And found her staring back. Something sparked between them, a recognition of something neither dared acknowledge.

They both looked away hastily, as if caught in some kind of wrongdoing. The look was too intimate, too revealing for first contact. It startled Oliver. Her lack of guile was immediately apparent to him; even more appealing after the constant flirting and coquettishness he'd come to expect from young ladies. Her manners were impeccable however and when she looked back in his direction, she had regained her calm demeanor. She didn't look at him directly again.

"Would you care to take to the floor, Miss Urswick?"

She looked warily at her father. The quick glance spoke volumes and indicated to Oliver, forewarned by Edmund, a degree of protectiveness that bordered on the unusual. There was something in what Edmund had told him. However, Lord Urswick gave his permission and Oliver led Ruth on to the dance floor.

He was relieved to find her capable of performing the steps of the country-dance he led her into. In the short conversations the dance allowed he discovered little, except she had a natural grace flowing from inside her rather than a learned poise. He had to force himself to take his attention away from her to give the common courtesies to the partners arriving in front of him in the round.

At the end of the dance, he took Miss Urswick's arm and steered her away from her father, towards one of the broad avenues leading from the Rotunda. She glanced behind her and then back at him, eyes wide with anxiety. "Don't worry," Oliver reassured her. "We won't go far. I'd just like to talk to you. And Edmund has business with your father that sounds tedious in the extreme the way he describes it."

"My father doesn't like to let me out of his sight," she explained. "We're new to London society and unused to its ways."

Far too protective, Oliver thought. Edmund was right. "You live in Yorkshire, don't you?"

"Yes." She sighed. Although the sigh was slight, Oliver, aware of everything about her, noticed it and wondered at its cause. He recalled Edmund's description of the estate. "A tidy house and neat estate," Edmund had said. "In the Dales. Sheep country." Oliver had always suspected that Edmund had the heart of a farmer. "My main estate is a little closer," he told her. "In Hertfordshire. I'm fortunate enough to be no stranger to London."

"You like London?"

"Don't you?" He took her gloved hand and placed it on his arm. She smiled up at him. Enchanting. "It's a very exciting place," he replied mildly. "Everything is to be found here."

"Except peace and quiet," she said. "It's been overwhelming, but we've been here less than a week."

He laughed. "I suppose it is, at first. You'll get used to it."

"Oh, I don't think we'll stay that long. Father has some sort of legal dispute and I don't think we'll stay long after he's seen his man of business." She stared around her, at the bright lights, the shadier walkways leading off the main avenue. Oliver was tempted to guide her towards one of them, but he feared it was too soon for that. He longed to touch her, to feel that soft skin under his hand. He wrenched his wayward thoughts back to the present. "Coming so far, I would have thought he'd like to give you a season. You haven't been out before in London?"

"Not anywhere," she answered. "You should know I lost my mother, brother and sister in an epidemic of the pox."

"I'm sorry," he said immediately, then frowned. "We haven't had an outbreak for—"

"Six years," she finished for him. "It was six years ago."

Oliver was astonished. She had languished in the country for six years? "Did you never think of asking one of Edmund's sisters to bring you out?" He was glad she hadn't, otherwise someone would have snapped her up by now but he thought it strange all the same.

That wistful look crossed her face again. Then she'd wanted to, he thought. "Papa

needed me," she said briefly.

Something stopped Oliver saying anything. He saw a reticence here, a reluctance to discuss her situation. It intrigued him; he wanted to know more. He would support Edmund if he decided to persuade Ruth to leave her father for a time, that was for sure. "Well we must make the most of your visit while you're here," was all he said.

She turned a glowing face to him. "Yes indeed! Papa says he will take me to the Tower and to Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's—who knows, I may never have the opportunity of seeing them again, so I would dearly like to see what I can!"

"And other, more frivolous pursuits? Riding in the Park, strolling up Bond Street, shopping—"

She looked away. "If I can."

"Would you allow me to take you around the Park one day?" he pursued gently.

"If—if my father will permit it. Is it—is it allowed? You must pardon me. I've been used to such freedoms at home, where everyone knows me, I'm mortally afraid of committing a social solecism!"

"Of course it's allowed." He frowned. She must have lived truly isolated. Her naiveté was frightening, especially here in London, where unscrupulous fortune hunters could easily take advantage of her. Edmund had said she was well-to-do. That would be enough. "Did you make any showing in society before you lost your mother?"

"No, she died when I was eighteen and it was to be my come-out year," she answered readily. "Mama said eighteen was soon enough. She didn't approve of inflicting sixteen year old misses on to her friends, she said!" Her smile lit her face.

Oliver watched the transformation and smiled back. Once, she'd been happy. The wary look gone, she showed something of what she might be, when the shadow was in the background where it belonged. "We went to an Assembly at York," she went on. "It must have been there Mama contracted the disease, for a fortnight later—" she paused and bit her lip.

He didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," sounded too trite to him. Eventually he said, "I hope your stay here will be a happier one. And I hope your father relents and allows you to stay a little longer. You'd be a hit, you know!"

The distressed look left her; she smiled. "Now I know you are cutting a wheedle! How can I make a showing before all these beautiful young ladies?" With a gesture she indicated the people around them; the young debutantes in their exquisite silks and satins, frilled to within an inch of their lives, glittering with family jewels. Her only ornament was a simple string of pearls clasped about her neck. No hair ornaments, no bracelets, no glittering stomacher. He liked it. "You're different," he said. "You'll be called a dowd by the jealous mamas, but you have something rare."

She looked at him questioningly; one eyebrow raised and forced a laugh from him. "Don't ask me what it is," he admitted. "But if they call you names, you can be sure you've been noticed!"

"I'm not sure I want to be noticed."

The time had come for something deeper and this might, just might, be it. Oliver thrust his problem, the one that had plagued him since his brother's death, to the back of his mind. Time enough to think of that if the friendship deepened.

Although he'd been ready for the attentions of the determined mamas, the intensity of the pursuit had taken Oliver aback. At first amused, he'd played the game but after several had attached themselves more than he liked—he disliked other people making his

decisions for him—he distanced himself by taking up masculine pursuits, pursuits the ladies couldn't follow.

This woman was friendly and without guile. At the very least, he hoped to win her friendship. Deeper inside, he knew he wanted something more.

He turned her in the shadow of a large, leafy bush. She stared up at him, eyes wide. "I've only just met you, Ruth, but there is something, isn't there? May I call on you?" Slowly he lifted her hand from his arm up to his mouth and kissed the knuckles. He had taken far more liberties with others, but this would remain with him as an enchanted moment. He didn't want to spoil it.

She smiled, her lips shadowed in the uncertain light. "I'd like that." They gazed at each other. Slowly, subtly he bent towards her. She didn't move away, but drew closer if anything. The spell held them both. They could have been in the middle of Bond Street for all the notice they took of their surroundings.

A voice came from behind him. "Come, Ruth. It is time we were leaving."

Ruth's face tightened; she took on an expression of bland obedience Oliver didn't like it. However, the man was her father, her legal guardian until she married and he had every right to treat her as he chose.

"Yes, father, of course." She turned and gave Oliver a dazzling smile. "Thank you for dancing with me. I enjoyed it very much."

He watched her go, meekly following her parent. If he had anything to do with it, it wouldn't be the last time he saw her.

Oliver put up with Edmund's quizzing all the way home. "I liked her, that's all," he said, although he knew how much more it was. So much more that it dazed him.

"You've never liked any others," Edmund said.

"Yes I have—but she has a certain something—don't you think?"

Edmund grinned and dodged a supine body on the pavement. A well-dressed supine body, someone who hadn't made it home. It was a mild evening, so he might be robbed in his sleep, but he wouldn't freeze to death.

"She's pleasant enough. I knew her as a girl, but when she lost her family, she and her father locked themselves away. I hope this evening means they intend to come out of seclusion. She's no child, you know, she should have been on the town this last six years."

"Six years seems a long time to mourn," Oliver said, "even after such a tragedy."

"I always thought so," Edmund replied. "We've all had such things in our lives and it's something we have to learn to cope with."

Oliver agreed. When his brother Charles had died suddenly it had been a terrible blow, but there was the estate to look after. People depended on him for their livelihood and he couldn't let them down. By the time he'd learned about his inheritance and begun to administer it, the pain of his brother's death had lessened to a dull ache. "I think you're right. I've only just met them and what struck me most was her fear of him and his possessiveness. I'll help if I can."

"Good man!" Edmund replied. "I've decided to set out first thing for Mary's house in the country. I'll put things right with her then I'll come back for Ruth. There'll be a hell of a row but we'll manage. She has property bequeathed to her by her grandmother, so even if her father casts her off there'll be enough for a decent dowry."

"Won't he go after her?" Oliver felt the fear as though it was his own. He felt foolish and dazed. He knew only that he wanted to get to know her better, in case the

miracle had happened and she had jolted him out of the fog of depression that had followed him like a black dog for the past three years. The warmth he felt was a dimly remembered emotion, something he was sure would never return to him.

“Likely he will, but Mary’s husband will know how to look after her. The house is chock-full of servants and she can be well guarded until the old man decides to leave her alone.” He shrugged. “It’s not what I like, but I can’t think of another way. I’ve seen more than you, Iveleigh and I don’t scruple to tell you that I’m worried.”

A shame, but not insurmountable. And there was a lot for Oliver to look forward to. Especially now.

Chapter Three

Sitting in the coach on the way home Ruth stared out of the window, happy but tired. She knew it was early for society, that most people at the ball tonight would go on until the small hours, but that was enough for her first night. She felt blissful, happier than she remembered and even happier when she recalled there might be more nights like this one to come. She'd thought she'd be too shy, but the people who spoke to her had been most kind. More than kind. She wished she had more experience with young men, knew them better but she had been kept so close that George was her only friend outside the family. She had never felt like this about George, this surging excitement, almost a need to feel Lord Iveleigh, to talk to him. Never had a promised drive in the park been so enticing.

Ruth glanced over to where her father sat, on the opposite side of the coach. "That was very enjoyable, father, thank you."

There was no reply. She couldn't see his face properly, as the coach was mostly in darkness, so she turned to stare out of the window once more.

Ruth missed her father's frowning stare, his look of absent concentration.

When they arrived back at their rented house, Ruth tripped up the stairs and then, in the dim light offered when the yawning hall boy lit a candle for them both, turned to confront her grim faced sire.

Lord Urswick, regarding her with a thoughtful frown, suddenly demanded; "Come into the library. I want to talk to you."

It was late, but she obeyed, pausing only to throw her cloak and hat down on a nearby stiff-backed chair in the hall. Her father had made the small bookroom on the ground floor into his sanctum. They had been here a matter of days, but it was as though he'd transported some of the atmosphere in his library at home. It felt just as gloomy, just as sober.

Lord Urswick strode to the seat behind his desk and Ruth stood before it, hands folded neatly in front of her, waiting to hear his will. She hoped he wouldn't tell her to avoid Lord Iveleigh. She liked him. Her mood of buoyancy would be difficult to prick. She planned to go to bed and dream of conquests. Time enough to face reality in the morning.

Her father studied her for several moments before he spoke. His habitual expression was of grave austerity, so Ruth wasn't as alarmed as perhaps she should have been.

"You should not give the young men such flagrant encouragement." So it was that again; the same thing that had driven George away that day. Ruth wished she could be surprised. "I did not like to see your behavior tonight, Ruth. It was too forward. Never forget who you are; you're worth twenty of the hussies there tonight."

"How was I forward, Papa? What did I do wrong?" Ruth had tried her best to behave properly and his statement confused her. She knew how to behave, even if she'd not been out in public for several years. Perhaps walking with him was wrong, but they had stayed on the broad, well-lit path and Ruth had distinctly seen other young ladies strolling alone with men on the wide walk.

"You accepted a dance from that young man on a mere introduction. I would have liked to know him better before I let you into his company."

Before she could still her wayward tongue, Ruth protested, "I only danced with him once, Papa."

Her father gusted a heavy, long-suffering sigh. "Once too often. Then he didn't bring you back to me."

Was her father jealous? Did he know something about Lord Iveleigh she didn't? Perhaps he was a rake, or penniless, or unsuitable in another way. It was only a dance and a short stroll. "There was nothing wrong in it, Papa, he merely took me for a walk after our dance. I was hot," she added mendaciously, "and you were discussing business with Cousin Edmund." In fact, she'd been delighted that someone wanted to spend more time with her than they had to. So few compliments came her way the few she did receive meant a lot to her.

Her father stared at her in silence for a moment and Ruth began to tremble. His eyes took on the wild tinge she was beginning to dread. "I will not have you the object of gossip, Ruth."

Increasingly bewildered by her father's tone, she protested, "Do you know something about his lordship? Of course, if you cannot approve of him, I won't encourage him." Her heart sank when she thought of forgoing Lord Iveleigh's company, but she had no wish to be beguiled by a handsome, no-good rake.

"I don't know him at all. That reprobate my nephew knows him. That's condemnation enough."

"Cousin Edmund? He was a perfect gentleman!" She remembered the ripple of excitement that went through the crowd when Mr. Urswick and Lord Iveleigh had appeared. They must be a catch; otherwise the careful mamas present would never have allowed their daughters anywhere close and they'd been all over the men. But, she thought, with a proud tilt of her chin, he'd chosen her.

Her father broke into her daydreams with a demand so bizarre she thought she'd misheard him at first. "You must pack your things. You are going home tomorrow."

The quiet words hit Ruth like a blow. She stared at her father, aghast. "But-but Papa!" she gasped, breathless with horror.

"You are not conversant with the ways of society, child! Allow me to know what is best for you."

"Why? What have I done?" All her dreams, all her expectations, shattered in a moment. This was not happening to her, surely. She couldn't stay immured at home for the rest of her life, it was impossible! Panic began to rise in her. She fought it down; it wouldn't help her to appear like a hysterical female now.

"You showed a want of conduct I found extremely disturbing." His voice became a little louder. "And it was not all on your side. I disliked the way you were ogled."

"Ogled?" Perhaps she had been, but it couldn't be her fault. Stung by the injustice of his accusation, she protested; "I can't help how people look at me!"

"Yes!" This time Lord Urswick's voice became much louder. "Ogled, miss! Not just that puppy who took you away from me, but everybody there! You were the object of curiosity, the butt of fools! I will not have you subjected to such treatment!"

Ruth tried to be conciliatory, although it went against the grain to do it. She knew no one could reason with her father once he'd worked himself into a fury. "Papa-I was new, they hadn't seen me before-surely they are allowed to look?" Her voice began to tremble in her agitation and she took a moment to steady herself. Her father's rages always frightened her because they were so unlike the man he'd been before the tragedy and it seemed he couldn't control them.

Lord Urswick, now in a towering rage, stood up with such force his chair crashed to

the ground behind him. He set his hands on the desk before him, doubled into fists. "They will not stare at my daughter in such a way! I will not have it! Now make your preparations—you leave in the morning!"

"No Papa!" Ruth's voice rose to an alarmed protest. Her dreams evaporated in front of her eyes; she saw herself alone, unloved, traveling miserably back home. How much worse it would be after one brief taste of what she should have had, what it was her right to have. "How am I ever to meet other people—even find a husband—if I am locked away? You wouldn't listen to George—will you deny me this as well?"

His lordship's face turned slowly red, mottled on the cheeks and over his nose. He clenched his fists them so hard that his knuckles turned white. "Husband? How dare you think of such a thing? How could you think about leaving me—how could you even consider it a possibility?" Small droplets of spittle showered from his mouth.

Ruth stood her ground. This was too important for her to give in meekly. "Then what am I to do?" The tears poured unchecked down her face, distress and anger mixed.

"Why your daughterly duty! You must stay and care for me, of course! Why is the only daughter left to me so selfish? Why can't you see your duty and obey? If you continue in such a way, I will beat you as I haven't beaten you since you were a child! Now obey me and go!"

Ruth swept her hand across her face, streaking the tears, not caring how she looked any more. "No!" She stopped, appalled at what she'd just said. She had never said 'no' to her father before and the thought of what he might do in this mood terrified her. She was not without courage, but had never found it worthwhile to defy him in one of his rages before this.

Lord Urswick shoved the desk between them, fury giving him strength to move the large object. It lurched forward and hit Ruth's legs, forcing her to the floor. Lifting her legs up as she fell meant she only just cleared the heavy piece of furniture that crashed beside her. The impact shook the floor and sent up a cloud of dust from the carpet beneath it. Ruth lay still, trying to regain her composure and took deliberately deep breaths. One person out of control was one person too many.

Lord Urswick crossed the room and stood over her, fists still clenched. "You are all I have, Ruth and you will obey me! No one will take you from me, is that clear? No one!"

His fist went back, but before he struck her Ruth grasped the desk and hauled herself upright, moving as far away from him as possible. "No!" she repeated, the word firming on her lips even as she said it. "I will not be your prisoner!"

She flung herself at the door, grasped the knob.

"You will do as I say!"

"No!"

He moved closer.

Before he could stop her, Ruth wrenched open the door and hurled herself through it, slamming the door closed behind her. Picking up her skirts, she flew across the hall, nearly tripping up in her haste.

She didn't stop to think, didn't remember where she was, what she was doing. She wanted to get away from this place, where the walls closed about her like a prison. If she didn't get away now, she never would; she knew it for a fact.

Seizing her cloak, letting the hat fall to the floor with a soft thud, she wrenched open the front door and ran.

Ruth raced to the corner and took the first turning in case her father came after her. In panic, desperate to get away, she took another turning and another. Tears poured down her face. The interview had terrified, appalled and infuriated her in equal measure. Her father's temper had always been volatile, but he'd never lost it so badly in her presence before, never threatened to hit her, even at his worst. She wasn't aware of where she was running, of the respectable pedestrians who stopped to stare after her, of the night watchmen who came out of their boxes to watch her run.

Ruth was too terrified to return and from somewhere deep within, furious as well. How dared he try to keep her like that? Was that the reason he hadn't allowed her to make her come out in York, kept her immured at home for so long?

The thought steadied Ruth, made her stop her headlong rush to who knew where. Then sense returned. This wasn't her home in Yorkshire, where she could have knocked at any door and been taken in. This was London.

The streets weren't completely empty. Some respectable people, escorted by link-boys, passed on the other side of the street. Ruth considered asking them for help, but she didn't know them and they'd likely take her home to her father once she told them who she was. They walked on, quickening their step when they saw her.

Now the street was empty. Menace lurked behind every door and in the shadows between. Ruth had rushed out of the house with what small change remained in her pockets and nothing else. There was nowhere for her to go.

She leaned against a wall, trying to blend in with the dark, shivering in fear. What should she do? Where could she go?

Nowhere. Nobody cared, nobody knew. She had never felt so totally alone. In the middle of this tangle of humanity, she was more alone than in the middle of a field at home.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and started in shock.

"What have we here?" a male voice muzzily asked.

Ruth turned to see a young man, younger than George or Lord Iveleigh, staring at her face. He was dressed respectably, thin of face, wet-lipped and slack with drink.

"Please sir, can you help me?" She hoped he wasn't too drunk to see reason.

It seemed he was. "Pretty!" His grip on her firmed. "Gisakiss," he leered and before Ruth realized what he was doing, he'd pulled her into his arms and pressed his mouth to hers.

It was disgustingly wet and his breath reeked of spirits. Her stomach heaving Ruth pushed him away with both hands. "No!"

She took to her heels once more, hoping she was running in the right direction. Whatever that was. The youth must have been too drunk to chase her, but it had frightened her and served to remind her of the danger she was in.

With a sinking heart Ruth realized she had to go back, at least for now. She wouldn't obey her father; she was determined on that. Perhaps when she'd got home her father would have gone to bed and she'd be able to think and make her plans. Edmund might help her. She would swallow her pride and ask him.

Somehow, she'd face her father down, refuse to return home. She knew he might bundle her into the coach and what he'd said in temper seemed only too real. She would have to take that chance; she had no choice. There was nowhere else for her to go. Heavily, sadly, Ruth began to trace her steps.

It was only after twenty minutes or so of trudging along streets and squares that

Ruth realized she was lost. She must have ventured further west, because the streets contained fashionable houses and shops, elegant town houses, some lit by flaming flambeaux outside the front doors. They all looked the same and she knew none of them. She had passed no one since that miserable youth and she sincerely hoped she wouldn't encounter anyone else.

These streets and squares were laid out in a logical pattern and the streets were related to the squares by name. Unfortunately, she couldn't see most of the names. They were painted on the walls, where the shadows fell heavily.

Miserably she paused to try to get her bearings and to consider what to do. After a few moments standing quietly, breathing in the crisp night air some of her good sense returned and the panic receded.

Thinking rationally again, Ruth remembered the night watchmen. That would be safer than bumping into a group of carousers, going home after some celebration. Yes, she would find a night watchman and ask him to take her home. That was it. A sense of relief filled her.

Having made her decision, she felt safer, less afraid. This was a civilized city, after all. She was surprised she'd met so few people, but it was early yet, by London standards. Most people would be enjoying themselves somewhere.

Ruth walked some more, but either she missed the boxes where the watchmen lurked, or there weren't any around. She walked lightly, tried to stop her silk gown swishing too much in the still, night air, to try to stop anyone taking any notice of her.

Ruth froze when she heard voices. Male voices, coming in her direction. She shrank back against the railings of a nearby house, glad of her dark cloak and thankful she hadn't had her hair powdered for the evening. That would have shone out like a beacon in the dark.

"Time for us to part," she heard a man say.

"It is indeed, old man. See you anon. Good luck on your trip."

"Could do with a rustication anyway," the cheerful voice returned and Ruth heard laughter. Her heart rose to her throat. She knew those voices.

"Well, sometime after noon then."

"Very well. Good night!"

"Night!"

The men parted and Ruth heard the sound of retreating footsteps as one went up the street a little way and around the corner. Then she heard the sound of footsteps coming towards her. She wasn't sure which of them it was, but she knew she could trust either one.

With a rustle of silk, she stepped out of her dark corner.

The man before her took a step back, his hand on the hilt of his sword, but then, recognizing a woman, stepped closer, peering at her in the near dark.

"Good Lord!" said Lord Iveleigh. "Miss Urswick!"

Chapter Four

They stared at each other, unsure and bewildered. Lord Iveleigh had clearly been drinking, swaying slightly where he stood, but not drunk enough not to recognize Ruth. He shook his head and seemed to regain some of his senses. "What on earth are you doing here, on your own?" He stared owlishly about. "You are on your own, aren't you?"

Ruth nodded. "I was going to find a night watchman to take me home. Oh sir, can you help me?" She dashed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. This was no time for tears.

"By all means, ma'am," he said promptly. Obliging he held out his arm and she came forward and laid her hand on it. "Might be as well if you pull your hood up," he said. "Don't want anyone recognizing you." They walked forward just as though they were about to be presented at Court, their stately pace dictated by his condition.

He took a sideways glance at her and saw the glisten of freshly shed tears on her cheeks. "Don't worry," he hastened to assure her, "We'll get you home soon. What on earth made you do this anyway?"

To his discomfiture, this only quickened the flow. Iveleigh stopped and drew her round to face him. "What is it Miss Urswick? You can tell me, I'm Edmund's best friend, after all!"

His friendly concern nearly undid all Ruth's resolve. She sobbed.

With a look of deep concern on his face Iveleigh handed Ruth his handkerchief crumpled but clean and Ruth buried her face in it as she struggled for control. Awkwardly, he reached out and put a comforting arm about her. She didn't resist. She was past resisting. "I'll take you home," he said. "My home. Can't walk about the streets like this."

Oliver had a neat townhouse in a nearby street. It was all he could think of for now. Deeply aware of the compromising situation, but unable to think of anything else, he led her to his door and fumbled for his keys. Thankfully, they were ready and he'd given instructions for the servants not to wait up for him. Although it was early, for London, Edmund wanting a good night's sleep before he went on his way, the servants would probably already be in bed, for they would be up at dawn. All the time Oliver was desperately accustoming his mind to the new events. He would need all his wits about him. Something was very wrong and he suspected he knew what it was. Edmund's uncle had been sending increasingly erratic letters of instruction to him and Edmund had been on the brink of taking a trip up to Yorkshire to discover the truth for himself. It seemed his vague suspicions were about to come all too disturbingly real. Oliver could only be glad Edmund had decided to seek his sister's sanctuary for the tearful girl at his side.

He made more noise shushing Ruth than she did crying, but they got into the safety of the morning room without anyone seeing them. He pushed her down in a comfortable armchair by the fire and poured her a glass of brandy. His hand hovered over the decanter, but he forbore to pour himself a drink. He would need all the wits he could muster to get out of this pass and that wouldn't help. He thought of calling for coffee, but then someone would see them. He hadn't the faintest idea how to do it for himself. Army officers hadn't been required to learn such domestic skills.

Ruth took the glass and sipped cautiously. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have dragged you into this."

She sounded so forlorn, Oliver resolved there and then to do what he could to help

her. "No problem," he assured her warmly. "I'll help you all I can."

She smiled shakily and gave him the empty glass back.

After lighting a branch of candles from the embers of the banked down fire Oliver sat in a chair opposite Ruth. "Now tell me," he said, keeping his voice as low and steady as he could. "What's happened? What can I do to help?"

Ruth studied Oliver doubtfully and he saw the thoughts cross her face and read it as though she had said the words out loud. He tried to reassure her. "I've known Edmund since school. He served in my regiment for a while and we've stayed in touch. I'd say he was my closest friend in the world and he's been a good one to me. I owe him a favor or two, but please, Miss Urswick, be assured you can trust me. Tell me what you can and then I'll be able to see what can be done." He bit his lip. "I've pushed the boat out a bit tonight, but I'm coming round."

She stared at him, adorable in her confusion, biting the tip of her left forefinger. "I've got nobody else. I'll tell you the whole if you promise to tell no one else."

"I promise." He would have promised her the world, if he could.

"Wh-when my mother and brother and sister died, six years ago, it was terrible," she began. "Edmund only came for the funeral and to arrange the legal side of things with my father, so he didn't see how bad it was."

"I remember," Oliver said. "He wrote to me about it. He said he wanted to leave you in peace, said you need some time to recover. Was he wrong?"

She shook her head. "No, he wasn't wrong. Not at the time, anyway. My father and I locked ourselves away and consoled each other. We didn't want to be the objects of pity, as we seemed to be every time we appeared in public. I think most people just meant to be kind, but they made it worse." Oliver nodded in understanding. His life had not been without bereavements. "It just became a habit. We were happy in each other's company and my come out could wait for a year or two" She paused, swallowed. "Well a year or two turned into six."

"Edmund's sister Mary offered to bring you out. Did you know?"

She stared at him before shaking herself back to reality. "No, Father never told me. He must have destroyed Edmund's letter."

Oliver was appalled. "Dear Lord, why would he do that?"

Ruth shrugged. "It's gone now, not to be thought of. Father didn't want to lose me. That's become only too clear." She frowned and her dark eyes gained a misty look, as she went back in time in her mind. "It was easier to continue as we were, instead of change. People stopped coming, at first to give us time, then because they hadn't been invited. I didn't think about it until recently. It's not normal any more." She raised her head, looked at him, her eyes glittering in the flickering light. The hood of her cloak fell back and he caught his breath on her tremulous smile. "I think my father wants to keep me for himself," she said quietly, bravely keeping her regard on his face. "Have I said enough? If you don't want to hear this, I'll stop, find another way. I'm not completely helpless and I won't be penniless either. I have a small legacy left in trust for me by my grandmother. Father doesn't want me to meet anyone else, doesn't want me to marry."

She paused, so he filled the silence. "If you marry, there'll probably be grandchildren. If you marry well, there'll be plenty of room for your father wherever you choose to live."

"Yes," she agreed. "It's what I hoped for. But-a neighbor of ours, someone I've known for years, proposed and it's because of that I'm here." He raised an eyebrow in

query. He could feel the sobriety returning to him. It had been a skill much required of an army officer, required to act at a moment's notice, however much wine he had shipped. The coffee would have helped, but the peace and the necessity to concentrate on Miss Urswick's words were enough.

Miss Urswick swallowed and went on. "When my mother died, I was happy to spend the next year looking after my father. I gave everything up—all my friends, my social life. Except for George. We played together as children and our lands march together. I think my mother hoped we might make a match of it one day. Then, three weeks ago, George proposed. He isn't of noble birth, you understand, but farming stock. However, they found a rich coal seam on the edge of their land and they've prospered ever since. George was sent to Harrow and learned to be a gentleman, but never forgot where he came from. He still enjoys working on the land, even though he doesn't have to any more."

Oliver watched her closely. Was she in love with this George? He longed to ask her, but knew he couldn't intrude on her that much. He wouldn't admit the feeling creeping through him. He wanted her for himself. It couldn't be mere lust, although it was a long time since he had felt even that. His protective instincts were strong where she was concerned, almost overwhelming.

She took another sip of brandy and her shoulders slumped a little, as some of the tension left her. "George is a good man and he will make an excellent husband," she continued and then, on a more wistful note, "but I don't think his wife will be me. Papa threw him out when he went to ask his permission; told him he was an insolent puppy. Not just that, in his rage he said no one would marry me, no one would 'take me away from him'!" She stared at Oliver, her eyes widening in horror as she remembered. "That's not normal, is it? I realized then there was something very wrong. Then he told me he would take me to London with him, to keep an eye on me, as though I would run away with George if he left me alone! While I was insulted by the insinuation, I was excited about London. I thought I might meet people—" she stopped, afraid of running on too much.

He gave a low whistle. "No, Ruth, that's not normal, not normal at all. Go on!"

She didn't cavil at his use of her first name; perhaps she hadn't noticed. It had come naturally to him, as though he'd known her for years. "We went to Ranelagh tonight. Because I'd been kept close, I found it hard to contrive a gown, but I managed it and although Papa wouldn't let me dance, he let me talk to a few people and I began to enjoy myself. Then, before Papa could object, you whisked me away." Here were all the stars she hadn't shown for her friend George, the misty look clouding her eyes, a small smile at her lips. Dare he hope? Now, it became more important than ever that he get her away from her domineering father. He wanted to get to know her better. A lot better.

"Papa took me home after he took me away from you." She broke off, twisting the handkerchief in her hands and lowered her head. "It was terrible," she whispered. "I've never seen him in such a rage! He said he would keep me, that he would send me home tomorrow—I couldn't bear it! I won't do that again, I can't face years and years of nothing!" Despite her good intentions, the tears came again and she had to break off. She looked up again, fighting down the tears. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't burden you with this. I had quite determined to go home and face whatever my father wanted to do, but to be truthful, I've never seen him so bad before. I'm not sure he's entirely responsible for his actions. I was afraid he was going to hurt me badly, I couldn't see any recognition in his face, any restraint. That's what made me run. I would have faced him down, but I don't think I had

the strength to do it."

Oliver sat in the gloom; one hand curled around the arm of his chair, frowning as he thought as hard as the brandy he'd consumed would let him. He longed to take her in his arms, never let harm come to her, but he had no right. At least, he resolved, he would help her. "I can't think it's right to cage you up like that. I can understand his motives. He wants to keep you safe after what happened to the rest of your family, but that's hardly the way to do it."

"I'll listen to anything," she replied. "I'm not sure he'll be safe just now. If you could think of somewhere I could find shelter for a day or two—somewhere respectable, I'd be very grateful."

"If anyone finds you here your reputation would be in tatters." He struck the arm of his chair with the flat of his hand. "Oh for a sister in London! I'm alone in the world, Ruth, I have no close relatives left."

She sighed. "An inn, perhaps?"

"With no maid or luggage?" He shook his head. "That wouldn't do. We need somewhere for a couple of days, somewhere you'll be safe. If he finds you, your father will take you back, won't he?"

"Yes. He's my legal guardian. No one would be able to stop him, if he put his mind to it."

"Edmund can start legal proceedings," Oliver ventured.

She laughed shakily. At least that was better than the tears. "You think I haven't thought of that? Such a case could drag on for years. It would drag me through the mire, bring our affairs into the open."

Oliver knew she was right. If he could get her to a place of safety, though, she might have a chance. She was over age, legally able to do as she wished, but her father held all the trump cards. Position, respectability, wealth; he had them all. "What to do? We must do something—and soon. In a few hours, the servants will be stirring and the early morning vendors will be in the streets. At the moment society is disporting itself in but very soon the streets will fill up with people going home."

"Take me to an inn," she said. "Perhaps I could stay at a disreputable one? No one would know I was there."

He tapped his finger against his mouth. "It's a terrible risk if you are recognized and if you were discovered you would have no protection against him. I wonder if we could contrive a disguise?"

She sighed once more, but the tears had gone and she looked steadier now. "I shouldn't have involved you in this. Just take me home. I'll manage. He must be over his temper by now, with any luck he'll be asleep."

Oliver surprised himself by the vehemence of his response. "No! I'm determined not to take you home until I've consulted with Edmund. Lord Urswick sounds alarmingly unbalanced, perhaps even ill. I'm not sure about your safety if you go back now, truly, Ruth."

Ruth watched Oliver silently and waited for his response. He couldn't leave her to face that monster alone. "Good God!" he cried, struck by a sudden thought. He looked at Ruth and blushed. "Beg pardon. I just thought of something. Of course, if you dislike it—"

"I'll be willing to take your advice," she said. "You're right—he's unbalanced. I love him dearly, but if he carries on and gets worse, he might do something he would deeply

regret."

"Well, I know somewhere just for tonight. Mind-you might not like it!" Inside he wondered what madness had got into him, but his still befuddled mind could think of nothing else.

"I promise I won't mind!" she cried fervently.

He leaned forward in his chair. "Edmund is going to see his sister Mary to see if she can take you under her wing, you can make your come-out and for now you'll be safe at her house. It will mean living close, never being out of sight of a protector, but it could be done. Your father can start all the legal proceedings he likes, but he won't be able to get at you there."

Joy transformed her features and Oliver held his breath in wonder. He would have killed anyone who hurt her, done anything to keep that look on her face. "That would be wonderful!" she breathed.

He had to mitigate his statement. He hated it, but it had to be done. "Edmund's sister Mary lives in Hertfordshire. He plans to leave first thing, or I wouldn't have been coming home so early. I decided to call it a night, as well." He put a hand to his forehead to steady it again. "Wish I hadn't thrown quite so much down my throat before I came home." He dropped his hand. "Anyway, the point is this. It'll take him a day to get there and a day at least to persuade her and a day to come home."

"I'd better go back," she said sadly. "I'd hoped, but-no matter! If Edmund wants to help me, I'm sure I'll be all right."

"I'm not!" he said savagely. She stared at him, her eyes wide in surprise. "I hate to say this, but your father doesn't sound in the least safe. Do you know he could have you locked up?"

She nodded. "Yes, he's threatened me with it before, but he wants me to take care of him, he says. I can hardly do that from a lunatic asylum, can I?"

He had rarely seen anything so brave. She was volunteering to go back into the power of a man who, from what Oliver had seen and heard, could prove to be a homicidal lunatic. Now her initial terror had abated she met his gaze squarely, courage and determination etched all over her face. "If you go back tonight, you won't be safe, will you?"

He saw the tiny tremble of her lower lip before she suppressed it. "Maybe not," she admitted.

"Then you shan't go back. I might be able to offer an alternative." He chuckled. "Somewhere Urswick would never think of looking! Right under his nose!" He eyed her a trifle owlishly, blinking to get her back into focus. "Mrs. Brown's," he said.

She stared at him. She had no idea who Mrs. Brown was. "Your father owns the land," he explained. "Very lucrative. Covent Garden."

He saw the light dawn in Ruth's face. At one time, about a hundred years ago, her family had owned a house in London. The house had been in the fleetingly fashionable Covent Garden. "Is the house occupied?"

"Yes, I told you. Mrs. Brown's. Everybody goes there." He paused. "Every man goes there. Very fashionable. She wouldn't turn you away." Not when he could threaten her with heightened rents on Edmund's behalf.

Miss Urswick sat up straight in her chair. "Then let us go there at once." She stood and picked up her cloak, throwing it around her shoulders. Oliver rose, holding the arms of his chair for support. Once he was back on his feet, he was as good as new, he assured

himself and he crammed his hat back on his head and held out his arm. "It's a bit of a walk," he informed her.

"I don't mind," she informed him sunnily. "I walk for miles in the country!"

He opened the door for her and then, remembering the two dirty glasses, shrugged. With any luck, his servants would assume Edmund came back for a nightcap. Closing the door firmly behind him, he followed her out.

The journey wasn't too long, up Piccadilly and past Drury Lane. With Lord Iveleigh by her side, the streets seemed much safer. Ruth pulled the hood of her cloak up, just in case she was recognized. Since she'd only been to one gathering so far, it was extremely unlikely, but it would mean disaster if anyone recognized her now. Although she knew his lordship was the worse for drink, his thought processes seemed reassuringly normal and she trusted him.

Occasionally Iveleigh moved closer to her to shelter her from the importunities of over enthusiastic passers-by, at this time of night rather the worse for wear. More than ever Ruth was glad of his presence. It was certainly a great deal better than managing on her own. She knew instinctively that he wouldn't let her down. She'd heard of him before, from Edmund's letters, but never met him. She was glad she knew him now.

The theatre in Drury Lane had concluded its entertainment and most revelers were either on their way to the clubs, or to private gatherings. With all her heart, Ruth wished she could be one of them, instead of a fugitive from her own home. However, she was not one to repine on what couldn't be, so she went with her rescuer to Covent Garden, deliberately pushing her fears away. Whatever happened from now on, courage was a requirement. Her emotions, bewilderment, fear, even a touch of excitement at what lay ahead, remained to be dealt with once she got to Mrs. Brown's boarding house.

The Garden had been built in the last century, as a place to house the fashionable, but it had never been a complete success and now it was given over entirely too nefarious and shady activities. In daylight, the great flower and vegetable market stood under the arches of what should have been a fashionable piazza, but at night, it belonged to the people who society knew about, but only one half had ever seen. The male half.

Small, unprepossessing doors, discreetly manned by very large men, muscles bulging under their coats stood open, light streaming out on to the cobbled road outside. Uncurtained windows sent more light to illuminate the chilly night and the sounds of unrestrained revelry surged out to join it. Ruth was fascinated but when she stopped to stare his lordship put a firm hand in the small of her back and urged her on. "Just stay silent," he warned her. "I'll say the needful." Ruth was relieved to see Iveleigh's walk was steady and his speech less slurred than it had been when she'd first met him earlier in the evening. "There'll be the devil to pay if this subterfuge is ever discovered," he muttered, "but I can't think what else to do tonight. Still, I can't leave a lady in distress. Chin up!" They went boldly forward.

The bully on the door knew Lord Iveleigh, for he smiled and bowed slightly when they approached. He regarded Ruth with a frown, but let her pass.

Inside was all color and light. Girls dressed in bright, cheap silks bustled about the hall, heading for the stairs and the show rooms above. Blue Chinese style murals showily adorned the hall, more verve than accuracy in the depictions of Oriental plants and birds. Ruth had seen better, but rarely had she seen brighter.

One woman stood at the foot of the stairs, ready to receive her guests. She was older

than the others, dressed with a little more propriety, but her ample bosom still swelled invitingly above her tight stays. She was quite short, but very amply endowed and blessed with a patrician, one might almost say aquiline nose of magnificent proportions. Her smile was practiced and welcoming. No sign of what she might really be feeling showed through the mask of heavy make up and carefully schooled expression. Her face was dead white with the thick white cream known as ceruse, except for a liberal sprinkling of black patches.

Ruth stared at her, knowing this must be Mrs. Brown. She also realized this was no ordinary lodging house. Respectable or otherwise. She was almost past caring. If Lord Iveleigh demanded payment in kind for his help, she would not be averse to that.

"Good evening, your lordship," the lady said, her practiced smile fading only slightly when she noticed Ruth. "I trust you don't expect to avail yourself of the facilities here without partaking of the company?"

"Good Lord, no!" exclaimed Iveleigh. "I would appreciate somewhere quiet I can explain matters. Thing is, ma'am, I find myself in a bind and couldn't think of anywhere else to go."

The smile faded, but Mrs. Brown was made of stern stuff. "Very well, sir. Come this way."

Instead of going upstairs, she led the way to a small door at the back of the hall. It led into a room set aside as an office.

It was as though they had stepped through into another world; the world of business. Ledgers stood on the shelves behind a large pedestal desk and the chairs set about it, while comfortable, didn't match and had evidently seen better days.

Ruth sat and only then felt safe enough to throw back her hood and undo the clasp at the front.

Mrs. Brown stared at her with a calmly assessing gaze.

Ruth stared back, noting the obvious air of control, the calm assurance. She hoped this woman would help them; she felt sure Mrs. Brown would be a formidable ally.

His lordship broke the silence. "This is Mrs. Brown, my dear."

Iveleigh cleared his throat. "Her father has come to town to attend to some business and has brought his daughter to enjoy her first taste of the town. He seems to be somewhat-unwilling to allow Miss Urswick to see more than the inside of the house."

Mrs. Brown shrugged. "Plenty of fathers are possessive," she commented indifferently. "What has that to do with me?"

"Miss Urswick became distressed tonight after a heated discussion and left the house precipitately."

Mrs. Brown's penetrative stare swung slowly to Ruth, studying her. She said nothing. Ruth met her stare for stare. The atmosphere thickened.

Lord Iveleigh tried to explain, mustering his thoughts closely. "Miss Urswick is concerned for her own safety and so am I. Frankly, ma'am, her father is showing such signs of instability I don't want Ruth anywhere near him until I can assure myself of her safety. I'm somewhat of a guardian, for the time being, until her cousin arrives back in town. He wishes to take care of her. I need somewhere for her to stay overnight while I find her somewhere safer. She left the house so quickly she has nothing with her, so I need to provide her with some sort of wardrobe before I take her anywhere else."

This time Mrs. Brown laughed. It sounded like genuine amusement. "And you couldn't find anywhere more respectable?"

"Not at this time of night," came the blunt response. "I can't put her up at my

house, so I need somewhere she'll be safe. You have brawny men working for you. Ruth might have need of them."

"And her reputation will be secure if she is discovered here?"

Both ladies stared at Iveleigh in astonishment. Ruth was innocent, but by now she had worked out that this was more than a simple boarding house. This establishment could only be one thing and anywhere less respectable was hard to think of.

Iveleigh continued gamely. "If you can put her in a private room—who's going to think of searching there?"

Mrs. Brown smiled, showing a mouthful of yellowed teeth. "And you know who owns this house?"

"Of course," said Lord Iveleigh. "Lord Urswick does. He'll never think of searching here. Nor will anyone else! She'll be safer here than she would be anywhere else in striking distance. If Lord Urswick really is going off his head—" he turned to Ruth, flushing— "I'm sorry ma'am, but it seems that way." Ruth nodded, sadly admitting the truth of it. Iveleigh continued. "He'll set up a search for her in all the usual places—inns, relatives, friends—and once he finds her he'll be able to compel her to return. In law, she's his and I can do nothing. Edmund Urswick might be able to, but he's leaving for his sister's first thing and I don't want to delay his journey. I'll send a note round to his lodgings, tell him what's going on, but no more than that. It's important we get Ruth away as quickly as we can."

There was silence. Mrs. Brown frowned in thought. All social niceties were gone now and left was a hardheaded businesswoman, pondering a situation that had just dropped into her lap. She absent-mindedly wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"It is extremely likely that Mr. Urswick will own this house one day," Iveleigh reminded her gently. "There would be considerable advantage to you in obliging him now."

"If this was a hum and I'm helping in something clandestine, I might be thrown out on my ear," she snapped back.

Iveleigh seemed to understand some of her dilemma. "If you wish, you may say you know nothing of this, that you thought I'd brought my doxy here. I'll back you up in that."

Mrs. Brown nodded, slowly. "And are you?"

Ruth flushed. So did Iveleigh. "I swear to you I'm not. Miss Urswick my friend. I promise you she's a perfectly respectable female."

Mrs. Brown turned her attention to Ruth, as though Iveleigh wasn't there. She spoke frankly. "Do you know where you are? I mean, what this place is?"

"Yes ma'am." Ruth folded her hands in her lap and prepared to be lectured. As Mrs. Brown spoke, she watched, fascinated, as a dewdrop collected at the end of the older lady's nose.

"If you stay here you are likely to see things you've never dreamed of. We don't force the girls here, as they do in some houses and we take good care of them. When they leave, it is often to go into a gentleman's keeping. This, Miss Urswick, is one of the best houses in London. We are firstly a gaming house, but there is a select company of girls, should the gentlemen require other entertainment. You are likely to see men here you will see elsewhere in society, but you must promise never to reveal it out of this house. You will also be exposed to things no well brought up young lady should ever see. Can you abide by all this?" She sniffed. Ruth breathed a silent sigh as the dewdrop returned from whence it came.

Ruth had never imagined such adventures in all her life and while the situation was desperate, it was not without its appeal to an inquisitive female who had never had an escapade in her life. Not even a scrape. Now the first shock of her precipitate departure from her father's house had receded the adventurous side of her, purposely suppressed for so long, emerged, blinking, into the light. "I can try."

"If it ever became known you stayed in this house, you would have as much to lose as me," Mrs. Brown pointed out. "Perhaps more than me. I can find another establishment if it becomes necessary, but you—if you lose your reputation like this it is gone for good."

Ruth knew she spoke the truth, but she saw no option. Lord Iveleigh was right. She couldn't go back to her father, not as he was at present. With any luck, she wouldn't be here above a night or two. If she was careful, it might be the very thing.

"One more thing," said Mrs. Brown. "It isn't only men who come here. Sometimes ladies of fashion come here, either to play a game with their husbands, or their lovers, or to experience life on the other side of the door. It is a rule of the house that these women are never to be recognized."

Ruth glanced at Iveleigh. His mouth had dropped open. "I had no idea," He grinned. "I must come here more often!"

Mrs. Brown stared at him steadily, one eyebrow raised. "I would hate to see you here too often, sir," she commented. Her voice was steady but the warning implicit.

Iveleigh flushed. "Well," he added belatedly. "Only out of curiosity of course."

Both women laughed. It was spontaneous, unforced laughter, camaraderie engendered by an instinctive understanding of men. For the first time, Mrs. Brown gave a genuine, unforced smile, the corners of her mouth turning up and creasing the heavy make up she wore. Ruth smiled back. Lord Iveleigh was forced to join in, but his grin was more rueful: the boy found out in mischief.

"Very well, I'll shelter her—but on my terms," said the lady.

Oliver nodded. "Of course."

Mrs. Brown folded her arms comfortably in front of her on the table and began to list her requirements. "First—you will pay me ten guineas a night for the use of the room." Ruth winced at the price. Far more than a respectable inn! "Second—I will hide her in my own way. Third—neither of you will gossip about what you might see here and more importantly, who. My customers rely on my discretion. Fourth—if questioned, I shall say Miss Urswick is a doxy you brought here for your own use, sir and the only name I knew her by was Millie."

Ruth exchanged a glance with Iveleigh and then back to Mrs. Brown. She knew how important this decision was for her future. She had no idea what was in store for her, but she knew she couldn't go on as she was. Her father had no right to take her life away. She would fight for control of it, then, even if he won, she would know she had tried.

"Very well, I agree."

The die was cast.

Chapter Five

Mrs. Brown sent his lordship away shortly afterwards. "It's my busy time," she told him. "I'll show Miss Urswick to her room and then come down to work." She turned to Ruth. "I'll call you Millie from now on, even when we seem to be alone. Walls have ears."

Ruth bade goodbye to Lord Iveleigh, who promised to call the next day. "Not too early, mind," the madam cautioned him.

Ruth watched him go. His lordship was her only friend, the only ally she had now. For a moment, she felt bereft, but then straightened her shoulders. She turned to face her hostess, seeing a calculating, thoughtful look disappear into a mask of blandness. "You should stay in your room tonight," she said. "Are you hungry? I can have something sent up to you." Ruth refused the food.

Mrs. Brown took her upstairs. Passing through the hall, with a jerk of her head that sent all her powdered curls into action, she summoned a strong, brawny man to her side. He was huge, with a broad, gnarled face to match and an ear that Ruth was sure had started life quite a different shape. "This is Vic," she said. "He'll look after you."

Ruth studied Vic and despite the difference in height, there was no doubt who ruled the roost. "This is Millie. She is for Lord Iveleigh's use. No one else. Understand?" Ruth felt a thrill. 'Lord Iveleigh's use?' Something inside her responded to the intimacies that phrase engendered in her mind. She liked his lordship, but perhaps that liking was something more. No, at the moment he was nothing more than her knight, the man who had rescued her from an unthinkable situation. Not many knights would have put her here, she thought wryly and not many maidens would have been thankful for it, but she certainly was.

Vic nodded, his massive head only moving slightly. Ruth noticed with interest that he seemed to have no neck, his great head merging almost without a pause into beefy shoulders. "Yes Mrs. Brown."

"She's new to all this, so don't give her any trouble," Mrs. Brown cautioned him. Then she addressed Ruth. "Make sure Vic can see you at all times when we're open." She jerked her head to indicate the throngs of fashionable men filling the hall and stairs. "Give this lot an inch and they'll take it all."

Seeing the look of delight and unbridled enjoyment on most of the faces, Ruth was forced to agree.

She followed Mrs. Brown up one flight of stairs, through a raucous group of people, male and female and up another flight. Ruth tried to look straight ahead. She'd had enough shocks for one night.

At the end of a corridor, the lady opened a door. "This should do. Sally was in here, but her gentleman took her away last week."

Ruth saw a small room, dominated by a large bed with slightly grubby curtains held back by cords. A washstand stood at one side of the room and at the other end was a dressing table with a large mirror. There was a chaise at the bottom of the bed and a chest under the window. It looked strangely impersonal, like a room in an inn. Ruth breathed a sigh of relief. She had been expecting much worse than this. The drapery might be gaudy but it was respectable. "I'd ask much more rent if you were a working girl," Mrs. Brown informed her, "I suppose you've realized, I'm doing his lordship a favor. If you're fooling me, I'll triple it--and more!" Ruth shook her head in denial, but the woman leaned forward

and patted her arm. "It's a hard life, especially for women. I came up from the country and if it wasn't for Mrs. Trimble, I would have been on the streets in a week and in Bridewell the week after." She lifted an admonitory finger. "Don't think I won't make my own enquiries. I'll be asking after you—discreetly, of course—and I'll make sure of it." She regarded Ruth for a moment, her steely grey eyes missing nothing. Seemingly satisfied, she nodded. "You can sleep in your shift tonight. We'll see about getting you some clothes and other things tomorrow."

With that, she left, closing the door. Ruth saw the key in the lock, turned it and leaned her back against the door, feeling safe for the first time since she'd returned from Ranelagh.

Left on her own, Ruth suddenly felt tired, drained beyond anything she could remember. The evening that had started so well with girlish excitement at the prospect of her first society gathering had ended in nightmare and near disaster. Near disaster? She gave a wry smile. This was as close to disaster as she could imagine and she couldn't see any way out of it yet. Her father's behavior was so frightening as to make her fear for his sanity and her safety should she go back. His autocratic control wasn't something Ruth cared to cope with any more and this night had made her determined to combat it, in any way open to her.

If society ever got to know it, her unchaperoned night away from home would shatter her reputation. She was forced to depend on someone she'd not seen for six years and a man who she had only heard of before tonight. She couldn't imagine what had led her to trust him. It wasn't only her despair; she could have managed, she was sure, but she felt safe with him in a way she hadn't felt in years. All her instincts told her to trust him. If she was wrong, she was further in the suds.

Although she was tired, she also felt exhilaration bubbling up unbidden inside her. This was adventure. For the first time in her life, she was on her own and it felt wonderful, as well as a little frightening. She didn't know what would happen tomorrow, unlike the rest of her existence. It was exciting.

Unwilling to think any more, Ruth decided the best thing to do was get some rest. She had some difficulty undoing her stays, but she managed it by slipping her arms out of the shoulder straps and turning the whole garment around so she could get to the laces. She stripped down to her shift, then got in between the covers and blew out the single candle Mrs. Brown had given her. Within minutes, she fell asleep.

Ruth stirred and opened her eyes. Accustomed to waking up in strange bedrooms at inns recently, one more didn't confuse her. Not at first. Then she remembered where she was and sat up. Something had woken her. There it was again; a knock at the door.

Scrambling out of bed, she unlocked the door and then raced back across the room to hurtle beneath the covers once more. She only had her shift on. In came a maid, looking much like maids anywhere, large cap to protect her hair, simple caraco jacket and heavy petticoat. She carried a tray with a small teapot, cup, milk jug and a plate of toast. Simple, but very welcome. Ruth wondered if it was included in the rent. "Morning miss," said the maid, eyeing Ruth with curiosity.

"Good morning," Ruth replied.

The maid placed the tray on the bed next to Ruth. "If you wish, miss, I'll bring you up some tea and light your fire in the mornings."

"Thank you," said Ruth uncertainly. She wanted to keep that door locked at night,

but she would appreciate the tea. The girl moved towards the fireplace and touched a catch. A small door swung open. "I can come in this way, miss. The guests are strictly forbidden the servants' part of the house."

This relieved Ruth's mind and she agreed with alacrity. The only thing that alarmed her in this arrangement was the possibility of theft, but since all she owned at present were the clothes slung over the daybed and the few paltry coins in her pockets, that didn't concern her as much as it might otherwise have done.

"What time is it?" Another thing she didn't have was a watch.

"Half past twelve, miss," said the maid. She bent to set a light to the already laid fire. "Madame has just woken and she says, if it pleases you to join her in an hour in her sitting room, she can spare you some time."

"Thank you."

The maid left and Ruth sipped a leisurely cup of tea and reflected on the astonishing occurrences of the last twenty-four hours.

She'd been so excited at the thought of her first society event, even when her father ordered her to remain with him. "Watch how others go on," he'd told her. "Don't put yourself forward." She wouldn't have dared, once she saw the magnificent clothes everyone wore and the familiarity with which they greeted each other. She'd been studied and found wanting, probably because of her relatively plain costume and unpowdered hair. Everyone else had been in powder and she felt quite a dowd, but despite that, she'd enjoyed herself hugely watching society disport itself. Closing her eyes, she saw the elegant Rotunda, the glittering chandeliers casting faceted light on the jewels and gilded embroidery.

Then Edmund's friend had asked her to dance. She felt very easy with Edmund, even though she hadn't seen him for years. It had been pleasant to see a familiar face in that sea of strangers.

Lord Iveleigh had been something else. She didn't feel at all easy with him! He was so assured, so beautiful she'd been sure he only asked her out of politeness and her cup of happiness ran over when he took her for a walk afterwards. Surely that hadn't been out of duty! His help later was so out of the ordinary she could only presume drink had bettered his judgment. She hoped he wouldn't abandon her here, but he'd helped her to take the first step and she would always be grateful for that.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to dream for a moment. What she saw when she opened her eyes almost made her drop her tea dish.

Herself, gazing down in astonishment. A mirror where the bed canopy should be, reflecting her, the tea tray and the rumpled bedclothes. Heaven alone knew what else it had seen!

Ruth looked away immediately, instantly recalled to a sense of where she was and the trouble she'd brought on herself. No, she told herself, although the panic that had made her run from the house had been hers, her father had caused it. If he hadn't frightened and angered her so much, she would still be there. She knew he had a volatile temper, but it had never been like that before, never so violent, never so terrifyingly uncontrolled. At one point, lying on the floor staring up at him, she'd feared for her life. That was why she'd run. The choice had seemed simple at the time.

Now, carefully avoiding looking up, Ruth wasn't so sure. She felt horrifyingly alone, no one to help her but a brothel madam, a distant relative she hadn't seen for years and a total stranger who made her feel safe. The alternative would have been worse. Her

father would never have allowed her to leave home again, once he had her back in Yorkshire. And then what? Nothing, for ever and ever.

Ruth couldn't bear that. At four and twenty, she was old to make her debut, but she still had a chance of finding a life for herself, a husband to care for her and to give her children. She wanted that very much, not to spend her days caring for an increasingly volatile father only to find herself middle aged and alone when he died. A quiet life of independence would be better than that. Pleasing herself, for a change.

There was nothing for it now but to do as she was told and see what transpired. She got out of bed after pouring another dish of tea and took it over to the dressing table where, to her relief, she found a hairbrush. The bristles were worn, the silver plate rubbed through to the copper, but it was usable. She brushed shining order into her long, dark locks, the mundane action helping her to find her courage again.

Scrambling about on the floor and among the bedclothes, she found enough hairpins to make herself decent, fastening her thick hair into a neat coil at the back of her head. Her stays were a problem, but by lacing them in a way she'd learned years ago, she could pull them fairly tight. The rest of the clothes were easier, though it felt strange putting on an evening gown at this time of day. Flicking up the ruffles at her elbows, she slipped on her stockings, garters and shoes and left the room.

Then she realized she didn't know where she was going. The corridor outside was empty, so she went to the stairs and looked down.

There, on the floor below, stood Vic. His ravaged face broke into a smile when he saw her and he beckoned. Without a doubt Vic had been a prizefighter, a profession proclaimed by his broad, crooked nose and cauliflower ears. In repose, he appeared as villainous as they came, but when he smiled, it changed to a quaint sweetness. Without a tremor, Ruth went down to join him.

"Madam's waiting for you," he rumbled and took her to the sitting room, right at the end of the floor, past gilded doors leading to the show rooms of the house. He opened the door for her but stayed outside, almost as if he was on guard.

The sitting room was obviously not a room for show. It was furnished in good but well-worn furniture in more subdued colors than Ruth had seen elsewhere in this establishment. They were alone and a tea table stood by a comfortable chair, adorned with a large teapot and several tea dishes.

Mrs. Brown had left off her heavy paint and now she looked much like a respectable townswoman should, dressed in a fine but practical gown of dark green wool, a fichu firmly tucked into her capacious bosom. She still wore some black patches on her face, but she had found a handkerchief this morning, which she carried in one hand, so her prominent nose was blessedly dry.

Mrs. Brown handed her a dish and motioned Ruth to sit down. "We need to get you some togs," she said. "You can't go around all day like that."

"I haven't a thing," Ruth confessed.

"I'll give you what you need," the lady promised. "You'll need a day dress, some underwear and something to wear in the evenings. Lord Iveleigh will pay your bills, so you're not to worry, he says."

"You've seen him?"

"No, he sent a note round. He wants to come later this afternoon, after he's seen your father. He wants to see the man for himself. Quite a mess this, isn't it?"

Ruth nodded, made miserable by her recollections. "I've never known Father quite

like this. I think it's been getting worse for the last year or two."

"Men can be driven crazy by their womenfolk," Mrs. Brown said laconically. "That's one of the reasons they've come here. I've seen them driven mad by other things, too. Sometimes the growth is so slow it's hardly noticed." She stood up briskly. "Now, I'll tell you a bit about this house. I take it you've never heard of us?"

Ruth smiled and shook her head. "How would I get to hear of you?"

"Well, we're a straightforward out and out gaming house, with a few girls on the side," the older lady stated. In the daylight, with her hostess dressed as respectably as most other women it all seemed fantastical to Ruth. Her words were real enough. "There are bagnios, houses of correction, seraglios and Lord knows what else, but we combine genteel entertainment and fair play with the prettiest girls in London and we do very well. In fact," she added proudly, jutting out her bosom like a pouter pigeon, "we're the best there is. We turn people away if they ain't the right sort."

Ruth tried to look impressed while the lady continued to tell her about her house. "We have a card room, which fetches in a fair amount and the girls know how to entertain a gentleman-in or out of bed." Ruth blushed. She appreciated the forthright manner, but couldn't yet cope with all the ramifications. "I think that makes for a better establishment. I wouldn't be surprised if my girls entertain your sons in the fullness of time." She put her tea dish down with a sharp click and stood up. "First things first. Let's get you toggled out. Then I'll have you shown around, while things are quiet. There are a few gentlemen here, but most are still abed, so you should be safe."

Ruth followed her into an adjoining room, which proved to be an ordinary looking dressing room. A dressing table stood on a shallow pedestal and Mrs. Brown ushered Ruth over to it and made her sit down. "I think we should give you the kind of disguise no one will look at twice in this house. You've only been seen once in society, is that right?" Ruth nodded, miserably reminded of her wrecked ambitions. "All to the good," Mrs. Brown continued briskly. "It's less likely anyone will recognize you. Now, I'm going to make it so your own father won't know you."

Ruth let her do what she wanted. Mrs. Brown applied a thick layer of white cream, which felt hard on Ruth's skin. Over it, she shaded some Spanish wool, leaving cheeks flushed redder than they ever would be in nature. Ruth watched Mrs. Brown apply black lines to her eyelids and blacken her eyebrows to thin, single lines. When her lips had been reddened and a few black patches applied, Ruth could believe her hostess' previous statement. "Do you think you could do that for yourself?" the older lady asked, standing back to admire her work.

"I think so."

"I'll have the creams sent up to your room. Now—" she turned away and Ruth watched her. "Some clothes."

Laid out on a chair was a profusion of silks. "What color do you never wear?"

"Puce," said Ruth promptly. The dark reddish purple didn't suit her in the least, turning her pale skin to a sallow tone and dulling the gleam of her dark hair. Mrs. Brown turned the silks until she found something in the color Ruth had indicated. "Tonight, you'll wear powder and then no one will know you if they see you again."

Ruth thought this was a clever scheme, but the heavy make up felt uncomfortable on her skin. She generally only wore a light covering of rice-powder or nothing at all and she rarely powdered her hair. Mrs. Brown was right: gazing at the strange reflection in the mirror, she knew even her father would have difficulty recognizing her. It gave her a

strange sense of freedom, as though anything she did in this guise didn't count. Not that she planned to do much more than watch.

Mrs. Brown gave her an armful of thin, puce silk to hold, then rummaged through the pile and found a gown in green, heavily ribbed material with a quilted petticoat in ivory. The fabric was good, the light embroidery well executed. Ruth looked at it bemusedly. "Why is the better gown a day gown? Why is the evening gown so tawdry?"

Mrs. Brown grinned and explained. "Clever of you to notice. The gentlemen who visit here expect dress and behavior they can't get anywhere else. Many of them are chock-full of refinement and gentility. That's not what they come here for. We know how to dress well as much as any lady does, but they don't want that."

Enlightenment dawned. "So cheap silk and paint is all part of the experience?"

"Quite. And you'll notice, in working hours I'm a bit-cruder than in the daylight." Mrs. Brown gave one of her disconcerting barks of laughter. "I'm a Cockney—a real Londoner, but my father was a clergyman and I was brought up to be prim and proper." Ruth's eyes widened in astonishment. "The customers here don't want that. They want me to be from the wrong side of the street. So the accent gets thicker and the voice louder. Wait and see, dear." She patted Ruth's shoulder. Ruth thought the lady proud of her achievement and she was beginning to see why. As a general rule, ladies looked to their men folk for support and livelihood. This lady was one of the few, the lucky few totally independent of men, answerable only to themselves and she'd achieved it on her own. Clergymen's children were often forced into less salubrious employment, the only alternative to a life of sin often being poorly paid menial work.

If Mrs. Brown had got out of the trap set her by her birth then, Ruth thought, so could she.

Ruth meekly followed Mrs. Brown out the room and upstairs to her own, where she folded and bestowed the new garments in the chest. "I'll have some chemises, stays and the like sent up," the lady promised. Ruth hoped Mr. Urswick could afford it. She would pay him back, she promised herself. Somehow.

Beckoning her out of her room, Mrs. Brown knocked softly at the door of the room next to Ruth's own. When it opened, Ruth breathed out a sigh of relief. She expected a scene of debauchery, but the sight that met her eyes was reassuringly normal.

A small, slender girl dressed in a light, loose gown stood in the doorway of a room looking much like Ruth's own. She wore no make up and her fair hair was knotted loosely back off her face. "Caroline, this is Millie," said the proprietress briskly. "She's new here and for the time being she's for Lord Iveleigh's sole use. Can you show her round the house for me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Caroline said, in a soft, appealing voice. She came out of the room and closed the door. Mrs. Brown left them, telling Ruth she would see her later.

Caroline didn't seem surprised to see a new girl. "Only one man?" "How did you manage that?"

"Lord Iveleigh has some influence," Ruth told her. "I suppose he traded on that."

Caroline shrugged. "I've not often seen Mother Brown breaking her own rules. Will you be here long?"

Ruth shook her head. "I don't think so. Lord Iveleigh is looking for—somewhere for me."

"Ohhhhhhh!" Caroline breathed. "That's what I want—a nice little house and servants of my own. Still, I'm in the right place for it. I've got two gentlemen who've

promised me something, if I'm patient."

The matter-of-fact way she said it appalled Ruth. To sell herself in such a way; she didn't think she could ever consider such a thing. The next moment she mentally castigated herself for her hypocrisy. Girls of her type sold themselves into marriage, but it wasn't for sex alone. But she had never been in dire poverty before. It might come to that, after all. She didn't consider herself superior to the girls here, just luckier.

Until now.

Caroline linked her arm with Ruth's and led her back up the corridor. "This is all bedrooms," she said. "There's locks on all the doors and the maids can get in through the privy doors. You need it, not all our gentlemen are gentlemen, if you know what I mean!" She winked. Ruth tried to show that she understood, although she wasn't entirely sure. She knew enough to guess but not enough to fuel her imagination.

They went down the stairs. "These are the main rooms," Caroline announced. "Mrs. Brown's private suite is here too, but no one is allowed there without an invitation. In here."

Ruth wrinkled her nose at the mingled smell of tobacco smoke and stale liquor. The blinds had been drawn and the room put in order, but the smell lingered.

It was a large room, furnished with a number of chairs and sofas, upholstered in lush royal blue velvet. Tables stood around, ready to hold glasses or cards and the floor was polished until it shone. Heavy drapery in the same royal blue adorned the windows, which looked out on to the piazza below. Ruth gazed around with frank interest while Caroline told her, "There's dances here and general socializing. It gives the royals something to do."

"Royals?" The word bemused Ruth. Did Caroline mean the royal family visited here?

Caroline blushed. "Oh Lord! It's cant. I'm sorry. Mrs. Brown don't like us to use it, but I forget sometimes. It means a good cully, a fine man who'll take care of you."

Ruth smiled. "I see. Why doesn't Mrs. Brown like you to use cant?"

"She says it's common."

When she thought of it, there was a distinct twang beneath Caroline's carefully cultivated tones, something Ruth recognized as pure Cockney, the broader tones of which had rung in her ears since she arrived in London. She grinned at Caroline. "I won't tell."

Caroline grinned back in a comradely style, her pretty, fragile face lighting up. "I'm very lucky to be here. This is the best house in London, so they say. There's one or two others, but Mother Brown is very straight with you. She charges you what she says and you can leave any time you want. No sense in forcing the whores, she says. There are some houses that do that, but this ain't one of them."

They left the large room and went into a slightly smaller one next door. It was equally sumptuously furnished. "The card room," Caroline said briefly. "Mostly for high stakes."

There was another room, much like the first and then a smaller room furnished mainly with couches and daybeds. Caroline glanced at Ruth. "The orgy room,"

Ruth turned to Caroline, eyes bright with questions. "You mean there really are such things?"

This time Caroline roared with laughter. "Don't you know?"

Ruth decided to play the innocent. After all, she was one. "I'm new to all this. And I'll be moving out soon."

"How do you do it?" Caroline said. "Start at the top, I mean?"

Ruth shrugged. "Lucky, I suppose." This was easier than she had thought. She looked around at the couches and beds and wondered if she could take part in the activities that took place in this room.

With a shock, she realized that if she was starving, or faced with a lifetime of drudgery, she very well might. She was no better than these people. Just luckier, up to now. After this—who knew what might happen to her? She had less than some of these women and meant very little to anybody.

If she was discovered here, she might as well make her life here, for all the good it would be somewhere else.

The tension in the region of Ruth's stomach increased the longer the day went on. She became nervous at the prospect of the night ahead and what she would be expected to see, if not participate in, but she tried very hard not to show anything. Her pride wouldn't let her. She kept reminding herself of the alternative. Immolation in the country, no prospects, no husband, no friends. A living death.

Dinner was served in the late afternoon. Ruth entered the dining room with Caroline and found a room full of happy, chattering young ladies, just as if it was a girl's school they were attending, instead of a brothel. She was introduced as a new 'young lady' and received several friendly smiles. She felt almost at home and managed a good meal before going upstairs to her room.

Ruth wandered over to the chair by the window and gazed out at the piazza below. The constant activity was easing a little as the fashionable dinner hour approached. Soon it would pick up again when the theatre around the corner in Drury Lane opened for business and then would come the busy time for Covent Garden.

Tall houses surrounded the square. Ruth guessed they contained establishments much like this one. Red brick, tall and no longer as sturdy as they used to be. Some tiles were gone off the roofs, the brickwork was no longer pristine and clean, chipped and soot stained instead. Who knew how many girls sat as she did, waiting for the evening to begin and the parade of 'customers'? How did they remain cheerful under such circumstances, how retain their self-respect?

Ruth had thought, if she thought at all about such things, that a girl would take up this profession *in extremis*, to make money. Now, having met some of them, she was not so sure. While she still didn't believe they could enjoy such things, she saw the cheerful good humor many of them displayed and began to wonder. She'd already revised her opinion of them as the lowest of the low and had stopped regarding them as a group now she had seen the individuals.

Of one thing she was sure now, after a day's observation. She could never do this. Given the choice between this and a life of constant drudgery as a governess, she would settle for the governess every time. She understood the people who chose to do this for a living, but she could never be one of them. Earlier she had thought it possible, but now she knew she was wrong. It wasn't for her.

Chapter Six

The maid who'd helped Ruth before came up to help her dress for the evening. How must the girls who actually participated feel? Were they as nervous as she was? She doubted it. They were used to it.

Ruth was shocked to find she would only be wearing a thin petticoat over the small side hoops she was provided with. Her shift and pockets, then the hoop, then the petticoat. The gown was cut in the fashionable sacque style, seamed tightly to the waist and then allowed to billow over the petticoat. Puce was definitely not her color, even when she submitted to having her hair powdered to cover her dark locks. Some more black patches were applied to her shockingly low décolletage and her face.

Ruth stared at the result in her dressing table mirror. Every inch the tart, she thought. She turned away, a flush heating her cheeks under the heavy make up. The maid studied her critically. "I think that's what Mother Brown's looking for," she said and she opened the door of Ruth's sanctuary for her to venture forth.

The big man, Vic, stood outside. He was dressed plainly but well and looked even more spectacularly ugly than Ruth remembered. She felt like a fairy next to him.

He didn't see anything untoward in her appearance. "Gentlemen will arrive from about nine on," he said. "There's a few earlier, but only the regulars. Madam wants you quiet and out of the way. You can talk, if you're spoken to, but if you get into trouble, tip me the wink and I'll deal with 'em for you."

"Very well," Ruth murmured and moved away down the corridor, now familiar to her to the show rooms below.

She entered the large room. There were still more women than men here, though a few thickset men, Vic's compatriots, stood around the walls, talking quietly amongst themselves. Ruth stood still, unsure what to do until Caroline saw her and patted the seat next to her invitingly. Ruth willingly went and sat down. "You'll have to go if someone else wants to sit here," Caroline told her, "You can go and stand by Vic if you like. He's got more than you to take care of, but you'll be all right. He looks after most of the new girls."

Ruth glanced at Vic who seemed to be in animated conversation with another large fellow, but when she glanced at him, he immediately looked back and then away again. He was clearly on duty.

All the girls wore flimsy, low cut gowns and their faces were painted, some as heavily as Ruth. Most wore their hair powdered, but not all. Caroline was in forget me not blue, enchanting on her. It made Ruth feel dowdy in her puce.

Her nervousness increased, but she smiled and tried not to show it, knowing that the more she could blend in with the others, the less likelihood there was of her being recognized. Under it all, she was deeply apprehensive. This was entirely out of her experience. Her social experience was limited in any case, but this was like a bad dream, something happening to someone else. The thoughts she rigorously suppressed all day suddenly recurred and she felt sick. What if her father found her here? Would he disown her, or more likely, take her back to Yorkshire, never to go anywhere again, never to meet anyone? Rather than that, she would put up with this.

Gentlemen began to arrive. They were undoubtedly gentlemen and for the first time Ruth was glad of the thick layer of paint on her face and bosom. They glanced around when they came in and stood about with a glass of wine, chatting. The girls went into

action. Several approached the gentlemen, who received them with smiles and conversation. It could almost be any social gathering in London. Almost.

Some of the men were young and good looking. Ruth wondered why they came here, why they needed this. She had no answer. She couldn't imagine what would make a man pay to get intimacies he could get at home. Her experience was more limited than even the most sequestered society maiden.

There was no sign of the intimacies she dreaded witnessing. Worrying that they would-do *it* there and then had fevered her imagination, but everyone behaved with reasonable decorum. Some of the girls accompanied the gentlemen into the card room, but more arrived to take their place. Caroline left Ruth's side.

Then the moment Ruth had dreaded above all. Someone came and sat next to her. A man.

He wasn't young, but neither was he ill favored. Ruth guessed he might be in his forties. He was dressed in the height of fashion, Ruth's uncritical eye not noticing the green velvet of his coat wasn't the best quality, the embroidery on his waistcoat a little cruder than it might have been. The man smiled. "You're new, aren't you?"

Ruth nodded. "Today," she managed, in a croak that sounded quite unlike her usual soft tones. "You'll be well cared for here," he said softly, in tones that promised much. "You'll see me quite a lot, too." At her querying look, he smiled. "Since my wife died, I've felt the need from time to time."

"Ohhhhh." That was one of her questions answered.

He smiled. "I've no desire to shackle myself yet awhile and the ladies here provide good company as well as other delights. I don't have to pretend here. It's blessedly straightforward."

Ruth could understand that. For a man who wanted female company with no dissimulation, this could be a useful place. "So," he added, turning back from his contemplation of the room, "would you like to take a turn upstairs with me? My name is Miles."

Her heart leapt to her mouth it seemed, so hard did it beat. He was really-was he really proposing to-and in such a matter-of-fact way? She knew she wouldn't, but how could a girl decide on such a thing; give herself so intimately on a whim? It was beyond her.

Someone cleared his throat noisily behind them. Ruth turned to Vic in relief. "I'm very sorry sir," Vic boomed, "This lady is bespoken."

Miles gazed at Ruth, one eyebrow raised in surprise. "Unusual."

"I-I'm lodging here until my gentleman can find me a house," she said. "And to-to learn."

"Really?" He studied her, his gaze lingering over her breasts, now quivering from a combination of tight lacing and panic. "Perhaps another time? Or are you here to watch? I wouldn't object to such a charming audience."

The implication made the ready blush rise to Ruth's cheeks. Would she spend the whole night blushing? Even though no one could see it under the make up, she felt uncomfortable. "Perhaps," she managed and Miles smiled. "It might urge me to greater efforts," he said and then stood up. "I'll take my leave, since you cannot offer what I require, but your company is charming and I would take it as a favor if you would bear me in mind when you are no longer-engaged."

With a smile, he left.

Ruth found her hand taken and a glass roughly pushed into it. "It's the good brandy," Vic informed her. "You look as though you need it."

"Th-thank you," Ruth managed and downed the fiery liquid in two choking gulps. Vic took the glass from her and gave her a glass filled with cool, white wine. "Take your time over this one. And calm down. Nobody's goin' to do nothing to you."

Once Ruth had digested the statement and her brandy, she felt a little better. Panic was a transient thing and now it had left her she could watch the proceedings and once her worries had subsided a little, to study them. This opportunity would never come her way again, she knew and while feeling glad about that, she could avail herself of the opportunity of gaining a little more experience in how to handle men. She must assume these girls were experts.

Indeed they were. Although the room at first looked like any fashionable gathering, on closer inspection it was far from that. Hands wandered far more than they ordinarily would, taking liberties a well brought up girl would never allow. A touch here, perhaps a hand on a waist, creeping a little lower, a finger delving playfully in the cleft between a plump, inviting bosom. No embraces, no kisses except on the hand or lightly on the cheek. Even that made Ruth feel unsure and deeply innocent.

She watched Caroline skillfully 'work' a gentleman. He was a finely dressed man, his face paint rivaling Caroline's own and they seemed to laugh a great deal as he leaned closer to her, the better to watch the movement of her breasts when she laughed. Ruth knew Caroline was aware of it and instead of moderating her movements, as a lady would, thrust herself at him, let him look. She drew the man into her web, gave him what would inflame but not satisfy. She dropped a light kiss on his brow, made him look up, but before he could embrace her, press his feverish lips to hers, she put a hand on his mouth, lightly, flirtatiously. He asked. She accepted.

They left the room together, heading, Ruth knew, for the bedroom next to hers.

Then she saw someone else she knew.

Lord Iveleigh had come.

He looked around the large room, feeling an initial panic when he didn't see her. When Mrs. Brown had told him what she'd done, he'd been angry, but then he'd seen the sense in it. If the madam had locked Ruth away word would get out that one of the bedrooms at Mrs. Brown's was closed and then who knew what would happen? That would be as good as a challenge to some of the visitors here. He'd been forced to accept her decision, even agree with the prudence of it. He already felt trapped, tight with tension, but he was determined to do his duty, not abandon someone who desperately needed his help.

When he first swept a glance around the room, Oliver immediately felt horrified, as though he was seeing it for the first time. Girls flirted – and worse – with the assembled company, leaving at regular intervals to adjourn upstairs. Laughing flirtatiousness gave way to unbridled passion. The bullies made sure things didn't get out of hand here, in the main room, but elsewhere the house was given over to gaming and sex. One man might take several partners in the course of one evening, returning between bouts to play a hand of cards, or take some much-needed refreshment.

Iveleigh himself had learned how to make love in this house, brought here by his older brother at sixteen. The woman his late lordship chose for him had been a full ten years older than Oliver and much older in terms of experience. She had taught him how to

please a woman and in so doing, please himself. He would always be grateful to her and to the madam, for that, but to bring a gently nurtured girl here was insane. Oliver realized just how drunk and how desperate he'd been last night. What ever had he been thinking of? However, it was done now and there was no going back.

With a small sigh of relief, he saw a girl in a revolting shade of puce gazing at him apprehensively. The eyes he knew; clear blue. Smiling in what he hoped was a reassuring way, he made his way across the crowded, noisy room to her side.

Vic peered at him, but he'd been forewarned that Lord Iveleigh was allowed to take liberties with Millie where no other man could, so he allowed the gentleman to take her hand and peer at her face with what looked like anxiety. "I'm sorry about all this," he said. "Shall we go upstairs?"

Having heard this phrase several times this evening, Ruth was startled into snatching her hand away, but then she grinned in a self-deprecating way. "Very well."

Pausing only to pick up a bottle and two glasses, Oliver took Ruth's hand and led her away. Vic watched them and then turned to oversee the rest of his duties. She would be safe enough with her lover. If he'd been more curious, he would have wondered why Mrs. Brown allowed this gentleman the exclusive use of a girl, but his lordship was well known to the house as an occasional gamester and friend of Mr. Urswick, who acted as his uncle's London agent. Vic assumed it must be a special favor.

The door to her room safely closed behind them, Oliver saw Ruth's increased nervousness at once and did his best to smooth the awkward situation over. "Sit down and have a drink," he said, pouring out the wine. She took the glass with a faint tremor and sat on the bed, while he took the chair by the fire.

"I'm so sorry about all this," he began. "I should have taken to you to a quiet inn somewhere. God knows why I thought of this!"

"I thought it was very clever," she assured him. "My father will be sure to search the respectable places and if he'd found me there I'd have been unprotected. And I'll always be grateful to you for rescuing me. I was beside myself, I didn't know where to go, what to do. I might have ended up in the river but for you!"

He shuddered. "Indeed you might. I'm glad I found you and not someone who would have done you harm." He sipped his wine, gaining some Dutch courage from the softly fruited tang. "I went to see your father today," he said abruptly.

Ruth waited for him to speak. Her eyes made dark pools in her dead white face. "How is he?"

He sighed heavily and put his glass down on the little table by his side. "It's not good, Ruth. May I call you Ruth?"

She laughed then, some of the tension breaking. "Yes, of course. You did, as I remember, last night."

"Did I?" he said, with his simple, friendly smile. "I went to see him on the pretext of telling him that Edmund had been called unexpectedly out of town. He was with his man of business, but the man left soon enough; your father is possessed of quite a fair amount of property in London. Edmund told me of it."

"It'll all be his one day."

"I hope he gives you some of it. The London properties aren't entailed. Edmund never had hopes for them. He has a fortune of his own."

"He won't give me anything now," she said gloomily.

He eyed her over the rim of his glass. "If he doesn't, Edmund will. Don't worry

about that."

Ruth smiled. "Thanks for that, at least. But he can't until Papa dies and he seems as healthy as ever. Not," she added hastily, "that I wish for his death. This is a temporary thing, I'm sure of it." She didn't sound sure.

Oliver looked decidedly doubtful. He bit his lip and then leaned forward to refill his glass. "I don't think you need this wrapped up in clean linen. I'll tell you what I saw, then what I plan to do." He took a deep draught of his wine. "He wanted to refuse me admittance at first, but I barged my way in and sat in the hall, so after about half an hour he saw me." He glanced at Ruth, hands clasped tightly together, waiting. "I ventured a remark about you, how charming you were the other night and I swear he turned purple. I thought he'd guessed at first, but it wasn't so. He seemed unable to control himself when I mentioned your name. I tell you Ruth, it scared me!" He took another drink to steady himself, but then put his glass down. "I thought he would turn it aside, say you'd gone into the country or something, but I don't think he could. He called you names, declared you were no daughter of his and then, in his very next breath, swore to lock you away where no one would get at you again!"

A choked exclamation left Ruth's lips, but at his look of concern, she took a deep breath, put down her still full glass and folded her hands demurely in her puce covered lap. Oliver watched her doubtfully, but continued to tell her about his visit. "I was deeply concerned that he should lose his temper that way with me, a perfect stranger. It doesn't bode well, Ruth. He doesn't seem concerned about anything outside the both of you. You're the only thing he thinks about; far more than can be thought normal. Of course he's worried about you, but the one thing he didn't tell me was that you were missing. He said you were upstairs in bed with a bad chill." He looked away for a moment. "My dear, I fear for your safety if you go back."

Ruth couldn't hold back any longer. Fumbling for her pocket for her handkerchief, she burst into tears.

Immediately Lord Iveleigh came across the room and sat by her side on the bed. He thrust his own handkerchief into her hands and put his arms around her. "Don't cry, Ruth, please try not to cry. I promise I'll do my best for you. We'll find a way out of this."

Ruth turned her head into his shoulder and sobbed.

Oliver held her tight and made soothing noises and pretty soon it had its effect. Plying the kerchief briskly, Ruth gained control again and mopped her eyes. When she looked up at Oliver she surprised a laugh out of him. "You look like Gilles," he said, referring to the clown of the *Comedia del'Arte*.

She quavered a smile back. "I'd forgotten about this stuff," she admitted, looking ruefully at the mess she'd made of his handkerchief.

Slipping out of his arms she went to the washstand and rinsed out the fabric, using it to wipe the heavy make up off her face. She needed to use the block of soap by the water too and when she'd finished the water in the basin was a strange color indeed and as opaque as soup.

When she turned back to Oliver, he smiled with a great deal of warmth. "You're a very lovely woman," he told her. There was no flirtation, no flattery in his voice and face, just simple honesty. She accepted the compliment without demur. She didn't go back to him, but sat on the chair he'd recently vacated. "I'm all right now. I just needed to cry. I feel better for it. Do you think my father is mad?"

"As near as makes no difference," Oliver said frankly. "His fury was certainly the

closest to madness I've ever seen. I fear for you, Ruth, I truly do." He paused, swirling the red liquid around his glass. The desire to drink it had left him. "I have plans. I don't know if it will work, but we have to do something."

He looked up to see Ruth regarding him, hope and apprehension mixed. Her expression, now she had washed off that stuff, was as clear as if she'd voiced her feelings. He admired her bravery. "If you go back to your father, I think he'll do what he threatens and send you away."

She looked puzzled. "Send me away?"

"He's still your father and he will be in control of your future until you marry, or until we can prove his insanity. And if we do that, it will lessen your chances of finding a husband."

"Do you think I carry madness?" she asked, struck by a new thought.

He studied her. "No. No one has shown it before, in your father's family or your mother's. I spoke to Edmund about it. I think this is his alone. Something has happened to overbalance his reason, probably your family's death." He paused, but she seemed steady, although a sad expression entered her face. "Have you noticed anything before?"

"Yes, but I thought it was grief and later, that he preferred the quiet life," she confessed. "He discouraged visitors, but I suppose I got used to it and eventually thought nothing of it. I didn't see anything that worried me until he sent George Thorne off so precipitately and then insisted I came to London with him. Even then I put it down to over protectiveness and I was so excited at seeing the great city and my other relatives after so long, I passed over any uneasiness I felt. Until last night."

"Yes. That wasn't normal, by anyone's standards. Nor was his behavior today. He will be looking for you, you can be sure of that. The sooner I can get you away from here the better."

"How will you do that?"

"Edmund went away early this morning. He didn't get my note, which is a pity, but he's determined to hurry. He'll be back in a day or so."

"Papa would know where to find me if I go to stay with Cousin Mary!" she protested, twisting her hands together in her lap. "He would come and fetch me!"

Oliver hated to see her distress. "We could prevent it. We can set someone to be with you all the time, a chaperone, someone we can take into our confidence. I'm sure your cousin we'll deny him the house. We can put it out that you have disagreed with your father, or that the chill your father says you have caught meant you should go out of town and you went to your cousin's house to recover. It would be much easier to look after you there than in this place." He glanced around the room and noticed a painting above the mantelpiece. Perfectly respectable, since it depicted Greek goddesses, but not one of them had a stitch of clothing between them. What he had before regarded as amusing now took on a more sinister aspect, when someone he cared for was involved. He couldn't deny he cared for her. How much he didn't yet know.

"How long?" she demanded abruptly.

"We could get you to Hertfordshire by the end of the week. If Edmund writes to me, with permission, I'll escort you there. Suitably chaperoned, of course," he added with a grin.

"Then what?" She blushed. "I'm sorry. I don't have any right to ask you anything, I know that, but I'm at a loss. I don't know what to do, who to turn to."

He smiled, empathy filling him. "You don't have to apologize. Then, when you're

safe, Edmund can take proceedings against your father. You might have to witness his action, since he stands to gain by it. He might be able to persuade him to retire quietly on his own, but I'm not hopeful of that. I don't think he's thinking rationally at all. I want to see you safe and then we can make some arrangements for your future."

"Oh."

Clearly, she was still unsure what he meant, so he tried to explain. "If we can break your father's jurisdiction, we can give you what you're entitled to. You should have your season in London, your dowry and with them I'm sure you'll achieve some happiness for yourself. We don't want your father's state of mind generally known, but I think we can manage. It may be uncomfortable for a while, but we'll come about, I'm sure of it."

Ruth didn't look as sure. Her frown displayed her doubt and her fears. Suddenly Oliver understood. "More patience. More waiting." She nodded. "At least," he added, in an effort to placate her, "you know in the end you'll get there."

"It could be too late," she said. "I'll be five and twenty soon. No one has seen me, no one knows me. I can't be a debutante; I'm too old for that. And if no one knows me, I have far less chance of achieving anything!"

She trembled, near to tears again and Oliver, anxious to avoid another bout of crying and deeply concerned for her, hastened to reassure her. "I think you have an excellent chance. You are lovely, something out of the ordinary and you are fresh. Your appearance the other night didn't go unnoticed. You won't be passed by, my dear. You underestimate yourself."

She smiled at the compliment. "I hope so. But the thought of more time spent quietly in the country appalls me. I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be so ungrateful, but—"

Oliver stood up and came across the room to her, pulling her into his arms. "Just this once," he said, more to assure himself than her, and he put his mouth to hers.

It was Ruth's first adult kiss. She responded instantly, putting her arms around him, feeling his firm body, while his lips played softly on hers, inviting a response. She gave it, in full measure, innocence overcome by instinct.

This was what she wanted. Someone to call her own, someone who would treat her as an equal, someone kind and considerate. She hadn't known that for years, but she knew it once and wanted it again. That was why she had accepted George's proposal. Did Lord Iveleigh feel the same need she did? It blazed through her body the instant she opened her mouth to his. He held her close, ravaging her mouth, as though he was a dying man thirsting for water.

He drew gently away, with a convulsive movement and stared at her. "See? That is why you mustn't stay immured in the country, why you must get away from this place."

Striding hastily across the room he left.

Ruth was left bewildered and once again, alone. Thinking over his proposal she tried to be cheerful about it, but couldn't help seeing this prospective visit to Cousin Mary as another period of imprisonment. She would be stuck in the country instead of enjoying the pleasures of London, which she had looked forward to for so very long. It would be the same-almost-as going home. Another house. She remembered her cousin Mary as a quiet, content girl. She had been allowed to marry for love, since her lover was the wealthy Sir Frederick Asheton and had, by all accounts, been blissfully happy ever since. It was a good idea, she had to admit and the only way forward she could see. Certes, she couldn't stay here much longer. She could so easily be drawn into this house, its ways and its people

and worse of all—she could be discovered.

Waking up in the little room it seemed almost like home. Lord Iveleigh hadn't forgotten about her needs; he'd brought a small portmanteau with him, which Vic brought up to Ruth's room. It contained all the things she had felt the lack of. She was now in possession of a dressing case, filled with toiletries and perfume, underwear, stays, nightwear, a dressing robe, shoes, stockings and garters. She wondered if Iveleigh knew what a lady needed, or if he commissioned someone else to buy the things for her. She blushed to imagine it, but in any case, his taste was excellent.

Ruth's first adult kiss left her confused and wondering. What had he meant by it? Anything or nothing? He'd released her immediately and left shortly afterwards, not following the delightful kiss with anything else. Ruth didn't think she loved him, she didn't know him well enough for that, but she liked him very much. .

She daydreamed. Marriage would put her out of her father's jurisdiction. Her portion was respectable, if not outstanding, if it could ever be sued out of her father and she had her grandmother's legacy. If anyone proposed, what would she do? Accept him, she supposed, with a resigned shrug. She had very few other options. She would be grateful for it. She grinned. Any proposal she would receive in this house wouldn't be marriage.

She spent the day in her room, except for meals, thinking, wondering what the future would bring. When evening came the maid helped Ruth don the puce gown. Her depression still hung heavy, but she felt it lighten and wished she had someone to confide in. Edmund had gone and there was only George, hundreds of miles away, or her father, who seemed to be planning a future for her she couldn't possibly accept. Iveleigh was an unknown quantity. Everything told her she could trust him, but the kiss had confused her and she no longer felt sure how she felt about him. Or rather, she did. She was very much attracted to him, but she couldn't trust herself. With that kiss, he had opened her to the possibility of adventure, the possibility of love.

If Edmund managed to persuade his sister to invite her, there would be another period of imprisonment, albeit a kinder one. She would have to stay close to the house until the business with her father was resolved, not travel, not see too many people. More delay, more problems. Would her life ever begin, ever amount to anything? She was very much afraid she'd miss the boat with all this delay. By the time she made her debut on the marriage market she'd be too old. The bloom would be gone and no one would want her. She might be forced to go back to her father, to look after him.

Then what?

Some of Ruth's nervousness left her that night. She knew the rooms, knew she would be politely propositioned and the man would take her refusal or he was asked to leave. It amused her to be asked by two gentlemen, but she refused them with a slight wistfulness. Would she never know what it was like to be a woman? She amused herself thinking of Iveleigh and Edmund in that way. She daren't let her thoughts stray solely to his lordship; there was danger there. And something unthinkably wonderful. There were great gaps in her knowledge, which she filled with imagination, but determined to discover before she left this place. If the practical knowledge was denied her, she would never have a better opportunity to ask the experts!

That evening Ruth was almost bored. When she had recovered from the interest in watching the girls at work, entertaining, disappearing discreetly, returning none the worse

for wear some time later. Or not at all. She wondered how much a man would have to pay and speculated that at the rates she guessed they charged here, marriage would be cheap.

With Edmund firmly in mind and Oliver thrust to the back of it, Ruth collared Caroline the next day. Apart from eating and washing, once the girls had risen they had little to do until the evening. They did a little light housework, but none of them showed any interest in embroidery, reading or any other pursuits. Some went out shopping, but because of her situation, this treat was denied Ruth.

It was tricky, to get the information from Caroline without revealing her total ignorance, but she managed it.

Knocking on Caroline's door, the girl welcomed her with a ready smile. Caroline looked so sweet; Ruth wasn't surprised she didn't lack for customers. Dressed in a casual, loose gown of pale pink, she looked like the sweetest virgin in society circles. With different birth, different circumstances, Caroline could have hooked a Viscount.

"I-I wondered," Ruth said hesitantly, the heat glowing in her cheeks beneath the thick make-up, "if you could help me with something."

"Of course," came the reply and Caroline led Ruth into her room.

The pretty room spoke of Caroline's presence, the delicate bedcoverings a frame for her ethereal brand of beauty. "I'm not very experienced at-all this," Ruth began. "I wondered if you could give me some ideas, a way I can—" she broke off, totally confused.

Caroline seemed to understand. "Have you got a problem?"

"No," Ruth said hastily. "I just want some help—you know—"

"Variety?"

"Yes," Ruth agreed in relief. It wasn't, but now she had started she didn't know how to conclude the interview. She wished she'd never started.

Caroline smiled knowingly and went over to a chest by the wall. Lifting the lid, she pulled out a box, which she brought over to the bed. She glanced at Ruth and opened it. Ruth stared, fascinated, as Caroline laid various objects on the bed. She had no idea what most of them were, or what the ones she recognized were for.

"Mother Brown doesn't encourage what you might call unnatural practices," Caroline said. "The whole idea is that we're young ladies attending a social gathering—with one difference." She grinned and Ruth grinned back. Here, the gentlemen could choose whoever they wanted and go upstairs with them, do everything with them they wanted to do with the society ladies they met in everyday life. Ruth was beginning to understand better. Two days here had made an enormous difference.

"These," said Caroline, picking up a couple of flaccid objects and regarding them dispassionately, "are sheaths. Gentlemen like to wear them to prevent disease. We are clean, it's one of the drawing powers of this house but sometimes a man likes to be sure." She dropped them back in the box. "This," she said, picking up a small sponge, "Will stop you getting pregnant. There are accidents, of course, nothing's certain, but if you soak this with brandy, or vinegar and push it up inside, it seems to work. Nobody knows why, it just does." Ruth watched, completely enthralled, despite her revulsion at the cold-blooded way Caroline was describing the tools of her trade.

Caroline glanced at her and picked up a long chain, slender but well made. "Do you know what this is for?" Ruth shook her head. "Goodness, you are innocent!" Caroline exclaimed. "It's for fastening someone up. Look." She picked up a padlock, jeweled but functional. She clicked it shut. "I won't let my gentlemen use anything else." Reaching underneath, she pressed something and the top sprang open. "I can open it myself, with

my hands or my feet. It's not advisable to give them complete control." Ruth watched, fascinated. "It's a mild form of what they do in the House of Correction at the end of the street. Like this." She dropped the padlock and picked up a small whip with a pretty handle. "This is just to sting. It can be very stimulating." She handed the whip to Ruth who took it and turned it over in her hands. That such a pretty thing could be made for that! Suddenly, the figures on the handle made sense to her. There was no doubt what the whip was made for! Hastily she handed it back; glad Caroline couldn't see her embarrassment under the heavy paint.

Caroline dropped the whip, chain and padlock back in the box and moved over to the large clothes press standing against one wall. "I have some special clothes, too." She pulled out a few garments. There was a pair of stays, elaborately decorated, obviously designed to hide nothing. They were so different to the plain ones Ruth customarily wore. The laces could be drawn very tight. "I might call on you one night to help me get into this thing," Caroline said. "It's all right once you have it on, but a bit of a struggle to get into. My maid regularly breaks the ribbons. I can get a sixteen inch waist with it!"

Ruth tried, but couldn't suppress the mental picture of Caroline compressed into the garment, bursting out at either end, slender though she was. While she couldn't understand the eroticism of the whip and chain, she could see some point in the stays. Caroline casually tossed the garment on to the bed and showed Ruth another, as different to the stays as possible. This was a loose pink gown, covered with blue bows.

Caroline undid a bow and the gown obligingly opened. "I can reveal myself slowly in this," Caroline told her. "I sometimes wear it downstairs, since it's completely decorous when all the bows are done up. I like this one."

"Why?" Ruth demanded before she could stop herself.

"It gives me control," the girl explained. "And it's elegant. I can reveal myself a little bit at a time and drive them wild with wanting. I love to see it. The way their eyes widen, their palms sweat!" She laughed softly. "My favorite gentleman likes this one."

"I should like to see you demonstrate sometime," Ruth said.

To her surprise, Caroline smiled. "You can."

Going over to the connecting wall between her room and Ruth's, she pulled aside a small print hanging there. Ruth looked closely and caught her breath. There were gaps here, in the brocade that covered the walls! They were carefully masked by a thin layer of fabric, but she could see daylight shining through the gap beyond. She could see everything, if she wished!

"I'll take the picture down tonight," promised Caroline. "Watch how I do it. Then, if you think your gentleman would like it, you can surprise him."

Ruth smiled politely. She couldn't imagine doing such a thing, but someone, obviously, could.

Caroline walked back to the bed and picked up the stays and the gown, bestowing them neatly in the closet. "I'll wear it tonight," she promised. "When I come upstairs, do you go too, but don't make a sound, or you might be drawn into it!"

"What?"

"Many gentleman like more than one girl," Caroline said frankly. "Some have asked Mrs. Brown if you're available and if they find you watching, they might want more than that."

Ruth took a deep breath. It passed her understanding how she could bear anyone to watch, but there it was! What an education she was receiving!

Ruth spent the rest of the afternoon reading a book Caroline lent her. It was French, it depicted in graphic detail many of the positions a man and woman could take to achieve sexual fulfillment. To call it an eye opener would be to do it a disservice. It was far more than that. It still passed Ruth's understanding why people should feel driven to this, to take even these steps, as before she had only seen sex as an act of procreation, something to beget children in marriage, nothing more. It started her thinking and when she donned the puce gown again, in readiness for the evening, it didn't seem half so scandalous. Positively decorous, in fact.

Ruth went down at nine, nodding to Vic who almost smiled in response. She stopped in front of Mrs. Brown, who flicked out the lace at her elbows and gave her a grim smile. "You'd do well in this house."

"Thank you." Ruth was feeling almost desperate enough to do it. More and more she felt as trapped here as in Yorkshire and then in the London house. Was there anywhere she could feel free to be herself, not to worry about the censure and power of someone else? She longed to have the power to make her own decisions, to have some influence instead of having to wait on the charity of others. To run away and try to make her own way in the world would be complete madness.

The evening passed. Vic discouraged the more ardent of her suitors without resorting to violence. Ruth wondered if there was ever violence in this house, it was run so well. She watched the girls doing their job and seeming to take pleasure in it. Their efforts at gentility would have fooled all but the most discerning eye, but there was an edge of vulgarity to it all, the gowns cut low, the material cheap and crudely decorated, the twang of an accent. Caroline appeared in the loose gown. It was obvious that some of the men knew its intent, for a gleam in the eye, a more assiduous attention alerted Ruth to the fact.

Eventually, after an elaborate flirtation that included a lot of hand slapping and fan waving, Caroline stood up and took one gentleman's proffered arm. They might have been heading for the card room, but Ruth knew they weren't.

She stood up and murmured to Vic, "I have the head ache. I'll go upstairs for a while, see if it doesn't go," and she followed Caroline and her swain upstairs. Ruth was the only person climbing the stairs on her own.

She slipped into her room after Caroline and the gentleman had entered theirs, going straight over to the print on the wall that corresponded to the one in Caroline's room. Cautiously, for fear of making a sound, she lifted the print away and laid it on the floor.

Her heart thumping Ruth bent and peered through the hole.

Caroline and her friend were drinking a glass of wine. It might have been a private salon anywhere; there was nothing to indicate its real use. The covers on the bed were decorously drawn up, and there was no sign of the objects that had so thrilled and appalled Ruth earlier. For a virgin, she was certainly learning a great deal.

She watched.

Caroline reached up and casually, almost as though not thinking about it, pulled one of the blue ribbons. The man, a middle aged, portly individual, leaned back in his chair and blatantly watched. A small amount of Caroline's pert breast was revealed, pale flesh against the pink of the gown, outlined by the blue edging to the slit.

Caroline moved, and her nipple came into view, almost immediately hidden by the

folds in the gown. She smiled at the gentleman, who murmured; "Do carry on, dear lady."

With a wicked smile, Caroline loosed another bow, revealing more of her breast. The gentleman's smile became broader.

Another bow was released, then another. Caroline might as well be naked from the waist up, except she used the folds of the gown to reveal and display herself. The gentleman sat in his chair, rapt at Caroline's little show.

Ruth began to feel uncomfortably warm. Caroline moved to a larger bow at the centre of the gown, and taking her time, pulled it loose. The whole of the bodice gaped open.

The man caught his breath and held out his arms. "May I assist you now, ma'am?"

Smiling, Caroline went to him. Sitting on his lap she watched while he released the remaining ribbons, then moved his hands over her breasts. "Charming," he said. "You have a gift, dear girl."

"Mmmm," was Caroline's only response, as his lips took hers in the kind of kiss Ruth hadn't seen before. Their mouths opened widely, and she saw his tongue dart into her mouth, like a fish seeking water. He drew back a little, and touched her lips with his tongue before plunging it back in. Ruth felt the place between her legs tingle, and wondered at it. It was like an itch. She lifted her skirts to rub it, and ease the itch.

The man's hands roamed freely over Caroline's body, loosening the bows until the gown became an irrelevance. Caroline was naked underneath, and the man lifted up, taking her with him and leaving the gown behind.

It was strangely erotic, to see Caroline naked and the man fully clothed but this was rectified when he shrugged off his coat and loosened the fall at the front of his breeches.

Ruth almost cried out when she saw what emerged. She had occasionally seen a man naked, or near to it, but never in this state. His rod jutted hard and red out of his breeches, and for the first time Ruth understood why they called it a 'weapon.'

He laughed, and Caroline, lying on the bed, lifted her knees before allowing her legs to fall open, fully opening herself to the man's rapt stare.

This peephole was perfectly situated for the observer. Mrs. Brown probably rented it out when this room was unoccupied. She could see Caroline's body perfectly, and the man as he approached her from the far side of the bed. She couldn't take her gaze from his 'weapon.' The only names she knew for it were totally inappropriate; childish names like 'willy' didn't seem to suit this almost fearful thing. Caroline had used a word, the only one she knew that really fit.

He lowered himself over her, and from her vantage point, Ruth watched him lower his rod into Caroline's eager body.

She realized her fingers weren't just scratching her private parts. It was more like a rub. One part stood up, a part of her she knew to be sensitive but she'd never noticed it standing proud before. It felt good when she caressed it. She pinched it, and the result made her gasp. She clapped her free hand over her mouth.

Caroline lay under the man, groaning theatrically. As Ruth watched, her new friend push, and the couple rolled, so Caroline was on top. Planting her knees either side of him, she sat up. Her back was to Ruth and when she lifted up, Ruth saw her plunge back down on to the man's engorged member. She laughed. "You just watch me, sir. Lie back and enjoy the ride."

Caroline moved faster, and she brought her hand to the front, though Ruth couldn't see what she was doing. It seemed to excite the man, for he pushed up, forcing Caroline to

almost squat to retain her seat. Every time she moved, he moaned his encouragement until he went completely stiff.

"That's it, my lord, easy now. You just let Caroline take care of you."

With a loud cry, he came. Ruth watched the sac under Caroline's backside contract and harden. Was that rod, now deep in Caroline's body, hardened even more now?

Something was happening in her body, too. She straightened sharply when a pang shot from her crotch up her spine. She threw back her head, working at her body furiously until something inside her seemed to release her to pleasure.

Dropping her skirts, Ruth made her way to the bed and flopped down on it, gasping as though she had run some distance.

The sound of girlish cries and giggles reached her from the room next door. Ruth listened before sliding off the bed, her body a gentle symphony of after-pleasure.

She crossed the room to look out of the window, wanting to distance herself from the noises coming from next door, and as she did so, she noticed her reflection in the dressing table mirror. Staring at the white faced, white haired figure she saw not herself, but a tart, ready for her work. Dear Lord, if her father could see her now! It might do the trick, she thought with a small chuckle, and cause him to disown her completely.

She slipped down the shoulder of the puce gown, revealing her soft, creamy flesh. It gleamed in the dim light. When she slipped down the other, the gown fell aside, revealing the swell of her generous breasts. Too generous, she had sometimes thought, but here they seemed entirely appropriate. She tried to see herself as others might see her, and she thought, with her dark hair exposed and her face cleaned, she could make an expensive whore.

Smiling ruefully, she restored the gown and moved away to the window, staring moodily at the crowds below. The evening was in full swing now, and if her room had been a bit lower, she might have been deafened by the clamor. Crowds swirled below, surging like some multicolored sea. She seemed to be the only one alone tonight, the only one brooding, the only one afraid.

Chapter Seven

The man known as Major Lord Oliver Bridgman until eighteenth months ago stared gloomily into his dressing table mirror. It reflected nothing to be ashamed of but his expression didn't encourage an approach. Nevertheless, his valet did approach, bearing a coat of deep crimson velvet, laced with gold. "My lord."

Oliver stood and held his arms out so Oates could help him into the heavy dress coat. He already wore the satin waistcoat, richly embroidered and embellished with tiny brilliants and his dark hair was caught back by a black velvet ribbon, brought forward to tie in a thin line around the stock at his neck.

"Ready for inspection," he commented.

Oates glanced at his master perceptively. He had been his batman in the campaigns abroad, but now peace had come the major had sold out and shortly after became the Earl of Iveleigh. He thought that might be one of the problems his master was obviously laboring under. His lordship missed his brother. This earl and his elder brother had scarcely been alike, but they had cared for each other deeply. The older brother's unexpected death, together with the ending of Oliver's military career, had sent the new earl into a spiral of depression he was only just finding his way out of.

Oates didn't betray his understanding. His lordship was a very private man, not given to making his emotions public. He wouldn't appreciate sympathy.

"I'm supposed to be at Lady Cavanagh's ball tonight," his lordship said. "If I'm needed, a message there should reach me, even if I've moved on."

"Yes, my lord."

It was barely nine, but Oliver decided he might as well be on his way. He would attend the ball, then find some other company. He couldn't go to the one place he longed to be—Mother Brown's. He didn't trust himself. That lovely face, so trusting and brave, had driven through all his self-control. He couldn't risk that happening again, although the caress burned his lips still when he thought of it.

He didn't bother to order the carriage. It was one of the things his butler particularly disliked, his lordship's preference for informality. Such casual behavior might have been appropriate for a young cavalry officer, but it was hardly seemly in the Earl of Iveleigh. He sniffed when he'd handed Oliver his cloak; it was all he dared do to express his disapproval.

All he received in return was an absent smile. "It sounds as if you're starting a cold, Collins. You'd better not wait up for me. In fact, I won't require any help when I return. Please make sure there's a fire in my room and a candlestick in the hall for me. I'll see to the rest myself."

Another sniff and a reluctant, "Yes, my lord."

Oliver left the house. He wasn't unaware of the servants' disapproval, but it amused him to flout their strictures. He made his way to Lady Cavanagh's, a mere square or two away. A foolish thing, to take a carriage there. He felt as if he was going to a funeral, instead of a celebration, not an unusual feeling these days.

Her ladyship, an amply built Juno of a woman, greeted him warmly. "So charmed to see you, Lord Iveleigh! Such a pity your dear friend Mr. Urswick couldn't be here this evening!"

Oliver nodded and said something polite before he moved on to take Miss

Cavanagh's hand to his lips. He felt a tremor in the cool flesh and looked up, his absent mindedness broken.

Miss Cavanagh was a pretty piece, tricked out in pink, her hair powdered but with traces of soft brown showing through. She looked up at him through her lashes. "I'm so glad you could come!" she breathed.

"Delighted," he said, then recalled what she was probably expecting from him. "It would be a great honor if you would consent to stand up with me later."

She flushed, the pink showing through the light covering of rice powder on her face. "That would be wonderful!"

The line behind him had begun to grow, so Oliver moved on, but her innocence caught his ennui slightly, pulled him out of his slough of despond.

A new friend, the eldest son of the Duke of Devonshire, hailed him. The Marquis of Hartington was a clever fellow, deeply engaged in politics. He all but ran the great estate belonging to his father, who had been in poor health for some time now. "Good to see you, Iveleigh. Walpole tells me you almost live at Whites these days."

"Sanctuary," Oliver explained with a grin. "I feel like a fox cub, pursued by much more experienced hounds."

"Ah!" Hartington understood at once. It hadn't been so long since he'd been the object of the chase, although, in the end, he'd married for love. "You'll have to face it one day, you know. The fifth earl has to come from somewhere!"

Oliver sighed. "Yes, I know. And the ladies are very taking, but-oh I suppose I'm being too particular!"

"Take your time," advised the older man. "Though the Lord knows I didn't! I was fortunate enough to see what I wanted and even more fortunate she was available. There'll be a fresh crop next season. And you're only-what is it? Thirty?"

"Twenty eight."

"Sorry, of course. Twenty eight." The Marquis paused to sweep an assessing gaze around the ballroom. "Then why did you consent to come tonight? The Cavanaghs have five girls and this is the first. There'll be after you like wolves, never mind hounds!"

"Sometimes," Oliver confessed. "I wish there was someone to choose for me. There was something arranged in childhood, but it never came to anything and when I met the lady recently, I couldn't be anything but thankful."

Hartington laughed. "I know exactly who that was," he said. "And I think you had a narrow escape! If you need anyone to point you in the right direction, perhaps I can help?"

Oliver smiled. "I might take you up on that. It would save this, anyway."

Hartington studied him, shrewdly assessing his mood. "Relax a little more, Iveleigh. Accept what life has given you and make the most of it. Think of it! All the eligible females in London are avidly dropping at your feet! There are men who would give their eye teeth for that!"

Iveleigh let out a crack of laughter. "Quite right! I'm sorry for being such a maudlin fellow, Hart, I should really know better! I went through near death on the Continent and came back in one piece, I've inherited one of the richest earldoms in the country-who am I to cavil?" Despite his brave words, a touch of melancholy remained. Determined not to let the marquis see his lingering foolishness, Iveleigh took his leave and crossed the room as the quartet of musicians struck up for a minuet.

He chose a girl at random and was bemused when she reminded him of their

previous meeting. With an effort, he remembered her name was Wilhelmina Carrington, but he couldn't recall anything else.

"Why my lord!" she cried, with a playful flick of her fan. "It was in the Park, not three days' hence! You were on that great beast of yours —"

"Ramillies?"

"I really have no idea, but it was a great black horse and it snorted at me!" She shuddered. Well if she didn't like Ramillies, she was of no use to him!

He returned her to her parents after the minuet with a smile of thanks and chose another lady to dance with.

The evening passed. Oliver danced with Miss Cavanagh, as he'd promised and his duty done, decided to take his leave.

What on earth was the matter with him? He was even angry with himself! His life had been so busy before, no time to think. Perhaps that was the answer. To find something to care about once more. He had a strong suspicion that the recent war in Europe would start up again before too long, but this time it would have to do without him. Unless he could find a complacent bride and sire a son or two, in case he could be killed while he was serving his country. He deliberately kept his mind away from the enchanting Miss Urswick. She had too many problems for his liking, he wanted someone uncomplicated, he told himself.

He strode down the fashionable streets and without realizing it, walked east. The flambeaux flaming outside the great houses became fewer in number and the pavements of the affluent sector gave way to cobbles. Oliver was forced to pick his way more carefully. He carried his sword and was trained to kill with it, not fence, so he had few worries about his safety, but he was no fool and he kept to the broader streets. Sooner or later, he would reach somewhere that appealed to him, he supposed.

He wasn't in the mood for drinking otherwise he might seek out a club or a tavern and drink himself into a stupor. He'd done too much of that when his brother died, swallowed up by grief and—he still couldn't quite admit it—fear at what lay ahead. Where a battlefield had only driven him to develop a strategy for keeping his men alive and killing as many of the opposition as possible, a crowded ballroom had the power to strike the fear of God into his heart. Aware of his position, aware he was being watched, assessed, he could only quail and don the mask Edmund Urswick had helped him develop, so that outwardly he was the suave, charming war hero, masking the scared little boy who seemed to come to the fore at these times. It made Oliver feel angry and defensive, as well as infinitely foolish. He'd spent too much time looking after others to think about himself.

Disturbed from his contemplation by a loud cry, he looked up, startled. Somehow, he'd found his way to Covent Garden. There was a crowd here, people from every part of London, rich and poor. Tarts jostled gentlemen, men in full-bottomed wigs, men in fashionable queued wigs, men carrying canes, tricorn hats and cudgels. A watchman forced his way through the crowd, holding his staff aloft. He was teased, but later the teasing might turn nasty. It was not a pleasant job.

The only women here were women of the streets. While he felt sorry for them, he'd only availed himself of their services occasionally and then he'd usually used their more affluent sisters the courtesans. He feared he would never need such a service again.

Perhaps that was at the heart of his discontent. Since his injury, he'd seemed unable to make love to a woman. He'd tried twice just after he'd come home, but not again. The humiliation had been too much to be borne, even though he could trust the women

involved not to blab. And one, when she'd seen the scar left by the saber cut declared it was "enough to put off a blind woman!" That still hurt.

In this great crowd he saw no one he knew. Never had he felt so alone. The army had given him a sense of camaraderie he'd never felt in civilian life.

Oliver wandered around the square, passing under the portico of the church, where several couples were engrossed in sexual congress. He passed on, trying not to look. The doors to the houses were open, streaming light into the square and figures were easily glimpsed in the windows and rooms. Oliver's gloom increased.

Irritably, he shook himself. Someone stopped to stare at the strange, convulsive movement, but he ignored it. Really, such melancholy was not suitable, not at all suited to his position! He was one of the luckiest men in London, he told himself. Titled, wealthy, young, healthy—what more could he ask for?

One door stood open but the man standing next to it, although large, was smartly clad and the customers coming and going seemed to be more decorous than in most houses here. Damn! He'd come almost without knowing it. Oh well, since he was here, he might as well go in and see how she was.

He stepped inside, nodding to the burly individual standing at the door. There was no rowdy behavior tonight. He'd had his share of what the bully had called 'rough-housing' and seen enough real violence to be sick of it.

Passing further in, he was greeted by Mrs. Brown, heavily painted and in cherry red silk. "Good evening my lord," she said. "Your lady is inside."

No one stood nearby, but all the same he was circumspect. "Is she well?"

"Perfectly, my lord. Your notes heartened her."

"Thank you," Oliver murmured, trying very hard not to stare at the woman's magnificent nose. A couple of men jostled him, but it was early yet and not as crowded as it would get later. If it weren't for the gaudy décor and the cheap silks the girls were dressed in it might ape the ball he had just left. The aims were much the same. At least it was honest, Oliver thought with a wry smile.

The large room was pleasant enough, even if the furniture wasn't quite of the best quality and the color of the upholstery and drapes rather vivid. He stood just clear of the doorway and looked around. There were one or two people here he was sure he'd seen earlier at the ball—no, he wasn't mistaken, one of the gentlemen nodded to him. He let his face relax into a small smile.

Ruth paled under her maquillage. He had come, then! She'd thought he wouldn't come, although he'd sent her brief, impersonal notes asking after her welfare in the intervening days. Perhaps Edmund had come home and she could finally leave this place.

He looked magnificent, dressed for a grand ball. That coat must have cost a fortune and she would bet any money that the stone in the large ring on his forefinger was a real ruby.

She tried to shrink back behind a couple canoodling in front of her, but his perceptive gaze swept the room and settled on her. She stared, unable to smile; unable to look away, sure the pounding in her chest must be apparent to everyone.

He stood over her, smiling. "May I?"

"Of course." With a slight, graceful gesture Ruth indicated the seat at her side. She wished the sofa was larger, but once he'd disposed the skirts of his coat, his knee was rather too close to hers. She was sure she could feel its warmth through her thin silk skirts.

He smiled at her and something entered her soul. It felt good. She smiled back and was seized by a sudden impulse.

With a feeling of fatalism Ruth said, trying to keep her voice low, "Good evening, sir. May I know your name? I'm Millie."

He stared and then understanding filled his eyes, with a touch of something Ruth thought looked like mischief. "Good evening. I'm surprised to see you sitting here alone. I would have thought you'd be snapped up. Millie, you say?"

The elation that surged through Ruth then almost undid her. Her smile was more than she had intended. "Yes, sir." She could play without serious consequences. She knew she could trust Iveleigh. She didn't know if she could trust herself. She no longer denied she was attracted to him. The hairs on the back of her neck seemed to stand to attention when he was near.

"Millie. Very sweet. Are you a regular girl here?"

"No—I expect to move on soon." She fluttered her fan.

"Don't you always?" he said lightly, then, more abruptly, "You remind me of someone. Do I know you?"

"It's possible, but I'm like many other girls, sir."

"I daresay," he answered her carelessly. He lifted his arm and stretched it along the back of the seat. Ruth schooled herself not to move. "You have something out of the ordinary."

"Not in this house, sir!" she said, sharper than she'd intended.

He stared at her, a frown between his black brows. Ruth was forced to laugh. "I mean—Mrs. Brown doesn't allow anything of that nature here, sir!"

He joined in the laughter. "Not my idea of fun either, dear lady."

With his arm so close to her shoulders, for the first time in her life, Ruth was tempted. The men who had talked to her before had been perfectly acceptable, but none had that air of casual danger about them, or the particular twinkle held in Lord Iveleigh's dark eyes. Well, even if she couldn't do anything else, she'd enjoy a flirtation before taking him upstairs and reverting to normality. How strange! She would have to wait until she was in private before she could behave with decorum. It was very different with every other female in this house.

"What do you like?" she asked, feeling deliciously daring.

He laughed. "How marvelously straightforward! I like what the majority of men like. To hold a woman, touch her, kiss her and make her happy."

Ruth felt sure she blushed. Well, she did ask and she knew he teased her. She was sure he'd continue with the dare, now. It sounded wonderful, what Iveleigh had just described, but, she realized with a pang, she might never experience it.

"Would you like it now?" She lifted her fan and covered most of her face with it, peeping up at him through her lashes.

He stared at her, his gaze faraway as though deep in thought. "Why not?" His eyes were filled with warmth, with something Ruth dared to interpret as desire. Well, her little game was over now. It had been fun.

They were interrupted when Mrs. Brown walked into the middle of the room and clapped her hands for attention. Ruth looked at Oliver, but his expression was as blank as hers was. Neither had a clue what was going on.

"My lords, ladies and gentlemen!" Mrs. Brown announced with a huge smile and an expansive gesture. "This evening is somewhat special. One of our new girls has agreed to

receive her initiation in public." She flicked a glance to Oliver and Ruth, and she felt his hand tighten against hers.

"Perhaps we should go," he murmured, his mouth close to her ear.

"No," she found herself saying. "Not just yet."

His heavy sigh confirmed that what she was about to see was something no well brought up maiden should be forced to witness. It made her all the more anxious to see it.

Mother Brown started towards them, and Ruth's heart leapt in her chest. Watching was one thing, but she knew she could never participate in the revels held in this house. She gripped Oliver's hand and felt him tense as he began to get to his feet to take her away.

But the madam stopped before she reached Millie and her swain, to extend a surprisingly graceful hand to a girl sitting on a chaise longue set at right angles to theirs, a short distance away. The girl took the proffered hand and got to her feet. She was shaking.

Oliver bent to whisper in Ruth's ear. "I hope she's willing."

"I know enough about this house to know that's almost a certainty. Mrs. Brown likes her girls not only willing, but enthusiastic about their work."

"Seems to me you're learning altogether too much about this business."

She chuckled, but resisted the tug on her hand as he tried yet again to persuade her to leave with him. Whatever happened next in her life this was an interlude, a moment out of time after the cessation of one part of it and the beginning of the next. Ruth intended to make the most of it.

The girl was dressed in a gown of very fine silk, held out by a narrow hoop. It was obvious when she stepped up to the couch set apart from the rest that she had little on underneath. Her legs were clearly shadowed in the light of the candelabra set on stands behind them. The lights in the room were put out, all but the ones nearest to the chaise, the better to make a good show, and so the other couples could conduct a little furtive fumbling in the dark. There was little need for that in this house, but Ruth knew enough now to guess that some customers liked a little furtiveness in their affairs. Mother Brown never missed a trick.

"This is Melanie," Mrs. Brown said. "Mr. A and our own Judy have agreed to assist. Mr. A, a masked gentleman and the broadly smiling Judy stepped up to stand either side of the visibly trembling Melanie.

Judy gave Melanie a light kiss on her lips, and moved aside, to begin unhooking the front of the girl's white gown. Mr. A Stepped in for a more comprehensive embrace. Judy deftly finished her work and allowed Mr. A access to Melanie's lips. He made the most of the job, embracing her and opening her mouth with his, turning her so they were both in profile. He made great play with his tongue, playing with the tip of hers with the tip of his, dancing suggestively into her mouth and out again.

Judy tugged at the shoulders of the gown and Mr. A released Melanie so the gown could be slid off her shoulders. It fell to the floor in a whisper of fine fabric, and a small sigh emerged from the onlookers. There must have been about thirty, in all. Ruth wondered how would it feel to do this and the heat between her legs increased a little.

Melanie was left in a pair of pure white stays and her shift, under the light hoop which was swiftly disposed of by Judy's neat hands. When she had tossed the hoop away, Judy returned to skim her hands over Melanie's body, displaying her small waist and full breasts, hoisted high by the stays. With a slight push on the ribs of the stays, Judy exposed Melanie's nipples. They burst from the top of the garment as though exuberantly inviting a touch, and Mr. A obliged. He circled the nipples, and they visibly crinkled into points.

Ruth felt her own breasts respond, becoming sensitive under the puce gown. She swallowed. Oliver gripped her hand tighter, then released it and crossed his legs, leaning further back and stretching his arm out behind her.

When Mr. A put his mouth to Melanie's breasts the room sighed and a smattering of applause disturbed the tense atmosphere in the room. A few comments became barely audible. "Very nice pair of bobbies," and "Put me down for an afternoon with that one, would you Madame?"

While Mr. A attended to Melanie's soft, willing body, Judy embraced her from behind, lifting her shift and slowly exposing her thighs. Her hands dipped underneath, and Melanie stiffened and gasped. With her newfound knowledge, Ruth guessed which part of Melanie's anatomy Judy fondled now. When Mr. A reached down to flip up the shift she saw she was right. Judy had taken that small peak of flesh and pinched it. As Ruth watched, she milked it like a miniature teat on a cow, and Judy responded with a small moan.

Mr. A pushed the girl down on the chaise, and Judy moved to attend to Mr. A. It seemed she was to prepare both parties for the encounter. Judy lay, breasts bursting from her stays, legs open revealing the glistening treasure between them while Mr. A enjoyed the view and allowed Judy to open the fall of his breeches. He shrugged off his coat and waistcoat, and received a few cheers of encouragement from the gentlemen present. "Go to it, sir!"

Ruth rubbed her thighs together to try to assuage the ache she felt between them. She wanted to touch, as Melanie was now touching herself, as she watched Judy reveal Mr. A's erect member. A few feminine gasps reflected the truth of what Ruth was thinking; Mr. A was a very gifted gentleman. His penis jutted, thick and erect, from the fall of his breeches, the rounded tip deep red and pulsing. Judy dragged the breeches down the man's legs, leaving him to dispose of his shirt by pulling it off over his head. A few more ragged cheers, some from women, urged him to turn and bow, smiling, to the audience. Melanie gasped, and Judy reached over to still her hands.

Now Judy pushed inside her own bodice and dragged her breasts clear, revealing them to anyone who cared to look. The pouting nipples rouged and already tight, she offered them to Melanie, who gave one nipple a tentative lick. Mr. A smiled and leaned over for his share, but as Judy knelt just behind the head of the couch, this meant he had to stretch over Melanie to do so. His penis nudged her hand away from her crotch and she arched up to meet him. So suckling Judy's breast, Mr. A made his entrance into Melanie's wet and willing body. He knelt up, and Ruth could clearly see where they joined. If she couldn't see it, she could hear it; Melanie's wet body setting up a squelching welcome as Mr. A forced himself in until he was fully seated inside her. The applause was more fulsome this time.

Oliver groaned. "No more. Come on."

Hearing the note of determination in his voice, Ruth knew the show was over, for her at least. The audience became more vociferous, urging the couple on with cheers and obscene suggestions, and Oliver stood, dragging the increasingly reluctant Ruth out of the room and towards the stairs, arching an exasperated brow at the doughty Vic, the only man in the room who seemed totally unmoved by the show.

"They'll be at it for a while yet," he commented laconically as they passed. "Should think they'll be busy for another half hour at least. You get the young lady upstairs sir and don't you let her out again until she leaves this 'ouse."

"A very good idea," Oliver said grimly, towing Ruth towards the stairs.

Ruth felt melancholy entering the corridor leading to her room. She wished she could have seen some more. It was deliciously wicked.

A jolt passed through her body when she realized this adventure was shortly to come to an end. She wanted one taste at freedom, at doing something that was her own decision, not forced on her by circumstances, or anyone else. She wanted to know what intimacy was like before she turned back into good little Ruth. There could be no harm in it, surely, if she was Millie here. No one need ever know. The show downstairs had convinced her that this was what she wanted, and she wanted it with the man by her side.

Feeling reckless, she drew Oliver inside her room. It was happening again, that tingle up her spine, in the pit of her stomach, the warmth between her legs, the tingle in her breasts.

It seemed he felt something, too. When she got to the room she drew him inside and closed the door. As soon as it was closed he took her into his arms. She smiled up at him, trustingly.

He stared at her, a faint frown on his face and then he relaxed into a smile. Drawing her to him, he bent his head to kiss her.

And drew back. "We shouldn't be doing this. I'm supposed to look after you, Ruth."

"What harm can a kiss do?" she demanded.

He studied her, the frown back between his brows. "Well it wasn't entirely pleasant. Won't you take that disgusting stuff of your face? It tastes vile."

"No." If she did, she'd be back to staid, sensible Ruth, too respectable to do anything like this. With this thick layer of paint, she was someone else; Millie, the new courtesan at Mrs. Brown's. Excitement rose within her. The game wasn't over yet.

With a grimace he said, "Then I can't kiss your mouth. I'm sorry. Perhaps it's as well."

"That's all right," she said, although she felt the disappointment. She wasn't sure what to do, because if she showed any hesitation, he would stop at once.

Deliberately, she shrugged. The thin gown slipped off her shoulders. Ruth kept her arms close by her sides, so the sleeves slipped down to her elbows. Her corset, not the one she had worn when she arrived here, was laced tightly, pushing her breasts up into plump invitation.

He groaned, staring down. "Ruth, we shouldn't be doing this."

"I don't care. I want you."

Amazed at her own wantonness after a mere three days in this establishment, she took a deep breath and watched his reaction when her breasts swelled. He breathed out in one long sigh. "At least you haven't painted these. You're lovely." He bent his head and took a nipple into his mouth.

The shock that went through Ruth nearly overbalanced her and she clutched at his shoulder with her free hand. He released her for a moment and his voice held a plea in it. "Tell me to stop, Ruth." He went back to his sucking and licking.

She didn't tell him. Ruth loved it. Did this mean she was a natural wanton? She didn't care any more. His warm tongue curled about her nipple, easing the sensitivity, increasing it.

He took her hand and guided it to the front of his breeches. Ruth felt his erection through the soft velvet. It felt hard, warm, hot even and she had never, never taken such

intimacies before. She couldn't ever remember seeing a man's erection before she entered this house and now she was touching one!

Greatly daring she slid her hand up and down, watched as he threw back his head, eyes closed. His breath hissed through his teeth. "That feels good." A feeling of power swept through her. She carried on stroking and caressing and he looked down at her and smiled. Reaching up, he began to unhook her gown. "Just a little, a very little more. I won't hurt you, Ruth, I won't do anything we need regret. God, it's been so long!"

Drawing back, he shrugged off his beautiful evening coat and threw it carelessly over the chair. His waistcoat followed swiftly, then, looking at her face *which she thought was very gentlemanly of him* he went to the bed and looked at her, waiting for her to make up her mind. She stood, trying to control her trembling, gazing at him as he removed the black ribbon from his hair and the tight stock from around his neck.

With his dark hair flowing freely around his shoulders, he looked like Lucifer before the Fall. He reached out one long hand to her. "Come here."

She couldn't have disobeyed him if she'd wanted to. Stopping to shrug off the puce gown, she went to the bed.

"I'd like to see you naked," he said. "Please, Ruth."

She almost froze at that, but acting a part helped her now. This wasn't Ruth Urswick, this was Millie. Smiling in what she hoped was a wanton way, she reached around to the back to release the tapes on her petticoats and side hoops. Her heart beat so hard she could scarcely breathe.

She let the rest of her clothes slide to the ground in one heavy heap of silk and linen and watched his face. He smiled. "I like that."

Then he took off his shirt. Ruth gasped. She'd seen a man's bare chest before, in the fields at home the workers in the fields would often strip to the waist but she'd never had the knowledge that she was to touch it, press herself to it.

He was strong and she watched his muscles flex when he lowered himself to the bed, lifting himself on one elbow to watch her.

Ruth could manage her own stay laces and he watched with more than desire when she reached around and pulled on the lace, that released her from her confinement. "Interesting," he said. "I always wondered how women managed to do that on their own."

She smiled and lifted her leg on to the bed, sliding one hand up her shift to undo her garter. She rolled her stocking down slowly, so he could admire her smooth, strong calves. Then she put her bare foot on the floor and repeated the action with the other foot.

Turning round, she took a deep breath or two and, dressed only in her shift, turned around and let him look at her. When she lifted her arms to remove the last garment he shook his head. She obeyed, knowing the wisdom of the decision. She was, in any case, unsure if she could let the last veil fall. Taking care to undulate her hips as Millie would, she moved slowly within his reach, more terrified and excited than she had ever been in her life before. He'd promised not to hurt her, not to take her, but she didn't care any more. After this would come more lengthy imprisonment, but before that she wanted to do one thing, just one thing to remember in the long nights ahead.

He reached for her and drew her down.

She couldn't repress her sigh of pleasure when he pulled her body against him and she felt his warmth. He chuckled and kissed her shoulder, then slid his mouth down to her breasts. "Lovely," he murmured appreciatively. "You are lovely."

She felt safe with him. Safe and in danger, at the same time and she found it

exhilarating. Ruth deliberately thought of herself as Millie and wanted to do what Millie would do, not sensible Ruth Urswick.

He moved off her and leaned back, eyes closed. "We shouldn't. We have to stop this game."

"Just a little more," she whispered and moved her hand down to the buttons on his breeches. He was even larger than before, straining through the soft material.

He bit his lip. "I don't know how long I can control myself. Especially if you do that." The first button slid through the hole. Ruth moved on to the next.

"I'm Millie. You owe me nothing, more than a guinea or two."

He watched her face as she slid the buttons loose, not trying to prevent her, as though he was in a trance. "It's been a long time, R-Millie. Don't do any more. I don't know if I can control myself."

It was his last protest. Under the fine velvet breeches he wore a thin undergarment, open at the front. If Ruth looked down she could see his erection, but she was afraid that if she did she would take fright, so she kept her gaze on his face. She undid the drawstring holding his last garment in place.

"Oh God!" Carelessly he dragged the garments off over his feet, the jeweled buckles at his knee and the silken hose coming off in the same movement. He tossed the breeches and underwear aside and came back to her, rolling her on her back.

When she saw the intent, blazing look in his eyes Ruth knew *it* was going to happen. She couldn't be sorry. This was so reckless as to border on foolishness, but this once, this one time, she would follow her desires and take the man whose body she found so deeply enthralling. The realization hit her like a blow to her solar plexus. She wanted him; it was as simple as that.

He was beautifully built and clearly enthusiastic for the simplest pleasure. His broad chest was furred with dark hair, thicker at the center, pointing down to the wonders below, the thing she had still not had the courage to look at, though she felt it now, pressing against her. He came on top of her and his hair swung forward. He flicked it back behind his shoulders and at the same time put his knee between her legs, urging them apart. "You, sweet girl," he said, "Are about to perform a miracle."

He drove himself inside her.

Ruth screamed.

Somebody hammered on the door.

Chapter Eight

Ruth's cry of pain was all Oliver needed to bring him back to a sharp sense of reality. He'd thrust with such force he'd driven through her maidenhead before he'd remembered it was there. She had invited him into the Millie game too thoroughly and now they must both take the consequences.

Ignoring the increasingly urgent knocking on the door, he withdrew and examined the result of his action, horrified at what he had done. Blood spotted the sheets and when he looked at his partner he saw the source.

Oliver put a shaking hand to his forehead. "Dear God! What was I thinking?"

He turned to stare at the girl who lay on the pillows, tears pouring down her face, gasping; "I didn't know, I didn't know it would hurt so much!"

He stared at her, aghast. "Ruth I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" The wanton Millie was entirely gone now, leaving in her place a sobbing, frightened young woman. His eyes raked her lovely body, distress etched on the taut muscles, lines creasing the make-up.

Horrified, the drumming he'd thought was in his head proved to have an outside source. Someone was at the door. They were found out.

Oliver leapt off the bed and retrieved his breeches, dragging them on over his fast receding erection. His delight when he found he had a response after so long was forgotten, to be replaced by a sickening return to reality.

The hammering at the door reached a crescendo. He went over to where he'd laid his sword with his coat, drew the blade from the sheath and went to the door.

He unlocked it and immediately it opened to reveal the face he was least expecting.

"Edmund?"

Edmund's face was a mask of shock. He entered the room, followed closely by Vic and Mrs. Brown, who swiftly closed the door and turned the key. She was the calmest of them all and she stood by the door, taking in the scene.

Ruth had crawled beneath the covers and pulled them up to her chin, sobbing as though her heart would break. Oliver, drawn sword firmly in one hand, stood confronting a flabbergasted Edmund. Vic stood back, ready to break up anything if it got too violent. He glared at Oliver belligerently, but didn't move to draw his own weapon.

Mrs. Brown went over to where Ruth sat, knees hunched up to her chin, sobbing into the sheets. Lifting the girl's chin in one hand, she took a dispassionate look and went over to the washstand, wringing out the cloth she found there. Returning to Ruth, she started to remove the make up that was now streaked all over her face.

Oliver glared at Edmund. His erstwhile friend stared at him, aghast. "You didn't—oh God, whatever made you do it! It's all my fault, I knew I shouldn't have left her alone!" He flung away, heedless of the naked blade in Iveleigh's hand.

He came into eye contact with Ruth and spun round, drawing his blade quicker than thought. "What have you done to her, Iveleigh?"

"I deserve it all," Oliver replied, his agitation receding when he faced the blade. An ex-soldier, he knew it was suicide to face a naked blade in the hands of a skilled opponent with anything in his heart but cold calculation. He was far from that, but he forced himself to concentrate on the immediate threat.

Edmund came at him furiously and Oliver beat him aside, but didn't retaliate. He allowed Urswick to vent his fury, striking him away each time until Edmund turned away

and threw his blade down in disgust. "Damn it, Iveleigh, fight like a man!"

"You can call me out," Oliver said, "but I won't let you kill me here, in front of Ruth!"

"Ruth is it?" Edmund exclaimed furiously. "Did you...?"

A quavering voice came from the bed. Ruth sat up, pushing Mrs. Brown to one side. "He did nothing I didn't want him to. Please, Edmund, it was as much my fault as his."

"It doesn't matter, he should have known better!" her cousin cried furiously.

"That's true," Oliver admitted. "I should have known better. I don't know why I did it-but it's done now. I swear I meant nothing but good, bringing her here. A lot has happened since you left town, Urswick. If you wish, I'll leave you and answer your summons when it comes."

"No!"

Both men turned at the agonized cry and stared at Ruth, still clutching the tawdry bedspread to her breast, but sitting up and recognizably Ruth, the layers of paint gone from her face. "You mustn't challenge him, Edmund, you mustn't!"

Edmund and Oliver exchanged a glance. "She's right," said Edmund. "There'd be talk."

"For goodness' sake go away and talk about this like adults!" Ruth cried. Despite her scandalous state of undress, she threw the coverlet back and swung her legs out of the bed, not attempting to hide her body, which was easily visible under the fine lawn of the stained and crumpled shift. "If I'm to go to your sister's we must make haste. Don't stand there like a couple of blockheads! Go downstairs while I make myself decent!"

Edmund went over to her and, looking only at her face, took her hand. "Did he force you, Ruth? If he did, I swear I'll kill him here and now!"

Ruth shook her head and stared crossly at her cousin. "No. Edmund, no. I wanted this. I wanted one night, one night before I went back to respectability, to my father."

Edmund gripped her hand harder. "No, you won't go back to that madman, I'm determined on it!"

She managed a watery smile. "It was my own foolishness, Edmund. I thought no one would ever know. You see - my knowledge of these things was very limited."

Persuaded by everyone's reaction, Oliver had cast his sword aside and was busy dressing, but he looked over to her at those words. She met his gaze bravely. "I didn't think. I didn't know -"

He stared at her, dazed. "Miss Urswick? I'm truly sorry. It was all my fault."

Edmund turned to stare at Oliver, his burning gaze searing his friend. "What possessed you to bring an innocent to a place like this? Didn't you know what would happen?"

"I know," Oliver began, but was interrupted by Ruth.

"Iveleigh-Oliver will explain. I had a guard assigned to me here. Nobody touched me but Oliver. There was nowhere else for me to go and I wouldn't have been as well protected from my father anywhere else. If anyone had tried to force me, or if Papa had arrived, Vic would have been there in an instant. He's taken very good care of me."

"As far as the house is concerned," said Mrs. Brown her voice breaking through the passion like a knife through butter, "Miss Urswick is his lordship's private property, only lodged here until he could find a better place for them both. She's known as Millie. Not even Vic knows the truth. Knew." Vic certainly knew now.

Oliver spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I thought it best. I have to

admit—I was drunk when I had the idea of bringing her here. It would have been better if I'd taken her home!"

"No!" cried Ruth, with such vehemence everyone turned to stare at her. "I won't go back, not now! He'll kill me!"

Edmund turned to Oliver, his expression grim. "Tell me the whole."

Oliver bent to pick up his stock and continued to dress. His hands shook as he tied the knot. "Urswick's run mad. Ruth is right. She can't go back while he's like this. He might kill her, especially if he knows where she's been. He told me he never wanted another man to set eyes on her as long as she lived and he seems set on it." He picked up his waistcoat. "He's worse than ever. He's set people looking for her. I fear he'll run completely mad soon."

Ruth wetted her lips. "It might be for the best. I fear for him, he needs caring for, but I can't do it any more."

Edmund stared from Ruth to Oliver and back again, then shrugged. "That's the least of it now. This—" he waved his arms helplessly.

The madam held up an admonishing finger and moved to the wall. Under the appalled gaze of Oliver, Ruth and Edmund, she moved a large print depicting Venus and Mars to reveal a sizeable aperture. The room behind was dark. "Caroline must be downstairs still," she murmured, then carefully replaced the print. When she turned back her eyebrows shot up. "What? You think I'd leave a perfectly good room begging? Caroline puts on shows and some people prefer to watch. That's all."

Edmund made a strangulated choke and Oliver turned away, reddening. Ruth seemed to be the most pragmatic person present. "Why shouldn't they want to watch?"

"Really, Ruth!" Edmund sounded so much older than his years that Ruth could imagine him the father of a hopeful brood of youngsters, handing out homilies on proper behavior. She grinned at him, pure mischief in her eyes. Edmund refused to respond, but his frown lifted after a moment.

"Tell me what we're to do, Edmund," Ruth coaxed. "You'll be my guardian if you can get my father committed."

He grimaced. "Not committed, merely declared incompetent. There's no reason to be unkind." He sighed. "Very well. Let's turn to the practical." He tossed Ruth a shapeless garment and Ruth put it on. A silk robe, meant for titillation, but it covered her up better than her shift. "I fear a mad father would not help your prospects. I don't think madness is in either of our families, nor in your mother's, but society may well choose to believe otherwise. I'm still hoping once you're safe, your father will accept matters as they are and go home, but from what you've been saying it sounds less likely than I'd hoped. We might have to coerce him, but to all intents and purposes, he'll have retired to the country."

"You mean we can engage people to care for him and send him home?"

Edmund nodded. "If we do, you'll be under his jurisdiction until you marry—if we don't have him committed. I hope he'll agree to retire. If we can arrange things properly, that won't matter. You must be looked after properly."

"Indeed you must." Oliver, now respectable again, came over to the bed and picked up the puce gown, throwing it loosely around Ruth's shoulders to cover the thin silk robe. He stood back. "What are your plans for her, Edmund?"

A shadow crossed Edmund's face. "I left town to visit my sister Mary. She lives quietly with her husband and children in the country and I can trust them implicitly. If

Ruth paid an extended visit to them it would not be seen as anything in the least unusual."

Oliver's face cleared a little, recovering from his anger and confusion. It was her vulnerability, hair tumbled over bare shoulders, a look of fear she couldn't quite hide in her eyes, that had finally brought him back to his senses and engendered a strong desire to protect her. "That would be excellent," he said, his deep voice softening a little. "A perfect solution."

Edmund frowned. "Unfortunately, Mary has taken it into her head to visit Bath," he confessed, with a heavy sigh.

"Oh!" This had obviously not come as an undesirable shock to Ruth. Her face brightened at the news.

"While I'm sure she would be charmed to have Ruth for company, I don't think it would be safe."

"Safe?" echoed Ruth. "A visit to Bath is better than being immured in the country! Surely I would be safe enough there?" She sounded wistful.

Edmund took her hand. "I'm afraid your father will seek you out in a place like that, compel you to return to him. I'm sorry, Ruth, it's not safe."

"Can she go to your sister's house in the country?" asked Oliver.

Edmund shook his head. "Not easily. The house has been closed up. It would take a while to engage the proper number of staff and open it up. And it might be thought strange if Ruth stayed there on her own and didn't join Mary in Bath. It would attract just the sort of attention I'm anxious to avoid." He turned to his friend and addressed him frankly. "I'm at a standstill, Oliver. There are only a few options left."

Oliver glanced at Ruth, the cheap silk covering the lovely body that had so entranced him shortly before. "I think we should leave while Miss Urswick makes herself decent." Answering Ruth's look of panic, he smiled and said, "I promise not to run away. I'll bring him back in half an hour, if you feel up to receiving us."

He made Ruth laugh at his formality, which was what he wanted. Shrugging on his coat, he and Edmund left the room and Vic followed to stand guard over the door.

After Ruth had thoroughly washed herself all over and donned her day outfit, she felt a little better, a little braver. She felt numb and very stupid. How could she have not known about her now lost maidenhead? She'd thought the phrase 'to lose one's maidenhead' had been figurative, not literal. It was why she had assumed that once with Oliver would not matter. She should have known better and had her mother been alive to guide her, she would have done.

She'd made her predicament infinitely worse. Now she was a fugitive from her father and-soiled goods. At least this time she'd brought it on herself. It had been her mistake; not one forced on her by someone else. That made it better, somehow.

Downstairs in a small, sparsely populated salon, Edmund and Oliver sat over a bottle of burgundy, discussing their predicament. "I'll marry her," Oliver said.

Edmund looked at him warmly. "I'm glad you said that, old man."

"After what I did I wonder you didn't kill me where I stood."

Edmund shook his head. "I was tempted, but what good would that do? Alert the world to our troubles?" He paused, swirling the red liquid in his glass and then said abruptly, "Could anyone be that innocent?"

Oliver's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Yes of course. She's been kept close; it seems she is about to be kept closer. She must feel like a prisoner and this was her one act

of rebellion. She knew nothing about the mechanics of it all; she honestly thought no one would be any the wiser."

Edmund looked at him curiously. "How well you seem to know her! Better than me." At Oliver's glance of enquiry he continued, "I knew her when we were children, but then we drifted apart—or so it seemed. The last time I saw her was at her mother's funeral."

"When was that?"

"Six years ago. Ruth lost her brother, her sister and her mother to smallpox in a matter of weeks."

There was a telling silence before Oliver breathed, "Dear God! I knew she'd lost her family, but I never really stopped to think about it before."

Edmund shook his head. "A terrible blow. I think her father's madness must have started then. I knew she'd do well in town and I wanted my mother to present her, once the period of mourning was up. Mama was always willing, right up to her own death."

Oliver nodded sympathetically, but he was still trying to recover from the shock. Although he'd lost his parents, it had been when he was young. He hardly remembered them. He remembered how devastated he'd been at his brother's death, how alone he'd felt. How much more so to lose almost all your family in one stroke! It was a wonder Ruth herself was sane, much less her father. His admiration for her soared. He understood how she could know so little about making love, how trapped she must feel. "I'll go upstairs and propose," Oliver said. "It's my mistake."

Edmund caught Oliver's arm, as he was about to get to his feet. "It's as much my fault as yours, old man. I should have tackled this years ago, but I kept putting it off. I don't mind proposing to her. She'd make a charming wife and I can make some things up to her."

"Don't you think I had something to do with it?" said Oliver softly. "And unlike you, I have no one."

"You want to marry her?"

"I wouldn't say that. I don't know her. From what I've seen of her..." His eyes glazed as he remembered the soft, lush breasts, the slim waist and inviting hips. Unsuitable! He shook the remembrance out of his mind. "She's an exceptional girl." He thought for a moment. "Edmund, I don't want to force her into marriage. If you're willing, if you're really willing, we could at least give her the choice. Is there any other choice for her?"

"I can't see anyone else wanting her after what you've done," Edmund agreed. "Could she be enceinte? That would change things, wouldn't it?"

Oliver shook his head. "Not a chance. I pulled away as soon as—no, I'm sure of it."

Edmund sighed. "Just as well." He smoothed his light brown hair back in a characteristic gesture. "Why on earth did you let it get that far, old man? What were you thinking of?"

Oliver closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "It was a moment out of time. That's the nearest I can get to describing it." He opened his eyes again and regarded his friend gravely. "She attracts me—physically, in a way I haven't felt for years. You know I've had a—problem. You're the only one who does know for sure, apart from the principals in the whole wretched affair." Edmund nodded, sympathy lighting his eyes. "Well tonight was different. For the first time in over two years I—well, you know." Edmund nodded again. "And she wouldn't take off that dreadful paint, so she didn't look like a respectable maiden."

"Very few girls in this house do, despite Mother Brown's best efforts," remarked Edmund.

"I couldn't think what else to do, where else to take her. Tonight she was lovely and lonely, and I've been lonely for years and it just—it just happened." He tried to be sorry. He couldn't be. Oliver leaned forward and spoke quietly. "I've been thinking. I have a house in Hampstead. It's where my brother Charles took his inamoratas. He was quite the ladies' man, if you remember."

"Yes," Edmund said with a grin.

"Well the house was where he took his *maitresse en titre*. Very few people know of it. For obvious reasons he never entertained there and it's close enough to London to travel there and back easily in a day—"

Edmund stared at his friend, hope dawning on his face. "Then you'd be willing—"

"Ruth would be much more comfortable there than here," Oliver said. "And it will give her a little time to recover from her ordeal."

Edmund frowned thoughtfully. "It wouldn't have done before, when there was a chance Mary could take her. However, now—" They both knew what he meant. Ruth would leave the Hampstead house as a married lady. "It would give me a little time to work out what is to be done about my uncle," Edmund added. "If I'm forced to commit him, it will take time and if one of us is to marry Ruth, it will give her time to get to know us both. Splendid plan!"

Oliver paused and tossed off his wine in one gulp. "If we take her there, she'll be safe and living in perfect propriety. Can we not give her a little time?"

"What do you mean?"

Oliver shrugged. "Time to recover. Time to think. And I don't think we should tell her what we've decided about her future."

Edmund's head jerked up. He was clearly startled. "Why on earth not? I want to put her mind at ease as soon as we can!"

"By telling her she's going to transfer from her father's ownership to someone else's? Ideally, we'd give her a Season, but it doesn't seem possible, so I suggest we give her the Hampstead house and a strong footman or two, let her recover." Taken by a sudden thought, he added; "What if we court her?"

"What?"

"From what you've told me, she's never been properly courted. It would certainly be more enjoyable for her than being told she is to marry one of us and making her choose." He had his own ideas about that. With Edmund in love, he decided he would marry Ruth. It was the only thing that would assuage his guilt. And there was something else lurking at the back of his mind. He hadn't got a name for it yet.

Edmund sank his head in his hand, thinking hard and then he looked up and grinned. "You have a good point. And we might enjoy it too!"

Oliver grinned back, lighter at heart now he knew he would have a chance to care for her. He didn't know how he felt about Ruth, but he was sure about the desire he'd felt for her and he liked her. Successful marriages were built on less. "Now all we have to do is tell Ruth."

Chapter Nine

Relieved to see the back of the brothel, nevertheless Ruth felt a slight pang as she prepared to leave her sanctuary. With her meager belongings packed, she looked back at the room, wondering who would be next in there. It had proved an effective hiding place and it had been only her own stupid fault that brought her to this pass. Her options were now limited. While Oliver had apologized, he hadn't offered marriage. Of course, it would have been foolish when the fault was hers. Instead, he told her she was to stay at Oliver's house in Hampstead. She had to think of him as Oliver now. They'd been too intimate for anything else.

She saw a carriage draw up outside. The crests were covered, but it could only be the one for her.

Sighing, she opened the door and went outside, carrying her portmanteau and dressing case. Stopping by Caroline's door she left a package containing the informative book she'd borrowed and a packet of ribbons. It was all she had to spare and she wanted to leave Caroline something to show her gratitude for her kindness.

Mrs. Brown waited downstairs and she gave Ruth the nearest thing to a smile Ruth had ever seen on her. Ruth took her hand. "Thank you. I won't be able to see you again, but I'll think of you."

"I'm sure you will," Mrs. Brown said. "You won't have met many like me, nor will you again!"

Ruth stepped out to the waiting carriage. If anyone noticed her leave, they didn't come forward. A footman helped her in and bestowed her luggage in the trunk. Ruth smiled shyly at the gentlemen within and they bade her good day. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"Are you quite well this morning?" Their experience of the night before hung heavily between them, but Ruth had to be practical and accept his help now.

"Perfectly, sir." She gave him a small smile. A very small one.

Disinclined to talk, Ruth stared out the window. They passed through Russell Square, which was respectable, if not fashionable.

They traveled north through respectable streets and squares, filled with neat, modern residences, most with their gleaming doorknockers in place. The season had truly started now; most of society in residence.

Ruth watched market gardens, gaily bright with the flowers of later crops, glasshouses cossetting luxuries for the rich. Men were already busy at work.

They passed Chalk Farm and then buildings came into sight, first a house or two, then a more populous area Ruth guessed must be Hampstead. There was silence in the coach, but she didn't find it oppressive. Occasional remarks had been passed, but nothing of note and Ruth found it soothing after the bustle of the brothel.

Edmund cleared his throat. "I'll introduce you as Ruth Philips. We don't want word getting back to your father."

Ruth found she didn't care. She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Say I'm your mistress if you like."

"The house was one my brother used—privately," said Oliver carefully. "He didn't encourage visitors and few people know about it. You should be safe there."

"I shall have to go back to Town in any case," Edmund added. "Make my presence

known, otherwise your father will be bound to guess."

"He's still there?"

"He's sworn not to go home without you."

Ruth shook her head. So much in such a short space of time!

Hampstead was a pretty, newly fashionable village. Healing waters had been discovered at the turn of the century and being so close to London had made it more popular. The Heath, an ancient stretch of plain and woodland, had been there forever, but the concentration was on the spa and gossip. Ruth found the place attractive, but was relieved when they passed through the main residential area and towards open country. If she'd been staying in the town, she'd have had to keep close, for fear of being spotted.

Just as she was wondering if they had much further to go, the coach passed through a pair of wrought iron gates and up a short drive. Ruth waited impatiently for the steps to be lowered and allowed Oliver to hand her out of the coach before she looked up.

A small country manor met her gaze. A shallow flight of steps led up under a portico to a shining front door, now held open by a footman. Windows either side of the door gleamed in the pale sunlight of the chilly April morning and upstairs more windows were ranked in an orderly fashion. The gardens at the front were well kept, the lawns as smooth as a billiard table. Ruth loved it on sight.

"Do you spend much time here?" she asked Oliver.

He shook his head. "Not until now."

She turned to see him watching her, his dark eyes soft with friendliness and she smiled back, the first time she could remember feeling at ease since she'd run out of her father's London house.

He offered her the support of his arm and she laid her hand on it in the approved manner. They went indoors.

A tall individual in sober dress bowed to them in the light, white and black tiled hall. "Anderson, ma'am," he said. "I act as the caretaker here and the butler when Lord Iveleigh is in residence." Ruth let out a long sigh of relief. A well-trained servant made an enormous difference to a house. She'd ordered her father's for so long, it was almost second nature to her. Those days had gone now, perhaps forever.

While grateful to Oliver for providing this shelter, she was still no nearer knowing what would happen to her in the long run. Her season was finished; if she reappeared in London unmarried, her father would whisk her away immediately and he had the law on his side. To break away would create the sort of scandal that would ruin her marriage prospects anyway. What were left of them, but after a long, intimate talk with Mrs. Brown the night before, Ruth was convinced her hopes weren't entirely dashed. "Ladies who enjoy riding and vigorous exercises often go to their marriage beds with their maidenheads broken so relaxed they might as well not be there." Mrs. Brown proceeded to give Ruth information that had made her blush a fiery red, but given her more facts about the mysteries of the marriage bed.

Ruth's heart lifted as Anderson took her around the house. Oliver and Edmund repaired to the library, to take a glass and discuss the situation, now they had arrived at a place of relative safety.

Ruth loved the house. It was clean, simply furnished and light. No heavy draperies, no dark upholstery. It lifted her mood just to be there. Her meager belongings were carried up after her and she was put in a bedroom at the back of the house, looking out over pleasant gardens. She could live here, she could be happy here, if things were

different.

Perhaps, just perhaps, she might be able to afford something like this if Edmund ever managed to get her portion out of her father. Then she could live on her own and no one else need intrude.

Thinking of that made her feel better and she went down to the library feeling happier than she had for—well, for a long time. The gentlemen stood when she entered and the smile she gave them stopped them both in their tracks. They had so far only seen her unhappy, nervous or covered in heavy make up. This was the first time the character inside had shone through to them. For a moment they were both enchanted and returned the smile in full measure. Edmund held a chair for her while she sat down and Oliver poured her some fresh tea. She thanked him prettily. “I’m so relieved to get out of that house!” she said, but she hadn’t fully realized it until that moment.

“I can’t think why I took you there!” confessed Oliver. “I should have taken you somewhere like this from the outset.”

“How could you? It was the middle of the night and you were drunk.”

The simple statement of fact made Edmund laugh. “I thought that might have had something to do with it! You put away more than a skinful that night!”

“Ha!” replied his friend. “I should call you out for that!”

“And do what?” Edmund countered. “If the weapons are my choice, I would choose a case of port! You wouldn’t last an hour, my friend!”

Laughing, Oliver was forced to agree. “I’ve never had much of a head for drink and Ruth found me at the end of a busy evening. I’m glad it was me, Ruth. I still can’t believe you did such a thing. Anyone could have found you.” He bit his lip, obviously remembering what he had done to her.

Ruth’s smile faded. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I thought my father was going to kill me.”

“Did he hurt you?” Oliver’s voice held a sharper edge.

Ruth shook her head. “He pushed me over, but I got to my feet and ran. It was the look on his face—he’d lost all control, there was nothing he wouldn’t have done! And all because other men were looking at me, talking to me!”

Oliver’s eyes held an appalled expression. “Do you mean it was me? When I danced with you and took you for a glass of wine?”

Ruth hastened to reassure him. “It would have happened sooner or later anyway, I think. It’s unfortunate that it was you—”

“Why?”

The monosyllable caught Ruth up short. She stared at Oliver. “Surely you would prefer not to have been involved in this mess? I’d rather not involve anyone and cope with it on my own, but I fear with the current state of justice, I cannot.”

“No, you can’t,” Oliver agreed. “As for being involved—I’m not so sure.” He meant it, though Edmund gave him a slightly doubting smile.

Bemused, Ruth returned his smile. He’d always seemed friendly, but with a cynical reserve she’d assumed was part of him. Perhaps it masked something else. She hoped he would allow her to find out.

Oliver watched, enchanted.

Edmund cleared his throat. “I can’t stay here all the time or my uncle will start to suspect something and come looking. I’ll go up to town tomorrow, show myself and tell anyone who wants to know that Oliver is on a repairing lease. Unless you want to come?”

He turned expectantly to his friend.

"I have some business in town," Oliver admitted, "but I think I'll return here afterwards. If you don't object." This last to Ruth.

"How can I object? This is your house."

Oliver shook his head. "I beg you'll treat it as your own, while you're here. You're posing as my mistress, so you'd better act the part." He was charmed to see Ruth hang her head, blushing; something the whore he'd foolishly assumed she was last night would never have done. Part of Oliver's ennui had arisen from pure boredom. Now he had something to do he felt better already.

"Thank you," she said, looking up in a determined manner. "I'll do my best to act the part."

"I wish you wouldn't," he said frankly. "Just be yourself." His smile was reassuring this time.

"I say," Edmund said suddenly. "Should you like me to buy you some more gowns? You must be heartily sick of those."

Ruth plucked at the green material of the only day gown she possessed. "Don't you think that might be a mite suspicious?"

"Not if we don't give our names," said Oliver. "You can be discreet, Edmund, can't you? Don't go to the very best, the ones who might know you and pay them in cash, then bring them with you." He longed to see her in something more worthy of her. The green gown was a good one, but not fashionable or frivolous or elegant.

"Can you buy ready made gowns?" Edmund asked.

Ruth laughed. "Indeed you can. One of the maids here can alter them to fit me. I have no idea where they might be found, though."

"We'll find out," Edmund promised. Ruth didn't ask how.

Chapter Ten

Edmund and Oliver stayed until about eight and then left together for London. Pretty though Hampstead Heath was, it was a notorious haunt of highwaymen and footpads and they didn't want to leave it too late. Together they went into society that evening, made sure to show themselves about. Oliver hinted that he might be away for a while, but gave no one an idea why he would be away. Several ladies pouted at the thought of his absence and their mothers too, but they promised to wait for his return impatiently. Oliver smiled absently and swore he didn't know how he could live without them.

The next day started late for both Edmund and Oliver, who had promised to accompany his friend to his uncle's house. He had to find out for himself if Ruth's father was any worse. He still hoped against hope that she would be able to return to him safely and then he could get to know her properly and with more decorum. He felt the dilemma keenly, because his instinctive feelings for Ruth were increasing. The jolt of desire and recognition he'd felt at Ranelagh were feelings he'd not experienced for a long time, feelings he'd thought dead.

From the outside the house looked ordinary, but when a solitary, gloomy footman opened the door instead of a butler, the strangeness began to impinge on Oliver's consciousness. Standing in the hall, handing his hat, gloves and cane to the same footman, he became aware of an odor he sometimes associated with the country, but rarely in the town. Fustiness, staleness. As though the house had been hastily opened, improperly cleaned.

Still, he'd known worse. The same servant led Edmund and Oliver up the stairs. In Hampstead, Oliver kept the number of servants to a minimum for security's sake, not economy, but even there he'd got a couple of sturdy footmen *'with orders not to let Ruth out of their sight if she ventured outdoors, although she didn't know that'*. Here there seemed to be only one, in decidedly faded livery. By his friendship with Edmund, Oliver knew Lord Urswick wasn't short of a shilling or two, in fact, Edmund had described him as *'decidedly warm.'* He was at a loss to explain why the house was in such a state and why there were so few servants. Very odd.

This was April and there was still a chill in the air, but the house seemed as cold inside as it was outside. Colder, almost, thought Oliver, sensing a pervading aura of damp.

They were taken to a small room on the first floor. The man behind the large desk got slowly to his feet as they entered. Their answering bows were, as always, perfect and Oliver added an extra flourish, just for the hell of it.

He studied Lord Urswick closely. The same blue eyes, but where Ruth's were clear and bright, her father's were bloodshot and watery. His large features seemed crumpled in, unhealthily pale. Oliver would have guessed his age to be near the seventy mark, but he knew Lord Urswick was barely sixty. For the first time he understood how much his lordship had taken the loss of his family to heart, why he might want to keep the one child remaining to him. Such a tragedy as had happened to him was bound to leave its mark, even on a sane, healthy man.

But it wasn't fair to Ruth. If his lordship could be persuaded to let her go, Oliver felt sure she wouldn't abandon her father. This separation must be terribly hurtful for her, as much as it was to him. Oliver didn't understand until he saw the ravaged face before him,

but he needed no prompting now.

Lord Urswick's expression was far from welcoming. He cursorily waved them to a seat and resumed his own. "Lord Iveleigh eh? I knew your father."

"That's more than I did, sir," Oliver replied ruefully. "I was very young when he died."

"Really?" Urswick said. "Thought you were about fourteen."

"No sir, that was my brother. He died eighteen months ago."

"Dear me! I must be getting old."

Oliver began to think his lordship sounded completely rational, but then the older man's face seemed to cloud over. A frown settled over his brows as though it lived there and abruptly, he demanded; "what are you doing here?"

"I accompanied Edmund," Oliver said reasonably, deciding that age had its privileges and Lord Urswick's rudeness was one of them.

"I've no mind to discuss my family business in front of strangers!" The man, jutted his chin out in a belligerent manner.

Oliver had had enough. "It could be my business soon."

Edmund's head whipped round, but the warning glare he gave Oliver was lost on him. "Explain yourself, sir!" Lord Urswick barked. "What do you know of my affairs?"

"Enough to give me a certain concern for the welfare of your daughter, sir," Oliver said calmly, in complete contrast to the increasing agitation of the man seated opposite him. He watched Lord Urswick's face grow mottled and red and waited for an outburst.

"Oliver is a very good friend," Edmund put in. "I have no secrets from him."

"More fool you!" his lordship declared. "It doesn't mean I wish to let him into my affairs!" He glared at Oliver. "Kindly take yourself off, sir!"

"I beg your pardon." Oliver decided to exert his authority. An aristocratic upbringing and his experience in the army had given him an air of command he didn't usually bother to exert, but he decided to use it now. He became the Earl of Iveleigh, rising to his feet, eyelids drooping over glittering dark eyes, staring with contempt at his older, but inferior, peer in terms of rank. "Then we should bring the matter to a head. I should like to apply for your permission to address your daughter, sir."

For a moment, Lord Urswick didn't understand, but when he did, Oliver thought he might explode. The older man's eyes narrowed into slits; his face, already mottled, turned the color of a beetroot.

Oliver continued as though he hadn't noticed. "I can offer your daughter a privileged position and an excellent settlement."

"What makes you think she's for sale?"

Oliver looked at the baron for a moment or two, with an expression that could freeze a red-hot poker. Inside he seethed, but he knew that to lose his temper would be to lose the argument. He needed a moment to regain control of his emotions. "I never assumed she was. I requested your permission to address her. I want her as my wife, my partner in life, not my slave."

Lord Urswick blinked, but otherwise didn't move a muscle. "She's my daughter and I repeat-she's not for sale!"

Oliver had himself well under control now. "Then I repeat-I don't want to buy her. Maybe if you would allow me to see her, the matter could be sorted out? It's highly likely she'll reject my courtship and if this is the case, there's no more to be said."

Edmund gave Oliver a fleeting grin and Oliver knew his friend had caught up with

his intentions. Now what would the old curmudgeon say?

"She's receiving no one at the moment. She is unwell." His lordship he looked away at last and picked up a pen from his desk, fiddling with it.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Oliver wondered how long Lord Urswick could keep up his pretence.

"I would very much like to express my concern for her speedy recovery." Oliver's voice warmed a little. "I should not like her to think she was friendless, or unnoticed. Would a short drive in the park restore her spirits?"

"No."

"Really sir, I begin to suspect you of hiding your lovely daughter away!" Oliver said, but he accompanied the remark with a smile. "I begin to understand your concern, if she is ill. Is it London, I wonder?" He glanced at Edmund, the edge of a smile on his mouth.

Edmund grinned. "I've half a mind to offer for her myself," he commented and received a glare from Lord Urswick for his pains. "She is a lovely girl and I haven't seen anyone I admire half so much in the past five seasons!"

"Well she's coming home with me," said his lordship. "And I ain't letting her out of my sight again!"

Oliver resumed his seat, and his relaxed posture. "Surely you aren't considering hiding her away, sir! Such loveliness and such an agreeable nature deserves to be seen and enjoyed by more than the rural population."

His lordship's color lightened a little. "Well it's all she's getting. I've seen enough of the corruption and vice here to last a lifetime!"

I'll wager your daughter has seen more, thought Oliver. "I don't want any part of it and neither does she."

"Nevertheless, before you return home I would very much like to see her for myself and see if she would like to further our acquaintance." A fleeting remembrance of satin skin crossed his senses before he firmly put it out of his mind.

Lord Urswick stared at Oliver. His voice lowered to just under a bellow and his tone became more reasonable. "I don't think she will see you."

"Why not? I promise I won't force my attentions on her. Merely make my request." It was Oliver's turn to flush. Only Edmund knew why.

"She is a shy girl. To refuse you might distress her."

"I should like to try," Oliver pursued his quarry relentlessly. He was not a hunting man, having seen too many manhunts for the sport for it to have any savor for him, but he was very good at it.

"I forbid it!"

Oliver leaned back. "Is she, then, still under your jurisdiction?"

"What do you mean by that, sir!" his lordship looked decidedly uncomfortable, shifting in his seat and not meeting anyone's eyes.

"I mean is she under age?"

"She is over twenty one, but if she wishes to receive her portion, she will do as she is told."

"Have you the power to prevent her receiving her portion?" Oliver sounded mildly interested now, no more.

Lord Urswick cleared his throat. "I'm her father."

"Undoubtedly you are, sir." Oliver got to his feet. "Since I can do nothing more

today, I will take my leave. I will not give up my pursuit of your daughter, sir. You may count on that."

He got to his feet again, executed a perfect, flourishing bow and left.

Oliver had discovered how possessive her father was, his volatility of temper and his inability to prevent Ruth receiving her portion. A court case would likely succeed, with them both present as witnesses.

"And if you meant what you said, sirrah, I want nothing more to do with you!" Lord Urswick said to him.

"Ruth has grown up into a charming and intelligent woman," Edmund said. "A marriage with Iveigh would be quite a triumph for her."

"No!"

"Would you mind explaining to me why you are so set against the match?"

His lordship seemed to be past the worst of his apoplectic fit and more at his ease. "Certainly," he said, his tone still stern but pitched lower. "I cannot bear to see Ruth leave me. I cannot lose her. She is my life, the only one left. Besides, I fear for her sanity."

Oliver couldn't believe Lord Urswick had just said that. His tone was so reasonable, so ordinary and yet this was the most preposterous statement he'd ever heard. His lordship continued in his reasonable tone. "She occasionally behaves in an impulsive way, something which may yet lead her into dire straits. She has fits of temper, frightening to see. I want her under my eye for a while yet."

This was not the Ruth Oliver had come to know. He tried to think of Ruth in an uncontrollable rage and failed. He knew her father was capable of it and he didn't have to imagine it.

Still, he managed an expression of concern. "Dear me! Can I help in any way?"

Lord Urswick shook his head sadly. "Not with Ruth, I fear. You could try to deter the earl in his pursuit of her. And if you continue to oversee the London properties for me, I need never set foot in this terrible city again!"

"I will do all I can, sir"

"Perhaps," said his lordship, but he looked down at the quill he still held in his hand and stroked the end between his other fingers. From that averted gaze, Edmund felt sure his uncle was lying. "I don't want to bring Ruth to London. Never again." To emphasize his point he looked up, straight at Oliver and he became sure of one thing. Edmund's uncle was going mad.

Before Oliver left the house, while he was sure Lord Urswick was otherwise engaged with Edmund, he questioned the sole footman.

"Did you come down with his lordship from Yorkshire?"

"Yes sir-my lord!" he said hastily. "I've served Lord Urswick since I was a kitchen boy."

"Is he a good master?" Oliver went over to the mirror to make some minuscule adjustments to his neck cloth.

"He always has been, my lord."

"What do you think of London? A bit different from your usual milieu, eh?" Oliver smiled and the footman cracked his face in a small smile in return. "Quite a bit, my lord."

"Should you like to stay on in London? You look a likely lad and I might be looking about for servants in the future."

The man's face lightened, became less forbidding. "I might like that, yes my lord!"

Oliver pounced. "You seem very eager to get away from a master you've served for so long."

The man saw his mistake and tried to redress it. "I-I've always wanted to see the big city my lord—"

Oliver turned away from the mirror and felt in his pockets. "And the vails are so much better here, aren't they?" He drew out a guinea.

The footman's gaze riveted on the gold coin and his smile broadened. "Yes, my lord, they are."

Oliver handed him the coin. "And if you inform me about events in this household, you will more than earn several of these."

The footman stepped back, as though the coin had burned him, frowning, and Oliver decided to be frank. He gave up all pretence at adjusting his neckwear and turned round to confront the man directly. "I'm concerned for the safety of Miss Urswick. I've just had a sample of her father's temper and I want to be sure she is safe. You have my word on it that is all I want."

They stared at each other, Oliver patiently enduring the man's scrutiny. Eventually he let out a long sigh. "So am I, my lord. I haven't seen Miss Urswick for days. Her maid says she is sick and takes food in for her, but—" he paused. Oliver waited. After a moment he continued— "I haven't seen any night soil." The chamber pots hadn't been emptied. Very perceptive of him! "I haven't heard her voice, either and the house—well, it just feels empty, sir!" His brow furrowed with worry. "If you care for her welfare, my lord, I would gladly give you what information I have for nothing." Oliver smiled. "Miss Urswick has cared for the master since the—events. Now I'm worried."

"What about your master? Has he changed at all?"

"Hard to say, my lord." The man answered promptly, so it was something he had thought about before. He didn't have to think about his reply. "He has headaches and his mood changes from minute to minute. That might be the strain."

"After six years?"

"He never really got over it, my lord. The changes might be his way of coping with it." The footman sounded doubtful, but it was good to hear his loyalty.

"Or a sign of creeping madness," Oliver said dryly. "You can reach me at Mr. Urswick's house, or failing that, contact me at my house in Brook Street. I'm not in residence, but a message will reach me. We're both concerned about Miss Urswick. You can trust us to be discreet and if you find yourself in any difficulty, contact us."

He waited until the footman had given his assent before leaving the house.

Chapter Eleven

Ruth opened her eyes, not knowing where she was for a moment. It was a sensation she was becoming all too familiar with. She lay back, staring at the canopy over her head; a light, cream silk embroidered with tiny flowers and insects. She smiled. While she wasn't out of her dire straits, they would be much easier to cope with from here. Her feeling of safety increased the more she stayed within its boundaries.

She'd spent the previous evening quietly and retired for an early night after dinner; delighted to find the library contained several popular novels, as well as more learned tomes. She sat up late reading "Pamela," the first time she had come across it, although she'd of course heard of it. She enjoyed it thoroughly and ended up sitting up reading into the small hours. The fire had gone out and the last candle was guttering before she finally extinguished it and turned over to sleep.

Sounds of activity filtered up from the hall below. Wondering what was wrong, she wrapped the coverlet around her and crept out on to the landing, ready to retreat at the first sign of trouble. The now familiar apprehension took hold of her stomach as she leaned cautiously over the banisters.

The gossip came from the two housemaids and the footman, pulling a succession of boxes into the front hall. Ruth's worries receded as she watched the delivery arrive and then, when she had watched enough, she called out for one of them to help her to dress.

It didn't take long. The servants had brought up the parcels and packages and set them outside her door. Unable to wait any longer, bursting with excitement, Ruth helped the maid bring the parcels into her room.

She opened the largest first. These contained gowns, everything Ruth had hoped for when she'd first come to London. No cheap fabric, no unflattering colors. Ruth wondered who had chosen that gown in the color that exactly matched her eyes.

"I can alter these for you, if you should wish it, ma'am," said the maid. "I'm quite good with a needle."

"Thank you Fitton. I would appreciate that very much." Ruth hesitated, wondering how to explain the fact that she hadn't gone shopping herself, but eventually decided to say nothing. The servants must be wondering already about her, so this would merely add to the flow of gossip in the kitchens.

Fitton helped her remove her outer garments and she tried on the clothes bought for her. Fortunately, the length was fine, so the petticoats fitted well, but the gowns would have to be altered to fit her more closely. They were in the French style, the extra material seamed down the back in several deep pleats that were allowed to fall free below the waist, so it would merely be a matter of taking the seams in a little more. Fitton fetched some pins and made the adjustments, while Ruth delightedly admired herself in the mirror.

She couldn't remember ever looking this fine. The gowns, to her mind, were of the first stare of fashion, embroidered, frilled and flounced deliciously in a frivolous style her father had never approved of. She couldn't help trying a few poses, as she had seen some of the ladies do on that fateful night. When she looked in the mirror, she saw Fitton smiling at her and she smiled back. "I lived in the country," she said. "We never had gowns like these."

"I guessed," the maid replied.

When the gowns were fitted, including a breathtaking riding habit of deep crimson

cloth, Ruth put on her old gown and tried on the shoes. Evening shoes, everyday leather ones, pattens to protect her shoes from the worst of the weather and a pair of riding boots. The pattern Oliver took must have worked, because they were all perfect.

No longer able to show proper decorum, Ruth tore open the other parcels, throwing the contents on the bed. Nothing else would need altering, so she turned to the maid and asked her to start work on the gowns. "I'll see to the rest myself," she said. "It will give me something to do.

Alone she could gloat. She now had fans, fichus, lacy kerchiefs, silk stockings, underwear trimmed with exquisite lace, ribbons for her hair. Opening one small package she had overlooked she found a small box, made of porcelain painted with scenes of lovers in bowers. It did what the other things had been unable to do. Ruth burst into tears.

Whether it was happiness or the accumulation of days, perhaps years, of stress she had no way of divining. Groping for her plain linen handkerchief, Ruth sobbed into it unreservedly.

She didn't hear the door open, but she felt the bed sink next to her when someone sat on it. Expecting Fitton, she looked up shame-faced, but it wasn't Fitton.

Without pausing, Oliver took her into his arms and let her lean into his chest. "Why the tears?"

"All these things—" she began. "How can I ever pay you back?" He said nothing and she continued, despite her resolve to keep her troubles to herself, "What am I to do?" and dissolved into fresh sobs.

He held her tight, murmured to her. "You need pay nothing back. We're helping you, that's all. There is something I can never return to you and that is all I need to know. These things—they were a pathetic attempt to cheer you up, make you smile. It seems we've failed."

"No!" she wailed. "No! It's the first time I've been truly happy for a long time!"

He chuckled. "It sounds like it."

He let her have her cry, until, recalling where she was, who was holding her, she drew back and getting up, went to the washstand. He handed her the towel.

She looked over its soft folds at him, shyly. "I'm sorry. You must think me a complete watering-pot."

"I think you're a very brave woman, with a tremendous amount of fortitude," he said. "I'm surprised you haven't spent the last few days in tears."

"I don't know what I would have done without you. You and Edmund have been the first true friends I've had—except George," she added shamefaced.

"George?" he prompted.

She felt better talking about George. For something to do she went over to the bed and began to fold things up, preparing to putting them away. "George Thorne. He's a neighbor. His father used to be a farmer, but about fifteen years ago they discovered a rich seam of coal on their land and they've become gentlemen." She paused, folding a delicate linen nightgown over her arm. "To my mind, George was always a gentleman. We played together as children. He always looked after me. We never loved each other—not in that way." She flushed, remembering what had passed between herself and the man standing by the wash stand, watching her. She had never felt like that with George. "George saw my father getting worse, perhaps before I did. He proposed as a chance to get me out of that household and I accepted because I liked and trusted him." She paused.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

"My father threw him out of the house. Then we came to London. You know the rest."

He came over and took a pile of linen from her, moving to the chest of drawers. He opened the top drawer and laid the pile inside. "I know what happened, but I didn't know how you felt about it."

She laughed, shakily. "I thought everyone could see how vulnerable I felt."

"No, especially not under that mask you wore in that house!" he exclaimed. "Dreadful thing. But a clever ruse. You didn't—forgive me!—look much different to any other girl in that room." He walked over to the bed and picked up a cloak, folding it neatly. "How did you bear it?" He went over to the clothes press. Somehow, the help he was giving her normalized it all, made him seem like the friend he said he wanted to be, not the near stranger he really was.

She felt more comfortable. "I think for the first day I was numb with shock. Then, since I was there, I made the best of it."

He left the door of the press open, then came over to find something else to put away. "I always thought a gently brought up girl was a different species to those women. I never equated them, in my mind."

"Few people do," she answered. She picked up a colorful jumble of ribbons and began to sort them out and smooth them. "I never thought of them before I met them. It could have been me. If I were less fortunate, if I didn't have friends—"

He smiled, his arm full of the skirt of her new riding habit. "But you have. Edmund and I plan to look after you."

She laughed again. "That alone would condemn me in the eyes of the world."

"I know. We have plans. You won't suffer, I promise."

She stared at him, wide eyed, but he wouldn't say any more about the plans for her future. She assumed they would include a visit to her cousin Mary as soon as Edmund could arrange it and a fudging of the dates. She prayed it would work. Even though she knew no eligible men except two, one of who was scandalously spending time with her in her room. It didn't feel scandalous at all. It felt natural.

Ruth folded a pile of stockings and took them over to the chest. "I've never had so many things before."

This surprised him, she saw, by the arching of his fine brows. "Never? What about at home?"

"There wasn't time to prepare for my season before my mother died," she said. "Afterwards, there wasn't any point. I've been making do for years. It never really bothered me before I came to London. I always had more important things on my mind."

"Such as?"

She shrugged. "Oh, finding a new maid for the kitchens, installing a new open stove, making sure there was enough fruit for the winter—that kind of thing!"

"You would have made the perfect farmer's wife," he said dryly. "What about other concerns? Balls, assemblies, social occasions?"

She shook her head. "There was none of that. And what I didn't have, I didn't miss."

"Would you miss it now?"

She wouldn't look at him. "Yes."

Ruth glanced towards the door as she went back to the bed. It was firmly shut. Looking up, she saw he hadn't come through that door. He'd come through the

communicating door to what must be his bedroom.

He was watching her. "Terrible etiquette, I know. I came up to change my coat and heard you. I'm afraid I didn't stop to think about it. I won't do it again, I promise."

He went over to the door and took out the key, which was on his side, then closed the door and locked it. Smiling, he came across the room to her and with a courtly flourish, presented her with the key.

She couldn't help laughing. "Thank you. Strangely, I don't fear it. I don't fear you."

"I'm glad to hear it." His tender smile seemed to turn wry. "I think I've already done you too much damage."

"No, no, please don't think of it like that!" she protested. "You've more than made up for it with your kindness in letting me stay here."

His gaze held curiosity and something else she couldn't identify. "I've only just begun."

She felt her body heat rise and was suddenly uncomfortable, turning away to pick up a pile of freshly folded lacy handkerchiefs, thinking wildly of something else to say, to break the silence he seemed in no hurry to pierce. "Where did you learn to be so tidy?" she managed, her voice quavering but determined.

He answered readily. "In the army. I had to look after myself sometimes. It did me the world of good."

The tension had gone; she smiled. "So it isn't all fighting and excitement?"

"Not at all. There is just as much ennui."

"Why did you leave?"

He walked to the window and gazed out at the garden. Ruth had the feeling he was avoiding her eyes. "I received a wound—a bad saber cut. I was sent home to recover, then my brother died and I sold out. I thought the earldom needed me more than my country. Now I'm not so sure."

He moved to the outer door, and then turned to face her, his face smooth and untroubled. "I'd better leave you. I think we've done most of the work. By the way, why isn't the maid helping you?"

She blushed. "I've set her to altering the gowns you sent. They need a little adjustment."

"Of course I don't mind. That's one of the things she's there for. I hope I'll see you at dinner?"

"Yes of course." They were both as polite as if they were in a fashionable drawing room, although the air between them burned with the knowledge that they were not.

Chapter Twelve

Oliver left early the next morning, before Ruth was up. She slept late, her sleep, recently disturbed and restless, miraculously restored. After such a short time in the country, she felt a lot better. The fresher air here, the relative quiet, all helped to restore her and make her look with a braver eye at the future.

This was only a hiatus, a time for her to recover before the next phase began. Very soon Edmund would contact his sister, she would be invited to stay and from there she would find someone suitable to marry and protect her from her increasingly volatile father.

After a quiet, tranquil day, she and Edmund had a light dinner, then went into the library and while Edmund read the London newspapers, Ruth studied the books. This wasn't a library designed for display, but contained a large, useful desk and several easy chairs..

Looking along a line of volumes, Ruth said, "The late earl seems to have been interested in agriculture."

Edmund glanced up. "Oh yes, he kept the land in good heart. Oliver freely admits he knows nothing of that and he's taken the sensible course. Kept the land steward his brother employed and said he'll learn from him."

"Will he?" Ruth passed on to what was for her a more interesting selection.

"Oh yes, Iveleigh generally achieves what he sets out to achieve." Edmund turned a page. "Another item about him here. It seems our strategy is working." He read the excerpt from the paper. "It is rumored that O-, Earl of I-has left Town for Cythera. His new companion is unknown to society, but is believed to be a young lady of dubious reputation fresh from the country."

Ruth flushed. "Cythera?"

It was Edmund's turn to flush. "The Island of Love."

"Oh." Ruth selected a book and sat down in the chair opposite Edmund.

They read for some time in companionable silence, until the maid brought in the tea. Ruth dismissed her and poured the tea, handing a cup to Edmund, now surrounded by discarded newspapers. "Do you always read the papers like that?"

Edmund looked around in evident surprise. "Yes. It's easier this way."

Ruth laughed. She had never seen anyone get in quite as much of a muddle with a few simple newspapers before. Edmund laughed with her and gathered the offending items into an untidy heap. "I hope Oliver read those in town. Do you think your father will read them?"

Ruth shook her head. "Not usually. But he might be reading them. There was nothing about me?"

"Should there be?"

"I thought he might advertise for my whereabouts."

"He hasn't done it yet."

"Oh." Not knowing whether to be relieved or upset at his lack of concern, Ruth went to look out of the window.

She heard Edmund come up behind her. She turned to face him and took both her hands in his. His suddenly serious expression made her pulse race. Something important was coming.

"I don't suppose-you wouldn't consider taking either of us to husband?"

The question jolted her, but one particular part took her by surprise. "Is this a joint proposal?"

He flushed deep red. "No—that is—no of course not! I just wanted to know how you felt about it, that's all!"

She regarded him in silence for a moment. "How I felt about what?"

Edmund took a deep breath. "Marrying me."

Ruth stared at him in silence, her mouth slightly open. Recalling herself to the moment, she closed it firmly and then said, "Why?"

"Would you believe protestations of undying love?" he watched her, amusement quirking the corner of his mobile mouth.

"No," she said baldly. "Edmund, I thought you were doing everything you could to preserve my reputation. Hiding me like this" she waved her hand about the room, trying to indicate the privacy, the secrecy of her hiding place. "I thought I was to stay with Cousin Mary, so she could bring me out, when you've persuaded my father to go home!"

He regarded her gravely, all amusement gone. "That all changed, Ruth. True, you could still stay with Mary and make your come-out-next year, when we've arranged matters with your father, but—it's not as easy as it was."

"Why not?"

"Because of what you and Oliver did."

The injustice of it struck her vividly. "Why? Oh, I know he—he broke—well, I know what he did," she said, blushing vividly, "It's hardly his fault and he's more than made up for it since. I invited him, Edmund. A moment of madness and I didn't know, I really didn't know a maidenhead was anything other than figurative."

"Well it's real," Edmund said. "And you haven't got one any more."

The blush remained, mantling her cheek with dusky rose. "I know. But—can't I pretend? Mrs. Brown told me to say I'd done a lot of horse riding."

He frowned. "It's possible, but many gentlemen know the difference. If you were found out using such a subterfuge" —he shook his head. "We both love you too much to let you do that. No, Ruth, it has to be one of us."

"One of us?" She stared at him, startled. "You've discussed it?"

Edmund spread his hands in supplication, letting hers drop. "What else could we do? It was a mistake, on both sides and you must believe me—you are ruined, Ruth. Unless you take one of us."

Her next question startled him as much as his question had startled Ruth. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," he said, without hesitation.

"How much?"

Grimacing, he got to his feet and went over to the window, but she would give him no peace. She put her hand on his shoulder and he turned back to face her. "Very well. Ruth, I love you as a brother might. I care about your future; I would be devastated to see you unhappy. You, Ruth, not family." He took both her hands in his and gazed at her. "What I cannot give you is passion and devotion. That hardly matters." He kept her attention, refusing to let her look away. "Marriage is a contract, just like any other, at its worst. Or it can provide friendship and companionship, a partnership to last a lifetime. I can offer you that, Ruth."

She studied him for a few moments. She was sure he spoke was the truth.. "There's a lot to be said for that." She bit her lip, then shook her head. "Edmund. I think what you

offer is lovely, perfectly lovely. And you didn't even mention that you'd be a baron one day!"

"I never counted on that."

She smiled. "Yes, I know. You have enough, don't you Edmund?"

He grinned back at her. "My father did very well in the Indies. There's more than enough. Will you share it with me Ruth? Or would you prefer Oliver?"

"You're so sure he'll propose?"

Edmund nodded. "I know he will. He's a man of his word. I don't know what he'll say; we haven't planned it more than this. Ruth, you've come to mean something to both of us."

She dropped his hands and turned to the window, the view over the lovely garden. "I might take him for this house."

"He has much grander houses than this." His gaze followed hers and they watched the spring breeze ruffle the leaves on the path.

"I love this one," she said.

"If you married him, you'd have to live in more splendor than this," he commented.

She sighed. "Yes. It's not just that." She turned away to look at him again. "I think I'm falling in love with him, Edmund."

Silence. Edmund abruptly left her side, walking back through the welter of discarded papers. "That might not be good."

She turned to him, anxiously clasping her hands together. "Why? Does he care for someone else?"

"What makes you think you're in love with him?"

Ruth couldn't come this far and not tell him. "When I first saw him at Ranelagh, I felt a pull. I thought it was just because he's a devastatingly handsome man." Edmund watched her closely, but let her speak without pause. "Then when he came to Mother Brown's, I knew I wanted him, even though I didn't really know what it meant, but-well, when I thought of the months and months ahead, all the arguing and trouble, I thought I deserved some kind of compensation." She stopped her outpouring, remembering whom she was speaking to. Edmund was nothing if not her friend. "And he makes me laugh and I want to look after him and-oh, all sorts of things! Do you understand, Edmund?"

Edmund nodded. Ruth looked at him, seeing something in him. "You're in love?"

He cast down his gaze, stared at the crumpled mess of paper at his feet and then looked up again. "I suppose I am."

"What's her name?"

"Emma." He breathed it like a blessing.

At once Ruth saw the truth of it. He would marry her and put his all into making it a success, but Emma, whoever she was, would always lie between them. In the future, he might throw the name in her face. He wasn't a saint, however kind and thoughtful he was, he would always remember her as the one he could never have-because of her, Ruth.

"Then you must marry her," she said firmly.

"Only if—" he stopped and covered his eyes with his hand. "I shouldn't have told you. That was badly done."

"Yes you should." She leaned down and put her hands on either arm of the chair, forcing him to drop his hand and look at her. "If you love her you must try for her, Edmund."

He tried a smile, but it wasn't very successful. "We can be happy."

"Yes, but with her in the background, how long would that last?" She stood up, folding her arms across her stomach in an unconsidered defensive gesture. "And now I've told you how I feel about Oliver—" she turned to confront him. "Do you know how he feels about me?"

Edmund stared at her, and then sadly shook his head. "He doesn't tell me those things. He's a very private man."

"Will you tell me about him? You know him better than I do, so will you tell me?"

Edmund nodded, thinking. Then he looked back at Ruth. "The first thing you need to know is I would never consider this, whatever he's done to you, if I thought he didn't deserve you. He's a good man, Ruth, if not an easy one."

"I guessed that." She gave him a small, deprecating smile. She went over to the other chair and sat opposite him, leaning back to listen.

"He spent most of his adult life in the army, in Europe. His brother was the heir and Oliver never had any expectations. He was given a competence and a small estate and left to make his own future. It suited him. He enjoyed the army, but I think that's where he learned to keep his thoughts to himself. I count myself one of his dearest friends, but I rarely know how he feels." Ruth listened avidly. "He left the army after a bad wound to his leg—" Edmund paused, glanced at Ruth and carried on, but Ruth thought he was keeping something to himself. She didn't ask him, loath to interrupt the flow of information she was receiving. "Then his brother died, leaving him the earl. He didn't really know what to do at first, but he soon got to grips with it. Then he became a target for the mamas." Ruth arched an eyebrow and Edmund laughed. "Wicked girl! No, he didn't, as far as I know, plunge into the stream with vigor. He hated the attention and not knowing if they wanted him for his position or himself. He'd never had that problem before." He glanced down and added, in a lower voice, "I've had it all my life. No title, no expectation of one, but m'father was damned rich and that was enough."

"Why didn't you succumb?"

He looked back at her and grinned. "Lucky, I think."

"So why would you consider me?"

"You're family my dear. And I like you. And I know you're honest."

"Thank you for that," she said quietly. She got up and went to him. "I will come to you if I need you, I promise you that. In the meantime, go to your Emma with my blessing."

He took her hand, pressed a kiss on it. "Angel!"

Ruth laughed and went to the door. "Save it for your true love." She went out.

Ruth was shaking by the time she got to her room. What Edmund had told her had shocked her and brought her to a sense of her true situation. She couldn't blame herself, that no one had told her what she needed to know, but there was no one else to blame. Except her father. She threw herself on to her bed, but refused to cry. Now wasn't the time. She must think.

She wouldn't marry Edmund while he loved someone else. If he came to her, it must be without regret and with a full heart, one she had a chance to make her own.

Oliver. She'd told Edmund she loved him, but she wasn't sure quite how she felt. She'd never felt like this about anyone before and had no way of knowing if it was love or just desire. She found him physically attractive, that much was true. He was tall, strong and wickedly handsome. She knew he had a body to match. Her body heated at the remembrance.

Resolutely she put that aside and began to trace a pattern on the brocade cover on the bed, to give herself something else to concentrate on. She tried very hard to think of his other qualities. After all, she was thinking of his husbandly qualities, not his lover like ones.

He was kind and generous, that she knew. He'd given her the use of this house. That might have been guilt, but he hadn't had to spend time with her here. He could have turned his back on her, decided the incident at the brothel was her fault and washed his hands of the whole thing. Therefore, he was honorable.

He could easily support a wife, but would he spend time with her, or would he decide to go off on his own? There was no telling. She guessed even Edmund couldn't tell her that. Oliver preferred his own company, it seemed, probably engendered by his life as an army officer, where he could only relax in the company of other officers. Would he give her a chance? She didn't know that, either.

Would he even ask her? She only had Edmund's word for it. He thought so, but Oliver might get cold feet when he considered what such an action meant. He might think she wouldn't make a suitable countess. While he'd not expected to inherit the earldom, now he had he was giving it his best shot, just as he had the army. He might want a graceful, sophisticated woman of fashion for his wife. In fact, now she came to think of it, that was probably the case. Ruth knew what she was and sophisticated wasn't one of them.

There were a couple of other options. She could return to her father. She had no doubt that would mean incarceration for the rest of his life and when he finally died, she would be too old to consider marrying. She might be able to buy a husband and Edmund would look after her, but her heart quailed at the thought of such a lonely life.

There was George, but it was doubtful if he could stand up to her father for very long. Lord Urswick was the local peer of the realm and held several offices that came with the dignity. He could ruin the Thornes if he wished it and Ruth was sure his spite went as far as that. She couldn't do that to George, particularly because they weren't in love.

Or she could run away, be someone else. Dreaming now, she rolled over and stared at the bed canopy, thinking about what that would mean. Freedom, of a sort. Anonymity. Penury. She would have to become a governess, or even—she smiled in self-deprecation—a whore. Whores had short lives, due to illness and depravity. Death from the white lead contained in the paint they wore, death from laudanum, alcohol, the loss of looks, the slide into poverty. She'd read about it and caught sight of some of the poor wretches on her arrival in London. They were unmistakable, their gowns skimpy and low cut, their paint garish, their attitude of seductive supplication a poor copy of what she had seen in one of the best brothels in London. She shuddered, thinking of the fate of the governess. Not much better. Worse, even, as they had never known happiness. No, that was for novel writers and opera lovers. Not for her.

She turned over and sighed, feeling sleep drift over her. Not return to her father. She wouldn't let anyone sacrifice themselves for her. Perhaps it might be possible to go to visit Cousin Mary. At least that would give her a breathing space.

Chapter Thirteen

The first thing Ruth asked the maid when she came up with hot water in the morning was, "Has his lordship returned?"

"He has, ma'am. Very late, so I don't think he'll be up just yet."

Ruth laughed and threw back the covers.

It was a fine day, the sun gleaming down on the bright garden outside. Ruth's spirits lifted, as always when she knew spring was definitely here. It seemed a time of hope, of promises unbroken, of exciting things to come.

Then she remembered the prison she'd locked herself into and her mood plummeted again. There was no freedom for her, no season to show herself to the admiring throng, no group of admirers to choose from.

Only one and that was only if he asked her and if she was convinced she wouldn't be ruining his life.

She shrugged off her mood and chose her gown with care. These at least she could take pleasure in. Finally, she chose a gown of pale yellow, heavy ribbed silk with small flowers woven into the fabric. Under it, she wore an ivory quilted petticoat, a small pattern of swirling curves. Pearls would look pretty with it, she thought, fastening a light ruffle of lace around her throat.

She examined herself in the mirror, pulled out a curl from her piled up dark hair to nestle against her neck and thought she would do well enough. She couldn't compare with the fashionable ladies in London, but perhaps here, on her own, she might do better.

Oliver didn't come down for breakfast later that morning, but if he'd been in late, he would need his sleep.

Early in the afternoon they received a most unexpected visitor.

The bell of an unseen church in the distance struck one and the sound of a pair of horses were heard on the drive. Ruth, who was out in the garden enjoying the spring sunshine heard it first and scurried indoors, rushing across the hall and upstairs to her room as quickly as she could. The footman standing in the hall watched until she'd gone upstairs, then turned to answer the bell set jangling at the door by an unseen hand.

Ruth closed her bedroom door and set her back to it, getting her breath. Her heart beat hard against her ribs; she put her hand there, feeling the throb.

Surely, her father couldn't have found her! She would not go back with him, she wouldn't!

A soft knock came on the communicating door between her room and Oliver's. "Ruth?"

Half sobbing she crossed the room to the door, unlocked it and flung herself at him. His arms went around her. "Hush, hush my sweet. It's not your father, he doesn't know you're here."

"Who else can it be?"

She shook; he soothed her, stroking her shoulders and back. "I think it's someone else entirely. Hush and listen."

Feeling absurdly safe in his arms she leaned her head on his shoulder and calmed. Slowly, she became aware of a strident voice in the hall—one she'd heard before.

Ruth felt foolish, but also content and safer than she'd been for months. Reluctant to leave her sanctuary, she looked up and met his eyes. He stared at her, his dark eyes

holding warmth—or did she imagine it? Were brown eyes always this soft?

His head lowered and they gazed at each other. A knock sounded on Ruth's bedroom door. With a small, breathless laugh he dropped a light kiss on her forehead and retreated. "See you outside," he murmured and not a little flustered, she went to the door as he closed the connecting one behind him.

A maid stood outside, wringing her hands together. "There's a—em—woman—downstairs, miss. She says she knows you and Mr. Urswick wonders if you would be so good as to join them in the drawing room."

"Yes of course," Ruth said with as much serenity as she could muster. Then she stepped outside just as Oliver left his room. "I heard," he told the maid. "I'll come too." Gallantly he offered Ruth the support of his arm and she accepted.

They went downstairs in state and entered the drawing room. Edmund sat at ease in one of the elegant chairs and Mrs. Brown sat opposite him, bolt upright and visibly bridling.

Seen in truly elegant surroundings the lady was startlingly vulgar. Ruth knew her to be shrewd, level headed; even kind in a rough way, but here she had no need of her work clothes, of her paint. Her gown was a garish, shiny green satin, low cut, with the detail poorly embroidered. And far too much of it for the daytime, as though worn in defiance. Her face and the upper part of her quivering bosom gleamed palely with a creamy maquillage.

The lady didn't smile, the maquillage precluded that, but she turned and studied Ruth and Oliver as they entered the room. Especially Ruth. More aware than before of her appearance, Ruth put up her chin and stared back. Eventually, she forced a smile. "Good morning, ma'am. I didn't know you knew where I was."

"Mr. Urswick told me in case of emergencies," the madam explained. "And this," she continued determinedly, turning back to Edmund, "is an emergency. I came myself, I hired a chaise and nobody knows where I've gone, so you may rest easy. I've kept my side of the bargain." She stared at Edmund belligerently.

"I'm sure you have, ma'am. To be truthful, you have been more honest in your dealings with me than many of the other tenants on Lord Urswick's land," Edmund said, in a conciliatory tone.

Mrs. Brown looked like a pouter pigeon whose feathers had been ruffled, her arms folded tightly under her ample bosom, the ruffle around her cap disarrayed in her agitation. "I thank you sir. To me a bargain is a bargain and if neither side cheats, it's all the more straightforward. I've seen many a rival win by cheating and then lose by cheating. I'll see them all off yet!"

"I don't doubt it," said Oliver, taking his turn. "The cards are straight, the dice fair and the girls—" he turned an apologetic glance on Ruth and stopped.

Oliver left Ruth's side and found chairs for them both, but when he took his own he kept it close. She felt the urge to take his hand when she felt the atmosphere tighten, but resisted it.

Mrs. Brown prepared to speak. She glanced around to make sure she had their attention and then told them what had caused her so much agitation. "Now I know why you were so anxious to keep Millie—Miss Urswick's whereabouts a secret.

"I had a visit this morning—early this morning. Most of us had only been abed two or three hours. Still, I went to receive the person I had been led to believe was a gentleman—" She put her hand to her cap, straightening it— "and he demanded to know

where his daughter was. I had to take his word he was his lordship, he showed me no proof. You, Mr. Urswick, have acted as his agent all the time I have occupied that building. I had no way of knowing it was his lordship for sure."

"What did he look like?" Edmund demanded.

Used to assessing men with a momentary glance, Mrs. Brown answered without hesitation. "Tall, strong, blue eyes—terrifying blue eyes—thin, heavily lined and very angry. Mad. He was telling the truth, no doubt about it." She glanced at Ruth and then back to Edmund. "At first I wondered what you'd led me into, sir. Keeping a daughter from her father is a serious matter. I could end up in Newgate for it. I carried on with it. After all, I could always say I only knew her as Millie and I thought she was your doxy." Ruth blushed, but no one seemed to notice. "So I said yes, I knew you and you'd been here recently, but I didn't know what else he meant. I asked how he'd managed to lose his daughter and he scowled a bit. Then he went insane." She shuddered dramatically. "The man's a lunatic!"

Ruth exchanged a look with Oliver, full of apprehension and sick fear. She gripped her hands tightly together and listened. "He shouted until he rattled the ornaments on the mantelpiece, all about how ungrateful children were, how you couldn't trust them out of your sight." She addressed Ruth directly, heedless of the gentlemen present. "If he catches up with you, he'll lock you away. Make no doubt about it, the man is mad. You'll be lucky if you see the light of day again! I don't tell you to frighten you, I tell you because you need to know. All I can say is be strong and put yourself into the hands of these gentlemen. They'll take better care of you than your doting Papa will."

Ruth nodded, all blushes gone. It sounded as if her father was going completely off his head now. What had caused this madness? She knew it wasn't just her disappearance. Her father's increasingly disturbing behavior had started long before that. "I will take care."

Mrs. Brown nodded and turned back to Edmund. "If you want a witness to his madness, I'll oblige willingly. Not that anyone would listen to me!" She snorted. "As if my profession makes me a bad judge of character! I've not finished yet. After his ranting roused the house, he finally realized where he was, what sort of house this was. "What!" he cries, "Is this then a house of iniquity? Is this a house of shame? And I am landlord here? Well, it will continue no longer!" and he orders his bullies to smash the place apart." She paused and her face grew hard. "Which they did. I would have set my bullies on his. They could have stopped it, but that would have made matters worse. We might have had the law on us then. So now—" she glared at Edmund. "I have no reception rooms worth speaking of and I'm ordered out forthwith!"

Edmund frowned. "What other kind of business does he think that area will catch?" he demanded, every inch the affronted landlord. "The man's a fool!"

"The man's mad," said Oliver and to Ruth's surprise, reached out and took her hand. The warmth comforted, but the intimacy startled her. It was what she wished for, but now she was embarrassed. Again, no one seemed to notice and she let her hand remain in his. "He will not recapture Ruth." He sounded so sure, Ruth could almost believe him.

Mrs. Brown stared at them both, her expression grim. "I told him nothing, but he knows all the same."

"How? Does he know where I am?" Her hand tightened in Oliver's. She held on tightly.

"He found something he seemed to recognize. In the corner, where you sat of an

evening." The lady grimaced. "Cleaners not as good as I thought. I'll have to see to that." Recalling herself to the subject in hand, she fixed Ruth with a steely gaze. "He found a perfume bottle. One of those small silver topped bottles. It had your initials on the top. Remember it?"

Ruth clapped her free hand to her mouth. "Oh my goodness! He gave me that on my eighteenth birthday! I knew I'd lost it, but I thought it was in the street somewhere!"

A hot flush suffused her body; she had lost.

"He took it with him," Mrs. Brown said briefly. "So he knows you were there."

"Oh Lord!" cried Edmund. "Then he'll be after me, for sure! He must know I'm involved, now he's found that." He looked up at his friend and Oliver met his stare mutely. "I think I'd better go back to Town. Sort things out and not let anyone know where I've been."

Oliver nodded. "It would be best."

Ruth turned to him, her face drawn and anxious. "Should I go too? I don't want to cause you any trouble. He could have the law on you if he finds you've been hiding me here."

In answer, the light clasp on her hand increased slightly. "Don't you dare! So far there is no connection between us. I'm Edmund's friend, only involved because of that. You'll stay here as long as it's safe. If you're happy here?"

"Oh yes! Happier than I've been for a long time."

She looked at Edmund, so that the confession could include him, too. She didn't want any partiality she might feel to show too strongly, especially in front of the perceptive Mrs. Brown. She got the feeling it was too late. Edmund and the older lady watched her, both with knowing smiles on their faces. A significant pause followed.

"Well sir?" Mrs. Brown demanded, turning to Edmund. "Do I move out? Set up somewhere else?"

Edmund shook his head irritably. "Of course not, ma'am. If need be, I'll buy the place myself and become your landlord in reality. We've had a long and prosperous association and I don't intend it should be broken. Who knows what riff raff will be put in your stead? No, ma'am, rather than that, I'll make good all your damages out of my own pocket. In any case, I brought the trouble on you and I'll make sure you don't suffer from it. I take it you've put repairs in hand?"

Mrs. Brown's face relaxed and if it weren't for the rigid mask she might have laughed. "You know me very well, sir! Yes, there are people busy about it now and I'll be able to open tonight." She studied Edmund deliberately, her gaze slowly raking him from head to foot. "I'm glad we don't have to move yet awhile, because I've found our dealings very fair. And gentlemen like to know where to find their comforts, not have to search them out." Edmund grinned in agreement, then glanced at Ruth, shame-faced. Ruth grinned back. "If I learned anything I learned that these girls are the same as me. Just less fortunate. I think," she finished and received a gentle squeeze of the hand from Oliver for reward.

Mrs. Brown got ponderously to her feet and Edmund rose to help her. "Mind, if there's any more disturbances I will move on! I can't have business spoiled in that way."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said meekly. Oliver stood up too. "I wish I had you in my house," the madam said frankly. "You'd make your fortune. But—" she sighed heavily and turned a sharp glare to the two gentlemen. "Be sure to look after her. Make sure that madman comes nowhere near her. I wouldn't put it past him to kill her, given the chance."

Ruth tried not to shudder. She would be brave, she would! She could gain nothing by weakness. She longed to have a good, long cry comforted by strong arms around her.

No, there was no use thinking like that. She smiled. "I have two champions. I have no fears." She wished it were true.

Chapter Fourteen

Edmund ushered Mrs. Brown out and Ruth was left with Oliver. He stood disturbingly close to her.

"Edmund won't come back for a while," he said. "I think we have things to discuss."

Ruth's heart rose to her mouth; her stomach contracted and she felt agonizingly shy. Seeing her flinch away, he said, with a wistful smile, "Is it that bad?"

"No, but —"

"Tell me!" he coaxed.

She stopped trying to draw away and looked up at him. "It's just that I consoled myself all these years with the thought of a season. A proper season, with shopping and gentleman callers and new friends." She gave a small laugh. "Foolish, I know."

He shook his head. "Not at all. It should have been your right. Except for what I did to you it might still have been possible."

She didn't like the injustice of that. "I asked you to. I led you on. I just didn't know —." She pulled her hand out of his and went to the window, staring out over the drive. A chaise sat there, obviously Mrs. Brown's. The coachman was walking the pair of horses that led the vehicle and a footman stood by, picking his teeth. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't want to force you into anything." She turned to face him, having regained a degree of composure. "I won't force anyone into anything." She said it softly, firmly. She had made up her mind.

When she turned to him his expression took her by surprise. It was infinitely gentle, softer than she had ever seen in him, even in the throes of desire. "What makes you think you have to force me?" He stayed where he was, watching her. She felt more embarrassed than she ever had in the room at Mrs. Brown's, foolish really.

She shook her head and wouldn't look at him while she spoke. "I don't want anyone to make any kind of sacrifice for me. What happened between us was my fault." She turned away again. "I wanted it. I'd just spent six years shut up in my father's house in London, then, after a week in London; I was going to spend more time shut up with Cousin Mary. Oh, I like her, or I did when I met her before, but I wouldn't be able to go beyond the house or receive visitors for who knew how long?" She turned and met his gaze, hoping he understood, that he didn't think too badly of her.

"Poor Ruth!" he said softly. "Incarcerated for life!"

"Well it might have amounted to that. For when the problem with my father was resolved, how old would I have been? That kind of process could take years and then I'd be too old to marry. Or a marriage could be arranged."

"Another kind of imprisonment?"

"Yes!" she said fervently, glad he understood. "A man has so many other choices!"

He moved a little closer, but didn't touch her. "What would you have done, had you been a man?"

She laughed. "How did you know I'd been thinking about it?" He answered her smile with one of his own. "I think I would do as you did—join the army. I'd have something useful to do and I wouldn't be in the country."

"It was a rewarding thing to do. It has its drawbacks, you know."

"So I understand. But I wouldn't be dependent on the charity of others!"

A spasm crossed his face; she didn't understand why. "Does that rankle? It isn't

charity, my dear!"

She looked down, tears temporarily blinding her. He crossed the space between them and put his hand under her elbow. "Come and sit down." He led her over to a sofa and they sat down together, not too close. He seemed to know not to crowd her too much. She was grateful for that.

Blinking away the foolish tears, she said; "I know what you and Edmund decided and it doesn't matter. I've told him to go after his Emma and only come back to me if it doesn't come to anything."

He smiled. "I thought you might, once you knew about her."

"Why?"

He reached out and took her hand again. Turning it palm upwards, he gazed at it as though looking for answers there. "I've come to know you, Ruth. We've been forced together in unnatural proximity in the last few days. In a way, it's as though I've always known you. I can tell what you're thinking sometimes, what you're about to do."

She laughed, a little hesitantly. "Whereas I haven't the faintest idea what you're thinking."

He smiled. "My fault, I fear. I've always been a secretive kind of fellow. I want us to understand each other. At the risk of boring you, may I tell you how I feel?"

"Yes please." Ruth was glad he wanted to confide in her. Perhaps he had a secret love, too. She felt alone. While she was pleased to find Edmund had someone he wanted, she thought she might be deeply unhappy if Oliver had found one.

He looked at her hand rather than her face, but from time to time glanced up almost shyly to see how she was taking it. "I've never found it easy to confide in anyone. Except Charles and he's dead now. He was fifteen years older than me, with many dead babies between us, so the age difference made him more like a father. He was delighted when I joined the army and willingly paid for my commission. It was a rewarding career, but to be truthful, when I returned with my-injury-just before his death, I was beginning to tire of it. There was so much boredom, relieved by so much death and so much misery. I was ready to throw myself at London society when Charles died." He paused, stroking the long line up her palm. She wasn't sure if he was aware of her; he seemed so far away. "I was going to enjoy all the pleasures I'd been deprived of. See if I liked it. I learned enough between my recovery and Charles's death to find that I liked it tolerably well. But not enough to lose myself in it totally, to make it my *raison d'être*." He gave a small sigh. "Still, it was a dreadful shock when my brother died."

He looked up, recognition recalling him to the present and she saw the reflection of his devastation at that time. "I'm sorry."

He gave her a small, bleak smile. "Thank you. Suddenly I was on my own, totally on my own. I have no other siblings, no close family. Becoming the earl was the last thing on my mind. It provided a solace. Learning about the estate and the responsibilities I would have to shoulder helped me get over my grief."

"Did your brother never marry?"

"Yes," he replied readily. "There was no heir. No bastards, either, despite his philandering." He grinned, the light finally reaching his eyes when he recalled his brother's ways. "It was an arranged marriage and she never objected, or he would have stopped. Or tried to. He liked variety in female company. It wasn't just-you know, the bed thing-" now it was Ruth's turn to grin at the apposite turn of phrase -"he enjoyed female company. This house was where his principal mistress would live, but they never

stayed long. He was restless, never staying with one woman for more than a year. He always made sure they were well provided for. He wasn't a cruel man." Ruth thought he might have been a shallow one, but she made sure her thought didn't effect her bland expression. Oliver might not appreciate her opinion of a brother he'd undoubtedly loved.

She glanced up at his face and caught him watching her, wearing a far softer expression than she was used to. She didn't look away. "After he died I found myself with Edmund more than before. We'd been at Eton together, but drifted apart when I joined up. Then, when I came home and lost Charles, I found myself in Edmund's company. He's a pleasant, undemanding fellow. I like him very much. We have much the same tastes and many of the same problems." He paused. "With the title came the matchmaking. I am supposed to marry, make an heir. I decided to give myself some time before I plunged into another way of life. I had no one to advise me and I didn't want to make any mistakes. When I began to look, last season, no one took my fancy." He grinned, the boyish expression lighting his face. "They were too silly, or too young, or too plain, or just boring. I thought I was too fussy and had almost determined to ask the first girl who came somewhere near the high standards I'd set." He looked at her as though he'd never seen her before. His gaze roamed over her face almost anxiously, waiting for her. "Then I met you. At Ranelagh."

"No!" She was shocked. Was he trying to fool her into believing he had a *tendre* for her? That was the outside of enough! Desire, yes, she'd seen that in him, but nothing else. The tenderness and comfort he'd shown her could have been concern shown to a sister, not the tenderness of a lover. An honorable proposal she would have listened to, but she didn't like this. "Are you saying you were attracted to me?"

"I am. Is it so very strange?"

She pulled her hand away. "Yes. I was wearing a gown even I knew was too plain for such a place! I knew no one. I was hardly sparkling company! You cannot pretend you preferred me to the other women there that night. Please grant me the intelligence to see that!"

He didn't try to touch her again, but leaned back. He was still calm. "Yes, I did prefer you. You had no airs and graces; you talked like a sensible woman. One of the things I find disconcerting is all that giggling and hiding behind fans. I'm not used to it, you see."

"Yes, but —"

He didn't let her finish. "And you looked more natural and-prettier."

Indignant, she made to rise. "Now that I cannot allow. I am not comparable with the beauties that adorn the ballrooms of London! I saw that when I first went to Ranelagh."

He took her hand again, forcing her to remain in her seat. "Please listen and believe me. I mean what I say. I thought you were the loveliest girl there. Then I asked you to dance, talked to you and —"

"Fell instantly in love?" she finished, acidly.

He smiled gently. "No, of course not. I liked you very much, felt myself warming to you and wanted to get to know you a little better. I felt an instant response to you, before I'd even spoken to you. I thought I would call on you in the accepted manner, take you for drives in the park, see you at balls and the theatre and we could get to know each other. That became impossible."

"Yes," she whispered, a shadow of regret falling across her. That sounded more reasonable and it was just what she'd hoped for when she went to London with such

expectations. To meet someone, for the acquaintance to grow, perhaps to meet someone she could be happy with, someone her father would be happy to see her with. Now that would never happen and the remembrance brought all her misery back. She fought and vanquished the specter of self-pity.

He continued as though he hadn't noticed her sadness. "Then you threw yourself at me in the street. I was foxed and I thought it was a dream, but it was a dream I was happy to go along with until I realized the state you were in." He grinned. "I couldn't think what to do. At first I thought I must take you home and as discreetly as I could, but what you said about your father disturbed me. While I had no doubt I could look after you and protect you from him, that would have destroyed your reputation for good. I needed somewhere safe for you and in my befuddled state all I could think of was Mother Brown's. Not respectable, but there's a houseful of bullies there and of all the muslin company, Mother Brown's would be the one to choose. Of course, there was the connection with Edmund. It was sweet, to think of hiding you under Urswick's very nose!" He broke off. "I'm sorry. I took an instant dislike to the way your father fetched you back at Ranelagh, as though he was a dog and you a recalcitrant sheep. I thought at first he disapproved of me, but then I saw it was not so. He would have reacted the same way with anyone. With any man." He stared down at his hands. When he looked back at her there was a haunted look Ruth hadn't been aware of before. "As to what happened—what I did to you. I have no excuse. I can tell you some of why I was so taken by you." The haunted look went as he continued to look at her. "Every time we met I found myself more attracted to you. I've been lonely for quite some time, Ruth and I think you have been, too. And I—" he bit his lip and stopped. Why he cut his speech short at that point? Ruth felt sure he'd been about to tell her something else, but she didn't know what it could be. They were attracted to each other. They were lonely. That seemed, to her, sufficient explanation. "Yes. I have. Do you understand why I let you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I'm glad. I'm not usually so-so—"

"Wanton?" he finished for her, a gleam in his eye.

Her cheeks pinked. "I suppose so. I'm sorry for all this. I didn't know you see, I just thought I did."

He smiled. "Did you enjoy it?" he asked suddenly.

"Sir!" Her first reaction was indignation, but in all fairness she couldn't keep it up for long. She couldn't look at him when she confessed, "I—I suppose I did."

"I thought you did. I certainly did. And would you have enjoyed it with anyone else? Another gentleman?"

"No." She said it without thinking, then was sorry. She'd let out too much. "I mean—"

He leant forward and captured her hand lightly in his. "Don't. Don't spoil it. Despite the sordid nature of the house and our meeting, I found it a lovely half hour, something apart from everything else." He paused. "Something I'd like to repeat."

"Oh!" She didn't know how to respond. If she were to tell him the truth, she would have to say he wasn't alone in that wish. But she couldn't say that.

"Perhaps in more respectable surroundings?" he suggested.

"Here?"

"If you like." He gave a small laugh, leaning forward to take both her hands. "With a ring on your finger. I'd love it if you'd agree to marry me, Ruth."

She stared at him. She'd expected a proposal, Edmund had led her to expect it, but not like this. What a gentleman he was, how kind he was to put it this way! "I-I " she began and stopped. He gave her the time to compose herself, leaning back, but retaining one hand once more. Ruth swallowed and tried to explain what she felt. This was no time to lose her reason. This conversation could affect the rest of her life.

The trouble was, she wanted him. She yearned to feel him again and in the past few days she feared she'd learned to love him. He wouldn't be an easy partner, but he was the one she wanted. She loved his concern, his kindness and conversely, his passion, shown her only the one time and thereafter so carefully masked. He didn't need to tell her he wanted her. She had caught him looking at her once or twice with naked desire, the look he had given her openly at Mother Brown's. It both warmed her and frightened her, but she couldn't take him on that alone.

"Is there anyone else?" She had to make sure he wasn't looking elsewhere.

"No one else."

"Forgive me, this might seem a stupid question, but-but I would like to know." His understanding expression gave her the courage to go on. "Do you-could you-love me? I'm not talking about grand passion, Francesca and Paolo, that kind of thing, but well, ordinary, everyday love."

"I thought you knew," he said, his face grave with sincerity. "Of course I love you, Ruth. Grand passion and all."

She stared at him, her mouth slightly open before she recovered herself to say, "No! You must be mistaken!" then, realizing what she had said she added, "I didn't mean to imply you didn't know your own mind, or anything like that. I just-I find it hard to believe."

"Why?"

"Oh for any number of reasons! It seems so, so convenient, so right! And you hardly know me-how can you tell?"

"Oh for goodness' sake!" he said, showing the first signs of impatience that day and he pulled on her hand until she came closer. He released it only to clasp her tightly in his arms and when she lifted her head to look at him, kiss her on the mouth.

Softly, his lips played on hers and Ruth let herself sink into the sensation, deliberately pushing all her doubts aside. His lips left hers only so he could murmur, "Open your mouth for me, my love. Please." She complied, very slightly parting her lips so when he returned to feast, he slipped his tongue between them and opened her up.

She relaxed into his arms, feeling safe, but with her skin tingling to his touch. At that moment she was his, to do whatever he liked with.

Gently at first and then with more assurance he explored her mouth, let her explore his, which she did, after a little encouragement. She found it wondrous, miraculous even that such intimate contact was what she had really needed from him. He moved his hands softly over her back, caressing and comforting until there was a responsive movement from her.

When he slid his hand around and touched her breast, she felt something inside her thaw. Her heart, held independent and behind carefully guarded fences for six years, afraid to love anyone, opened for him. She had to believe him. If she didn't, she was lost. He ended the kiss only to drop light kisses along her jaw, down her throat, then returned to her willing mouth to ravish her senses again.

Eventually they had to stop, if only to get their breath back. Leaning against his

shoulder, her breast still cradled in one strong, possessive male hand, she said, "I'll never wear paint again."

His smile was tender and open. "Good. Because I'll always want to kiss you. And that stuff tasted vile. However did you stand it?"

She laughed shakily. "I had to. I couldn't lock myself away in my room, then Mrs. Brown assured me, gentlemen would come looking, so I had to disguise myself. A mask would have been too easily removed, so it had to be the make-up."

"You're much more beautiful without it."

"Me?" She was genuinely astonished. "No, I'm not beautiful, merely passable!"

He shushed her with a soft kiss. "You're beautiful. Society will exalt you as a beauty. You're hair is nearly black, gleaming, an invitation for a man to run his fingers through it. Which," he added with a smile, "I can't wait to do. And your eyes hold an invitation, despite your virtue." She pulled a face and he dropped another kiss on her nose. "You have a natural virtue, untouched by where you've been. Your figure is a dream—you hardly need those stays you wear. Your skin—oh lord! Your skin is soft, silky, fine as porcelain. What more does a beauty need?"

"Confidence?" she suggested. "I haven't had the experience I should have and I don't feel happy in company."

"That," he assured her, "will come. And I'll be with you."

"Will you?"

"If you wish for it." He gazed at her, now so close. His grip around her shoulders tightened for a moment. "I'll ask you once more, but I want another kiss first. Just in case you say no." He took his kiss and took his time about it, curving her into him.

She went willingly. She couldn't fight this any more. Even if he pretended his love, she knew he wanted her and she loved him too much to let him go. "Oh yes," she whispered.

He drew back a little. "I haven't asked you yet," he said, amusement glowing in his voice. "Will you marry me, Ruth? For love and companionship, not for the other concerns?"

"Yes, Oliver. I'll marry you. On any terms."

"Thank you."

Getting rid of Mrs. Brown took longer than Edmund had imagined it would. He had to repeat his reassurance several times about the expense, about how Edmund would prevent that mad old man from coming back and doing it again, from the precise financial details of the transaction. Eventually they agreed that three months' rent should be remitted, to take care of the damage and distress. Edmund knew he'd been rooked, but he knew he owed the lady more than that for her loyalty to him and her fair dealing now and in the past. Really, he thought, lawyers should be so honest.

Going back upstairs he wondered what they should do now. Everything had become more urgent. Urswick was hot on the trail and as soon as he realized Iveleigh was involved, he'd be on the doorstep. Getting Lord Urswick committed would take some time, have no guarantee of success and seriously impede Ruth's ability to attract a husband. For Edmund no longer expected her to accept either himself or Oliver. She'd shown no partiality for either of them that he could see and for all he knew Oliver had offered and been refused, as he'd been. Another way must be found. It said a lot for his natural optimism that he knew it would.

He hurried upstairs, eager to discuss the developments with his friends. He had some ideas of his own. And he was determined not to let his lovely cousin return to the incarceration her father had put her in.

He flung open the door to the drawing room and stood there for a moment, blinking in surprise. His friend and his cousin were locked in what looked very much like a passionate embrace.

"Good Lord!" he breathed, regaining his senses and turned to leave the room.

"No, Edmund, don't go!" he heard, so reluctantly he turned back, closing the door behind him instead.

Oliver was seated on the couch, his arm around Ruth, who unashamedly rested her head on his shoulder. "Congratulate us," Oliver suggested.

Edmund came forward and took their hands in his. "I couldn't have wished for a better outcome! Are you both content? I'm very fond of both of you and I want you to be happy."

"We'll try," said Ruth, her voice softer than he remembered. It had lost that sharp edge of anxiety she had been at such pains to hide over the last week. He saw Oliver's hand tighten on her shoulder for a moment when she moved closer to him.

Edmund went to the sideboard and poured out three glasses of the Madeira he found there. After he'd given them out, he raised his glass. "To a long and happy union!" he said. "And in the absence of your father, Ruth, I freely give you my blessing!"

He wished he hadn't said that when he saw the shadow cross his cousin's face. "I wish he would give his blessing!"

"Do you need it?" Oliver asked her.

Ruth seemed to come to an awareness of her position and sat up hurriedly. Oliver let his arm remain on the back of the sofa, in a protective gesture sheltering her. "No, but I'd like it. It'll be the devil of a job getting my portion out of him." She looked anxiously at Oliver, her eyes losing some of the softness. "I can't come to you penniless!"

"Why ever not?" he said. "If you wish it, I'll sue your father for what is yours, but I'll willingly settle any amount on you." A woman's dowry was often used to provide for her in the event of her widowhood, or for dowries for her own daughters. Dowerless females rarely attained a good match.

"I can't ask you to do that!" she said, taken aback.

He leaned forward and despite the presence of Edmund, gently kissed her. "Don't ask. Let me give it to you."

Edmund felt avuncular. After all, in the absence of her father, he was the head of the family. "Then I suggest that we put our plans forward quickly. I take it you don't want to wait until residency is established and banns called?"

"Good God, no!" Oliver said, appalled. "Now it's decided on, the sooner the better, I say!" He addressed Ruth. "I want to look after you properly. What say you to Saturday?"

Ruth was bewildered. "But it's Wednesday! How can that be? I thought they changed the law last year!"

"The Marriage Act?" Oliver said. "Yes, they did. I shall go to town and apply for a special license from Doctor's Commons. I don't know if it's required, but since you're of age, you may write your consent and I'll take it with me. I'll bring it back with me and we may be married." He took a breath and then decided not to add to that. Instead, he addressed Edmund. "You'll stay and look after Ruth? Or is your business too urgent to

wait?"

Edmund thought for a moment. "If you would take a message to my man of business for me, I can stay as long as you want. I don't want to linger too long. I want my uncle to see me about in town."

"Surely there's no need for that now?" Oliver asked.

"You might want a few days' peace before you decide on your next step," Edmund said tactfully. From what he'd seen, they would want more than a few days!

Oliver caught his betrothed in a loving gaze. "Once I have you safe your father will come around. Or he will not see you again. He has no choice."

Chapter Fifteen

Oliver had little difficulty obtaining the special license the following day. He greased a few palms and had the matter moving along nicely, but still had to wait for a few hours. He spent his time in coffee houses, collecting gossip. What he heard disturbed him. He made his decision, returned to his town house to make some orders and then took his carriage back to the country, eager to be in the company of his bride-to-be. Ruth had made all the difference to him, had given him something to look forward to, a future. When he touched her, when he kissed her, he felt capable of anything, although the miracle that had occurred at Mother Brown's house hadn't happened again. But it was possible. It was definitely possible.

Ruth was in the garden at the back of the house. Oliver went immediately to find her.

She stood at the bottom of the garden near a bower that would soon be covered with roses. She wasn't looking at the rosebuds. She'd found the breathtaking view.

When he said her name softly, "Ruth," she turned at once and went to him. He folded his arms around her and kissed her. He loved her kiss, the way she gave herself so trustingly to him. He could be happy with that alone.

When he drew back she tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her. "Someone might see!" she protested.

He laughed. "It doesn't matter, my love. We'll be married soon enough--and the servants think you're my mistress anyway!"

"Will you tell them?"

"After the ceremony. I don't want any word getting out before then."

Her eyes widened in alarm. "Is he still looking for me?"

He tried to soothe her with a gentle kiss. "Of course, but he won't find you."

"How can you be sure?"

"Hush my love, hush. I won't let him take you away, I promise. And after Saturday, you'll be mine in law and he won't be able to take you."

She buried her face in his chest for a moment, before looking up again. "I hate this. Why should I belong to anyone?"

He smiled. "Least of all me. Be assured I don't look at you in that way. If you give yourself to me, that's different. In that case, I'll give myself to you."

"So we're each others'?"

They both laughed. "Yes."

She straightened up. "Look."

Before them was spread the vista of London. Hampstead was one of the highest points above the vale of London and they could see the entire metropolis from this vantage point. A cloud, the result of hundreds of coal fires hung above the city and from this distance everything was in shades of grey. They could make out the square towers of the Tower of London on one side and the gleam of the river, passing through the Great Wen on its way to the sea. The dome of St. Paul's was an easy landmark and then, further east, the masts and great warehouses which marked out the dock area.

"It takes this kind of view to realize how little of London we really know," he commented. "Our London is only a small part of it."

"It's so big," she agreed. "I didn't realize before I saw it like this."

"The biggest city in the world."

They looked at it together for a while, each with their own thoughts, his arm comfortably about her shoulders. Then he gave her a small squeeze. "Come, let's go in now. We have things to discuss with Edmund." Ignoring her anxious frown, he took her indoors.

They found Edmund in the library, but he looked up from his book and smiled when they went in, rising politely until they were both seated. A small chuckle escaped him and Oliver raised a haughty eyebrow. "Sir?"

This only made Edmund chuckle more. "A pair of lovebirds! You'd best marry soon—if only for that!"

A rueful one replaced the haughty expression. "Yes. If it weren't for your uncle, I'd give Ruth the wedding she deserves—but then again; I'll be able to care for her the sooner, this way. And that's all to the good."

Two heads turned in his direction, the same question framed on each. Oliver raised his hand, then told them. "I got the license and went to see the vicar on my way through the village. He'll marry us on Saturday, with pleasure, he says." A gentle sighing of outdrawn breath reached him from Ruth. He smiled at her. "I'd planned to take you away after that; to my home, where we'll be safe and you can begin your new life. I think we should amend that to a few weeks in town first."

Her look of dismay pierced him. "Oh no!"

"I'm afraid your father has made no secret of your absence. He's scouring the town for you and at the same time he's saying you've been taken ill. It's as though one half of him doesn't know what the other half is doing. He's turning up at various functions and asking everyone if they've seen you. So society knows you've left him, that there's been a breach."

She gripped her hands together in a gesture of anxiety he was beginning to know too well. "He is distressed!"

"So he deserves to be," said Edmund. "What a fool! You'd think he could be more discreet!"

"I think I know how to counter it," said Oliver. "It will save Ruth's reputation and perhaps send her father back home. Edmund, will you take action against him? Have him put into your care?"

Edmund sighed. "I think I must. He's given some very peculiar orders to his man of business, orders that make no sense. The poor man applied to me for guidance and I don't know what to tell him."

"Tell him the truth," Oliver said gravely. "It will all come into the open soon enough."

"Oh Oliver!"

At the sound of her voice, he turned and took one small hand in his. "I'm sorry, my love, but there's no hiding it any longer. He's forced our hand, although I don't think he meant to. By far the best thing would be if we could persuade him to retire to Yorkshire where he can be properly cared for. I fear he may have to be forced. The first step is to take you beyond his jurisdiction." He squeezed her hand and received a small, quavering smile. "Then I think we'll go to town and announce our marriage, show ourselves at a few places. We'll have to admit the breach, but in the circumstances I don't think there'll be a problem. Your father has made several enemies already, disrupting balls and the like and I think you're more likely to receive sympathy and understanding." He watched her mouth firm

into a straight line, the worried frown disappear. He honored her for it. "I'll be with you."

"So will I," said Edmund. "I've a lot to see to. Ruth, if he refuses to retire, it might come to a hearing. Will you give evidence, if you're asked?"

"Not in public," she said. "And I'll only tell the truth."

"Of course," he agreed. "I promise you I'll make sure the best care is taken of him."

"I never thought I'd be glad the Priory is so remote," confessed Ruth. "It might be good for him. Give him some peace." There was a pause before she cried out, "God, how he's suffered!"

Both men stared at her startled by her outburst. "You suffered too," Oliver said quietly. "And you have recovered."

"I'm sorry. I've often watched him staring into the fire of an evening and not known how to comfort him. Yes, I have recovered, but there'll always be something missing. I should have a brother to take me to balls and routs, I should have a sister to laugh with, but I haven't."

"I'll try to make it up to you. I can't replace what you've lost, but I might help you make another kind of life," said Oliver and he meant it.

"Yes." She wouldn't look at him for a moment and he knew she was blinking away tears. How many times had she done that, forcing herself to go on when she was as grief stricken as her father? How much had she sacrificed for him? He became determined that he wouldn't ask the same of her, that he would share her sorrows and her joys.

He looked up when he heard the door close quietly when Edmund left the room and he could do what he wanted to do and hold her. He drew her to him, sat in the nearest armchair and nestled her on his lap, where he held her close, like a child. She didn't cry, but she felt her response when her misery subsided and she remembered where she was. He pulled her back down firmly. "I like this."

"Yes, but surely we shouldn't-well—" she gave in and rested her cheek on his shoulder. "It is comforting."

"Just comforting?"

She looked up and saw his smile. "Well-perhaps we shouldn't think about that just yet."

She might be nervous. In that case, she wouldn't be the only one.

They spent the next day quietly talking, laughing and occasionally embracing, when Edmund wasn't with them. It was like a holiday, a day out of time when nothing mattered. They went out in the garden and discussed improvements, while Ruth stubbornly refused to admit the house needed any. They didn't change for dinner and retired for an early night not long afterwards after several hands of cards which they played for button stakes. Ruth thought it was idyllic, but she knew it couldn't last.

The next day was her wedding day. Ruth got out of bed with a light heart. The thought that she wouldn't be retiring alone added sweetness to the savor of a leisurely breakfast from a tray in her room. The communicating door between her bedroom and Oliver's remained unlocked; she had almost expected a visit from him the previous night and wouldn't have turned him away.

Her only sadness was a nagging doubt that he didn't love her, that he was offering her all this as compensation for what he'd done to her at Mother Brown's. She loved him, but she didn't know him well enough to know how skilful he was at dissembling. She was sensible enough to realize this was her only way out. She had to take it. There was no way of knowing if her new found love would last, but she knew she liked him and she could be

useful and helpful to him in his new position as earl.

She dressed with care, in a pretty jonquil gown. Then the maid came through with a long box. "This is from his lordship, ma'am."

Wondering, she opened the box to find a double string of pearls and matching earbobs. She nearly wept then, staring at the lovely gleaming stones bedded on black velvet. They were so beautiful!

Quietly the maid took the rope and fastened it around her neck. She hooked the earrings in herself, remembering the sting when her maid had pierced her ears for her on her twelfth birthday. There had been a lot of blood, but her mother had scolded her for her tears. "Just think of all the precious jewels you can wear now!" she'd said. At the time it hadn't compensated for the pain.

Now, perhaps it did.

Just before she left her room, she felt something and on investigation, her worst fears were confirmed. Her menses had begun. How could she tell him?

No matter. That would come later. She did what was necessary and hurried downstairs.

He waited for her in the hall; her cloak slung over one arm. His smile warmed her; all her fears fell away and she felt better. He took her gloved hand and kissed it and she turned to smile at a grinning Edmund. "When this is over I'll go back to town and leave you two in peace," he told her.

Ruth felt a sudden jolt of panic and forcibly quelled it. "Will you tell them?"

"Call me John the Baptist," he said. "I'll tell them you're married, but not where you are. That way when you come to town the worst of the gossip will be over."

Ruth grinned. Anyone less like the unkempt John the Baptist of the Bible was difficult to imagine. If she had to use one word to describe Edmund, it would probably be dapper. She couldn't remember ever seeing him unkempt.

Oliver was elegant. Dressed simply but immaculately in a dark blue coat and waistcoat that fitted his shape tightly to the waist and then flared out below, he was the epitome of the fashionable gentleman. Ruth could hardly believe he would shortly be hers. He moved to put the cloak over her shoulders and give her bonnet. "Thank you for the pearls," she said, glancing up at him.

"They suit you. You'll find you're quite well off for jewelry, though some of it might be old fashioned. I have quite a lot of family jewelry and no one to wear them until you."

"What about your brother's widow?" Ruth asked. He'd hardly mentioned the lady.

"She remarried six months ago," he said, briefly. "Her new husband is giving her all the jewels she needs."

"Oh." She sensed some reticence in the reply and dropped the subject, loath to spoil this special day.

The carriage waited outside to take them the short distance to the church. The church at Hampstead was a typical village church, built in the Middle Ages, grey-stoned, looking as though it had been there always. Not so the new pump room and assembly rooms, built to accommodate the new visitors to the spa. Ruth watched them pass numbly, her mind elsewhere.

The service was simple and to Ruth's mind, perfect. Edmund and the vicar's wife acted as witnesses and there was no need to hide her happiness from anyone under a veneer of fashionable boredom. She made her promises and meant them. She hoped he meant his and she rather thought he did. Afterwards he softly kissed her, his lips only just

touching hers and she heard the vicar's wife sigh.

They went back to the house, to the waiting servants. Oliver stopped in the hall to address them, her hand tucked in his. "You may have guessed that this lady has done me the honor of becoming my wife. She is now the Countess of Iveleigh and should always be addressed as such. She was Miss Ruth Urswick and has been forced to flee her home, which is why she was here before the wedding. I will not tolerate any gossip or disrespect."

He was greeted by murmurs of congratulation and bows and curtseys from the staff. It wouldn't stop them gossiping, though the worst they could say now was that she became his mistress before they were married, which was, in a way, true and since they were now married, acceptable in the eyes of society that could do her no harm.

Edmund didn't stay. Kissing Ruth's hand and giving his friend a hug, he left in the waiting traveling carriage for London. "I'm so glad you married Oliver. I know he'll look after you!" Touched by his concern, Ruth kissed him.

Then she turned back to Oliver. Her husband.

He was watching her with a half fond, half wary expression she was at a loss to interpret. "Poor Ruth! No wedding breakfast, no dancing! Whatever shall we do with ourselves?" Ruth blushed. "No matter. Shall we walk in the garden? Take another look at the den of iniquity we'll be going into shortly?"

She wondered what he meant, then realized he meant London. "Very well." She took his arm and they wandered down to the viewing point by the bower. "Can we come back to see the roses?" she asked him.

"Of course we can. We'll come back as often as you wish."

"So you won't be setting up your mistresses here, as your brother did?" She slanted a look up at him. To her relief he laughed.

"No mistresses. One woman is enough for me!" His expression warmed. "So long as it's you." He drew her towards him and kissed her forehead lightly.

She drew back when he released her. "Thank you for that." You're really very kind."

"Kind?" His voiced gained a rough edge. "Nothing of the sort! Please believe me it's not kindness!"

Shyness overwhelmed her for a moment when she remembered what she had to tell him. "Oliver?"

She had his attention at once. "My love?"

"Oliver, I fear-I fear something happened this morning which means we might have to - have to wait."

He frowned at her but after a moment his brow cleared. "Your courses?"

She flushed. "I fear so."

He smiled. "No matter. We have a lifetime now. What's a few days?" He drew her back to him.

Did she imagine it or was his smile a little broader, his muscles more relaxed? She'd expected him to be a little concerned, eager to finally finish what they'd begun. She knew he admired her, she remembered his reaction at Mrs. Brown's when she'd slipped off her stockings for him, the way he had tightened in anticipation, his eyes darkening. She wanted to see that again, wanted to feel him touching her, but she thought she might want it more than he did.

Why she thought that she didn't know. She turned to him and found him looking at

her, a gentle expression in his eyes. "What is it?"

"Nothing-nothing," she said.

"Disappointed?"

"Perhaps. I'm not supposed to say so, am I?"

His smile broadened. "Sweetheart, you can tell me anything. I won't condemn you, or laugh at you. I want to be your friend as well as your husband. Am I asking too much?"

"No," she said quickly. "I would like that. This has all been so sudden, I'm afraid it will end in tears."

"Not mine," he assured her and drew her to him for a kiss.

Chapter Sixteen

“Good morning, my lady.”

It took Ruth a moment or two to realize the maid meant her. She opened her eyes and remained staring at the almost familiar room while her maid drew the drapes around her bed, opened the shutters and placed a tray on the nightstand containing a pot of tea and some freshly buttered bread. My lady. My goodness.

This house was hers now, she was no longer a guest here. She could come here when she wanted, give orders and expect them to be obeyed. She let her mind wander, thought of what this would mean, what she was to be.

If the maid was surprised to find Ruth alone on her wedding morning, she showed no sign of it. Of course, she would know the reason; a lady could keep nothing from her personal maid. She supposed she ought to find an expensive personal maid, one who was conversant with the *grande toilette* and the latest fashions and the right way to do one's hair. A pity. She wasn't sure she would like that. However, she was determined to make Oliver a countess he could be proud of, one he wouldn't be ashamed to present to anyone so she would need the skills only a highly trained abigail could provide.

Edmund had bought them a little time. In a few days they would go to town, show themselves to society, make it perfectly clear that Ruth was a married lady, no longer under the jurisdiction of her father. She was Oliver's wife.

Oliver! She allowed herself to dream. The next few days would be the first they had spent alone and might be the making or the breaking of their relationship.

She dressed with care and went out of her room to find him leaving his. Was it on purpose, had he been waiting for her? Answering her smile with a warm one of his own, he came forward to take her hand. A little to her surprise, he drew her closer and saluted her mouth instead. A gentle kiss of greeting, but more intimate than she was used to. “Good morning, my love. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” she managed. She heard a door close gently behind her and realized the maid had come out of her room. She colored up and buried her face in his waistcoat, hearing his soft chuckle. Soft steps heralded the retreat of the maid. She dared to look up at him. “Some mistress I would have made!”

He kissed her again. “A better wife, I think.” He released her. “Come, let's walk in the garden before breakfast.”

The next few days were idyllic. Oliver told Ruth he was determined to give Ruth as much rest as possible while he could, and insisted on early nights and lazy days. A visit from London's most expensive and fashionable mantua maker took care of her meager wardrobe, increasing it beyond her wildest dreams. They read, played cards and sometimes just talked. To their mutual delight they found they had many opinions in common. They would have little trouble putting up a united front, if they needed to.

Ruth was blissfully happy. Except for one thing. Every night he took her upstairs, kissed her, and wished her goodnight. Apart from that first kiss when he'd proposed he never lost his head again, never kissed her with all the passion she remembered from before. Of course, she was grateful he waited, but she wished he might show a little impatience, show he wanted her. But he never did. Perhaps he was afraid of frightening her, or perhaps he was such a gentleman he could hold himself in check. Occasionally she

felt uneasy.

Chapter Seventeen

They left the house in Hampstead on the Saturday after their wedding. Ruth was as close to virginity as she had been when she entered the house on her wedding day, but otherwise happier than she'd been for a long time.

When the door of the Hampstead house closed behind them, Ruth looked out the carriage window wistfully. Oliver laid his hand gently over hers where it lay on the seat between them. "We can come back. It's your house now, as much as mine."

"It's a happy house," she whispered.

"One of many, I hope and pray."

With only a small sigh, she turned away and tried to look ahead, to the life to come. Her smile didn't fool Oliver, but he said nothing.

The drive to London didn't take long and the London house was open and ready for them. As a bachelor, Oliver had never bothered to open the whole of the house, but on his visit the previous week he'd given orders for it to be opened and extra staff to be hired. The day before he sent a message to warn them he would be coming and bringing his wife.

He fully expected chaos, but he was pleasantly surprised to find order. At least on the surface.

The elegant chaise drew up outside the house in Brook Street and a footman hurried across the pavement to open the door and let down the steps. Lord Iveleigh alighted and turned to help out his lady. The assembled household, peering from the hall, drew its collective breath.

Oliver looked down at her when he felt her convulsive clutch on his coat sleeve. "These are your people," he said. "Your house. And this—" he turned to a tall, cadaverous gentleman dressed in sober but fine clothes—"is Curran, my butler. My brother's butler before me. Anything you want to know about, he probably has the answer."

Curran executed a stately bow. "If you will allow me to say, my lady, it is a great pleasure to welcome you."

Oliver cocked an eyebrow at him. "Time I took the marital plunge, eh, Curran?"

"It is not for me to say, my lord." He cracked his face in a very small smile.

"Well, I couldn't have chosen a finer lady," Oliver said, putting his wife to the blush. "Lady Iveleigh was, before last week, Miss Ruth Urswick, a cousin of my friend Mr. Edmund Urswick." Curran bowed.

The butler stayed by her side and introduced the rest of the household, giving her a few words about each one. The fat girl, bursting out of her corset was the head housemaid, Stanger. The tiny, frail looking woman was the ordinary cook, Mrs. Bestman. Ruth wondered where she got the strength to heave those great dishes and bowls of vegetables about. There was a French chef, several housemaids, kitchen maids, burly footmen and grooms. Ruth met them all.

Oliver watched his wife with pride. She showed the right amount of politeness and whatever nervousness she was feeling was firmly locked away inside. If he'd chosen her for her public persona, he couldn't have chosen better. Every day she became more dear to him and every day he became more reticent about showing her what lay beneath the surface—his hopes, fears and failings. He wanted to be the best he could for her.

After they met the staff, Ruth asked to be shown the house. Curran took that responsibility on himself, while Oliver went to the bookroom, the small study on the

ground floor, to catch up with his correspondence.

While this house didn't take her heart like the one at Hampstead, it was a fine town house, perfectly adequate for the needs of a young nobleman and his new wife. Ruth was rather disappointed to find there was little needed doing to improve it for her needs and the décor was to her taste. She would have liked something to do. She remembered how much her new wardrobe was likely to cost and was glad she would cause her new lord no further expense.

Wife. It still didn't seem possible. Ruth walked across her new bedroom to look over the garden, more formal than the one at Hampstead, designed to impress. The room was lovely, the colors light and modern, with just a touch of gilt.

She sat down at the dressing table, its expanse covered in fine silk, the pots and jars already unpacked and glimmering. And stared at herself. No beauty, but it didn't matter any more. She was loved. And she loved.

She believed it now. She loved Oliver deeply and knew it was more than convenience. He cared for her too, she was sure of it. Picking up the brush, Ruth began to tidy away a few loose strands of hair and stared at her reflection, already changed, the pinched, worried look beginning to fade. She tried a coquettish smile, but it looked strange, unnatural. Perhaps she should cultivate an air of superiority. She lifted her chin. No, that looked as though she had a stiff neck, nothing more. With a small laugh, she turned away and for the first time, looked at the bed.

Her gowns had arrived. They were piled high on the bed, waiting for her approval. Goodness, had she really ordered that many?

Without further delay, she rang for her maid.

When Ruth went back downstairs, she was attired in a fine gown of rose-colored silk, flowing over a petticoat of pale pink brocade and a matching stomacher, frilled with frivolous bows. The lace ruffles at her elbows were the finest she'd ever owned, the satin slippers on her feet adorned with silver buckles.

Oliver sat in the smaller of the two salons on the first floor. He'd changed into London finery, a dark green cut velvet coat and white waistcoat and breeches, but when he saw Ruth he sprang to his feet and held out both hands for her to place hers into them. "Lord, Ruth, I knew you'd polish up well, but this is—you look wonderful!"

Ruth flushed and laughed. "I'm so pleased you like it."

"It makes me want to show you off. Do you think you would like to go to the theatre tonight? I'll send someone to bespeak a box."

"Well," she was a little flustered, but when she thought about it, she thought it was rather a good idea. They could be seen without having to engage in too much social intercourse. The sooner gossip died down and they became just another young couple the sooner they could begin to fit in. "That would be lovely."

"Oh no, Ruth," he said, laughing. "You're lovely."

She laughed with him, not fooled, but glad he should think so.

As did Edmund when he came for dinner. His admiration warmed his already friendly eyes and he claimed he couldn't imagine why he'd let her go. Ruth, now in a rich blue, smiled prettily and thanked him for the compliment.

After dinner, Ruth retired to the smaller salon but the gentlemen didn't linger over their port. They'd stopped in the bookroom, but only for a moment. "If we're to show you off as the new Lady Iveleigh," Oliver said. "You should wear something distinctive which will proclaim your station." He carried a large box. Opening it he drew out a succession of

smaller boxes covered in shagreen and opened one for her.

Her breath stopped. Nestling in black velvet was a necklace, sparking cold fire. Ruth had never seen anything so magnificent before. Unable to hide her awe she looked up at Oliver, smiling as he watched her reaction. "One of the family treasures," he explained. "There's a set of 'em. The Iveleigh sapphires. M'mother had them recut and reset, so they should be wearable."

Ruth choked. "Aren't they too grand?"

"For what? For you? Certainly not. Anyone seeing you in these will know for sure you are my wife. A form of protection, if you will."

Ruth understood the reasoning. If these were family jewels, the fact that she was wearing them would help to establish her new standing and her acceptance by society. She turned and let Oliver clasp the cold, heavy strand around her neck, then put her hand up to feel the stones while she let out an "Ohhhhh!" of admiration. She went and stood before the mirror over the mantelpiece and watched the stones glitter when she breathed. The design was very simple, large sapphires in a frame of diamonds, linked together. Silently Oliver handed her a pair of large, girandole earrings and she hooked them in. They were too heavy for comfort, but she didn't really care. Then she found the hooks designed to go over the top of the ear to support them more comfortably. There was a bracelet and a ring, all perfect, dark blue stones, glimmering with secrets surrounded by flashing fire from the diamonds. "Good Lord," she breathed.

She turned and grinned, feeling the heavy stones from the earrings swing against her neck. "I feel armored," she said. "I can face anything." She paused. "Almost anything."

Oliver smiled and came forward to take her arm. "The great Lady Iveleigh," he said, gently mocking. Ruth laughed. It would be a while before she believed that.

There was an audible stir through the audience at Drury Lane when Ruth took her place in the box, flanked by Oliver and Edmund. She expected it and unfurled her fan, flicking it before her face and allowing the fabulous jewels to glitter in the sharp light from the stage. "You must tell me whom I should acknowledge. I haven't a clue who all these people are."

"Easier here than in some crowded ballroom," Edmund said. He began to point out all the notables and Ruth tried to concentrate.

All the time the actors were performing something, Ruth wasn't sure what. She took as much notice of them as everyone else seemed to be doing; that is, none at all. The glittering, glimmering, gossiping throng was far more interested in each other than in some dramatics that were only the excuse to bring them here. Above them the masses engaged in a parody of the behavior of the highest in society; jostling and commenting loudly on the performance and each other, throwing orange peel at each other. Below in the pit sat the respectable and the raffish; gentlemen looking for a new mistress, merchants and their families looking for an evening's entertainment.

All stared at Ruth, all chattered about her. In the next box a lady raised her opera glasses and stared at the parure now adorning the new Countess of Iveleigh. Ruth stared back, then looked away, as though bored. She heard Edmund's chuckle. "You were born to this."

"In a way, I suppose I was," she answered. And the one person she feared most of all wasn't there, she was sure of it. "What do they know about my father and me?"

"They know there's been a breach," Edmund said. "But not why. I wouldn't tell them, let them speculate. Eventually it will all die down and be forgotten in favor of

something else."

"Sad that a life should become fodder for ten minutes' conversation," observed Ruth, turning her attention to a fat man mouthing words on the stage. "As though it means nothing."

"Your friends know better," Edmund reminded her.

"Outside this box," Ruth said. "I have only one other friend in the world."

Oliver reached across and pressed her hand. "There will be more. Not every member of society is spiteful and mean. Some are quite pleasant." She smiled at his gentle teasing and shot him a warm look that wasn't missed by anyone in Drury Lane that night. A love match! Did they, then, elope?

Society held its breath.

That night, as always, they went upstairs together, parting outside her bedroom. He gently kissed her and wished her a good night. Ruth went inside and let the new French maid Edmund had acquired for her make her ready for bed, hardly bothering until the heavy jewelry was taken from her and laid back in the boxes. "Make sure that is securely locked away," she instructed. "They should be given to his lordship to put in the safe."

"Yes, my lady."

She said nothing else and allowed the woman to undress her, help her into her nightgown, brush her hair out, braid it and put her to bed. All the things she had done for herself until such a short time ago. Picking up a book she'd brought from Hampstead she read for a while until it became obvious that this night was going to be the same as all the others, when she blew out the candle and settled for sleep.

On a bright day Ruth took a shawl and walked out alone. Oliver was doing his tour of the coffee houses and clubs. She could have been shopping, visiting the library, but she yearned for solitude after days of busy socializing. Without knowing it her new life was taking shape. She felt more settled and it reflected in her looks. The haunted, scared look had faded, to be replaced by serenity and happiness.

She looked up when she saw footsteps approaching and smiled to see Edmund. "Good day, cousin. Are you well?"

"As well as I was last night." He sat down by her side on the long wooden bench. "I'm glad I caught you alone. I wanted to talk to you about family matters."

"Oliver is my family now," she said.

His face relaxed in a smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

"What are they saying about us, Edmund?"

The smile turned to a grin. "What we wanted them to say. After your father's rant around the city looking for you there was no hiding the breach. So it's generally assumed that you eloped with Oliver and Urswick's still angry with you. I'm supposed to be the mediator between you."

"Are you?" She studied him closely, noting the fine lines of worry around his eyes. She hoped she hadn't put them there.

"Hardly." The smile disappeared. "I think he's mad, Ruth, really mad. I went to see him yesterday. Have you tried?"

"No. I sent him a note. It was returned-shredded."

"Oh Ruth!"

She shook her head, determinedly fighting back the tears. "He's not the father I remember. The best I hope for is that he can be properly cared for. Do we have to go ahead

with proceedings against him?"

"Thank you for the 'we' Ruth. I know what that must have cost you. I'll try to make it as discreet as possible, but if we don't stop him, he'll destroy himself."

Ruth's anxious frown deepened. "Is he dangerous?"

"I think if he falls into many more rages, he'll have an apoplexy and expire on the spot. I want to get him home. London is the last place he should be."

"Oh Edmund, I do worry about him! Oliver says we must leave it to you, but I wish I could do more!"

"Oliver's right." He paused, searching for words. "I'm your father's heir and it's only right I should take steps to look after him. He's cast you off, Ruth."

She stared down at her lap. "I-I was afraid he might."

"He's calling you the foulest names. Believe me, no one listens, no one cares. Oliver was quite right to bring you to London. Now they've seen you they can't possibly believe him, but if you'd gone straight to the country they'd be talking still."

"Then I'm glad we came," Ruth replied firmly. "I didn't want to at first, but it does make sense. Oliver said I would be able to make my place. I owe it to him, Edmund. He's given me so much."

Edmund smiled. "He's a good friend. I hope he's as good a husband. I thought you might have problems with him. He has a dark side he rarely shows to anyone, you know. You seem to have tamed him."

She studied her cousin, wondering if she should confide in him. "He says he loves me."

"I think he does. I've never seen him so at ease with a woman before."

She stared at a budding bush that would spring into bloom any day now. "I'd like to be alone with Oliver for a while. Perhaps if—" she broke off and turned her face away.

There was a pause and then she felt Edmund's hand on hers. "Oh my dear! What is it? You've been so tense since you came back to London and it isn't just this unpleasantness with your father, is it?"

She looked back at him, unshed tears brimming over. "No-no it's not. I don't know what to do, Edmund and I have no one else to consult." She disposed her hands carefully in her lap, preparing herself to betray her husband by confiding in another person. "I'm not sure he wants me. When we married I couldn't—I couldn't—" she broke off and then continued in a more determined voice. "I was having my courses. He said it didn't matter, it would give us a little time to get used to each other. He was wonderful, Edmund. But he hasn't—he hasn't—"

Edmund understood; his face flushed. "Oh God." He got to his feet. He walked around for a while, agitatedly pacing, then turned back, decision etched on his handsome features. "There is something you should know, Ruth. I would far rather he told you himself, but if you know... don't know. It might be better to leave you to it. I'm sure you can work it out. After all, at Mother Brown's he did something which got you into this in the first place." He paced again before turning abruptly and facing her "Tell you what. I'll have a word with him."

"No Edmund he mustn't know I've spoken to you!"

"He won't, I promise," Edmund replied. "Truth is, I don't feel happy telling you something told me in confidence. I might be able to help—or are you happy like this? It might suit both of you, after all—"

Fleeting Ruth thought of what the French called a 'white' marriage, one never

consummated. Could she be happy with that, just kisses and caresses? Then she remembered some of the feelings he'd evoked in her in that little room in Covent Garden. "No. I want a proper marriage."

"I'll be subtle," Edmund said, "I promise, I won't breathe a word of what I know and I won't tell him you said anything."

She stood up smiling. Sharing her problem made her feel better, although she was still far from solving it. She wished Edmund could confide in her, but his decision not to reveal something Oliver told him in private gave her a good opinion of his character. "You're a good friend, Edmund. I'll learn Oliver's ways and he'll learn mine—we've made a good start and I'm sure we'll do better in time."

He gazed at her attentively. "Do you love him?"

"Oh yes. From the first time I saw him."

Chapter Eighteen

"I say, old man," Edmund approached Oliver, seated in his usual chair at White's. It was early yet and there were few people about. There wouldn't be a better time to tackle him.

The smile Oliver gave to his friend reflected none of the unsettled misery he'd shown a few weeks earlier. Edmund was happy for him, but knew he had to persevere, for Ruth's sake. Damned uncomfortable it made him feel, but he'd made her a promise. He was glad he'd found Oliver here, on neutral territory so to speak.

He settled in a chair drawn closely next to the one Oliver occupied; Oliver raised his black brows at the proximity, but said nothing about it. He put down his newspaper. "Well? Was there something in particular?"

"I just wondered," Edmund began, trying to be casual, but failing miserably. "I must be the only person in London who knows about your war wound."

"Far from it," Oliver replied, with a careless shrug that didn't look, to Edmund, as casual as he'd tried to make it. "The surgeon who treated it is somewhere in the city and there are several officers who know of it. They think I was just unlucky in my choice of mistress. I've never been sure about that."

"Oh Oliver, my good fellow...!"

Oliver turned a scorching stare on his friend. "I was a fool and as badly behaved as the rest. We all deserved it. At least I had the solace of paying for my sin."

"Good Lord, you sound like one of those chaps out of the Bible! sorry people weren't more discreet." Edmund stared at his fingers, gripped together in his lap. He bit his lip. When he turned back to Oliver, he saw his friend staring at him, a line of puzzlement between his brows. "Has Ruth been speaking to you?"

Edmund gripped his hands together, gaining control over himself. He feigned mild surprise. "No, no, why? Is there something wrong?"

Oliver looked away. "No, nothing."

Edmund didn't believe him. "I thought—after Mother Brown's and what you say you did—what I know you did—"

Oliver gave a harsh laugh. Several men sitting at the other end of the room turned to see what the sound was and then returned to their newspapers. "It seems that was an aberration. I haven't had much success since."

"Have you tried?" Edmund asked, appalled at himself for asking such an intimate question.

Oliver bit his lip so hard Edmund feared he might draw blood. "No. I can't fail her. After all she's been through it would be too much for her to bear." He turned to look at Oliver directly. He met his gaze fearlessly, with a bleakness Edmund thought had been banished. It had merely been asleep. "If I let her down there'll be no one else for her. I can't take the risk."

"You think she'll leave you or feel you've done something she wouldn't like?"

"I have, haven't I? I've married her under false pretences. I don't know if I can hold her, Edmund. I can't—can't risk it. I do love her, very much, and I can't risk hurting her. At Mother Brown's, I hurt her, you know. I can't hurt her again, she's been through too much."

Edmund met his gaze levelly. "Did you hurt that other woman?"

Oliver glanced away. "Yes, and she was a slut, not to put too fine a point on it. She slept with any soldier she fancied. So if I hurt her, God knows what I would do to an inexperienced girl like Ruth!" He brought his attention back to Edmund, facing him bravely, like a soldier in battle. "She's been through enough, Edmund, and she seems happy enough now. I just want to keep her that way."

"Even though it means being unhappy yourself?"

Oliver shrugged. "That doesn't mean much. I've been unhappy for years. I can stand this small fly in my ointment if it means Ruth is happy. I'll do everything I can to keep her. I want to get her past this business with her father, then we can discuss what to do next."

"You've already done that, old man," Edmund told him. "You married her. He can't touch her now. Leave the rest to me; I'll take care of it."

Oliver gave a convulsive shrug of his shoulders and got to his feet. He stopped to shake his coat into order, letting the folds at the back settle into position. "You're a good friend, Edmund. I love her, you know. I always will. Who would have thought what a change my life took when I allowed you to persuade me to go to Ranelagh that night?" He grinned. "One thing at a time, eh?"

He went, leaving Edmund a prey to doubts and worries, not the least Oliver's acceptance of his right to ask and his friend's evident relief at being able to unburden himself.

Edmund beckoned to a waiter and ordered a bottle of claret. What had he allowed Ruth to do?

Half way down the bottle he made up his mind. At least he could do one thing properly. He decided to pay a visit to his man of business and start proceedings against his uncle that very day.

Another week went by and there was no change, except Ruth became more accepting of her situation and more frustrated at the same time. She had no idea if Edmund had spoken to Oliver, but she thought not, since the problems with her father became worse and Edmund's problems increased.

Edmund and requested a hearing. He wanted to set up a trust and be allowed to make provision for Lord Urswick, who was no longer capable of managing his own affairs.

Ruth hadn't seen her father since her flight from the house that fateful evening. So many things had happened since then she sometimes felt like a different person. She became used to being addressed as 'my lady' or 'your ladyship' and Oliver continued to treat her like a fiancé, rather than a wife.

Ruth discovered she enjoyed life in London. The pace was frenetic—they rose at noon, shopped, Oliver visited the coffee houses and they met for dinner, sometimes for the first time in the day, but this was unusual. Oliver often came home during the day just to be with Ruth and to make sure she was well and happy. She loved the attention he devoted to her. But if she tried to caress him a little too intimately, if she tried to undo his waistcoat, slip her hand inside his shirt, he usually found some way of deterring her. She didn't know how to continue with him, how to make him respond and love her properly.

He took her to balls, routs, the theatre and the opera. Ruth even began to be recognized. The first time it happened she foolishly looked around her, as though someone else was being addressed. She had to apologize for that and she never did it again. Oliver talked about getting a wedding portrait done of both of them. The only trouble was, she

didn't yet feel like a wife.

The crisis came, as crises do, totally unexpectedly. Ruth and Oliver attended a coming out ball, held for a Cavendish, a relative of the Duke of Devonshire.. Ruth wore blue, a gown heavily embroidered with tendrils of twining flowers, interspersed with tiny bees. A finer chain of sapphires adorned her neck, fashioned into flowers-not a family piece, but a special present from Oliver. He was looking fine in deepest green, a heavy, dull silk. She thought he was the handsomest man in the room.

Oliver led his wife out for the first minuet, then danced with the girl in whose honor the ball was held. A pretty little thing, lively too. Ruth thought she would give Emma Wentwater a run for her money. Certainly, Edmund seemed taken by her, offering to take her into supper later and showing her all the gallantry for which he was famed.

"That could have been me," Oliver murmured to Ruth.

"Do you wish it was?" she asked, equally softly.

"No." He gazed at her. "I want it just the way it is."

Ruth turned to watch the dancers so Oliver couldn't see the sudden tears misting her eyes.

Ruth watched a tall, cadaverous man enter, his gaze sweeping the room like a hawk's. She recognized him at once.

She felt a light touch on her arm. Oliver had noticed too. "We'll brazen it out and I'll take you home. No point making a scene." He paused. "Society has been at great pains to keep us apart. I suspect this hostess has informed your father where he may find us. She wants a scene. We'll disoblige her, shall we?"

She agreed wholeheartedly. They watched while Lord Urswick began to circle the room, his daughter firmly in his sights. Ruth swung around and laid her hand on her husband's arm. The press of people slowed down their progress and Lord Urswick, being on his own, could gain on them. "Where on earth is Edmund?" asked Oliver through gritted teeth.

"He took Miss Cavendish for a breath of air outside," Ruth said calmly.

"Well let's hope someone tells him."

Someone stopped Oliver. "It seems your wife's father is desirous of a word. Perhaps you haven't seen him?" The lady gave a charming smile, glinting with menace.

"My wife does not wish to speak to him," Oliver said briefly and made to move on. It was too late. Lord Urswick was upon them.

Ruth heard a voice she hadn't heard for weeks. "Ruth! A word, if you please!"

Sighing, she turned, Oliver standing close. An expectant hush fell. Ruth could only be glad the quartet continued playing and the dancers continued in their stately movements.

"Good evening, father."

"Good evening daughter. I wish to speak to you privately, then we will go home."

Ruth glanced at Oliver and her clutch on his arm tightened. "I think not," said Oliver tightly. Lord Urswick opened his mouth to reply, the color already beginning to build in his thin cheeks.

"A private word? If you will follow me, sir, I think I can find somewhere." Lady Hartington had, by dint of using her elbows, managed to work her way to the front of the crowd, which by now was almost slaving at the prospect of a public scandal. The older lady glanced up at Lord Urswick's set, stern face and said, "If you would come this way, I can show you to a room where you will not be disturbed. I suspect my husband's cousin of

mischievous in this matter, but I don't see why she should have everything her way." So it hadn't been their hostess, but a relative who had engineered this confrontation.

She led the way out of the ballroom, along a corridor and upstairs to the hostess's boudoir, a pretty room furnished with a light daybed and small chairs. "You may stay here as long as you wish."

"Thank you," Ruth managed.

She thought she saw the light of intelligence about her father, though she couldn't be sure. She was sure of nothing where he was concerned. Once she thought she knew him. Now he was a stranger to her.

Lord Urswick stared pointedly at Oliver. "A private word with my daughter, if you please sir."

Oliver shook his head. "This is as private as you'll get, my lord. Please say what you will."

Lord Urswick stared at him, but there was no budging Oliver. Eventually his lordship sighed. "Very well."

He waved his hand, indicating that Ruth should take a seat. Summoning all the dignity she could muster she spread her skirts and sat on a small sofa. Oliver took a chair by her side after Lord Urswick sat opposite them.

He steeped his hands in front of him in a gesture Ruth knew well. It nearly brought her to tears. That it should come to this! "I am willing to overlook your willful behavior, Ruth, as long as you come home with me tonight."

"No, father, I cannot." She stared straight at him, into the blue eyes so much like her own and so different.

"You prefer to live as this man's doxy? Oh yes, I have heard of your- union and I deny my permission. You will not marry, my girl, Iveleigh. I need you too much."

"I have married, father. Lord Iveleigh is my husband now."

His hands flicked open. "Faugh! How can that be? A girl needs her father's permission. I will select your husband when I find someone worthy of you. So far there has been no one." His voice was steady, reasonable. Only his words didn't make sense.

"I'm over twenty-one, father. I've married Lord Iveleigh and the marriage is a true one." She refused to look at Oliver. If she could keep the conversation steady, she might yet persuade her father. She was the only one who might do so.

Lord Urswick glanced at his son in law, his eyes filled with contempt. "I have investigated this gentleman and his credentials are not sufficient."

"I have married him father."

"You have gone through a ceremony with him, my dear and you have signed a piece of paper. This does not mean you are legally married."

"That's exactly what it does mean, sir." Oliver's voice, soft and deep echoed through the room.

Lord Urswick slowly turned his head to stare at his son in law. Oliver suffered his stare, something he would do from few men. Control, above all things, was required now. It was a measure of how well she knew him already that Ruth was able to spot it.

"You sir, are not capable of having a wife."

Ruth knew Oliver was upset by the way he tensed. "And yet I have one."

"No sir, not from what I've been hearing about you."

"Who have you been talking to?" Oliver's voice was slightly higher, filled with tension. Ruth grew afraid.

"Some gentlemen from your old regiment. They recalled something I don't think you want Ruth to know about."

Subtly Lord Urswick was gaining control of the situation. Ruth could sense it. Without looking away from Oliver, his lordship said, "Leave the room my dear and wait for me in the hall. I will come to you directly."

Her voice shaking, her whole body tensed against attack, Ruth said, "No. I stay here."

Lord Urswick sighed and dropped his forehead into one large hand for a moment. Then he looked up again. "On your own head be it." His voice was still steady, still in control, but Ruth was glad she and Oliver were nearest the door.

Now he spoke to Ruth. "My dear, I will not ask what has happened between this man and you because I know. Nothing." He paused. Ruth took a deep breath and steadied herself. "That's why I'm willing to take you back. I know you are still pure, that you can return to me unsullied."

"What?" Startled, bewildered, Ruth held out her hand, but looked round when Oliver didn't take it. He stared at Lord Urswick, a terrible stillness on his face. His hands gripped the arms of the chair and he didn't seem aware of Ruth's presence.

"You told her?" said his lordship to Oliver.

"No, damn you!" Oliver's voice was less than steady.

Lord Urswick's face slowly transformed. A wicked, humorless smile spread across it, a rictus, a parody of a real smile. His eyes showed nothing. "This fine gentleman, this niminy-piminy excuse for a man is no man." He stared at Oliver, daring him to deny it. Oliver said nothing.

"He got into an argument in the army, didn't you, my fine fellow?" Lord Urswick's voice turned sneering, taunting. Oliver pressed his lips together and Ruth tried to still her face. For once she wished she wore the heavy maquillage again. It would have been easier then to conceal her unease and tension. "Many people think it was a duel, but it didn't quite get to that. Finding him rutting his wife, a gentleman took his saber to your fine husband-gelded him!"

Ruth closed her eyes. She heard Oliver's indrawn breath, but when she opened her eyes she couldn't look at him. It might kill her.

"Invalided out, the scandal covered up-but enough people knew to tell me!" Lord Urswick knew he was in control now. Ruth could tell from the triumphant tone. "So admit you made a mistake, girl and come back to me!"

This jolted Ruth into a reply. "Never! How dare you enquire into my husband's private life like this! How dare you assume you know what happens in the marriage bed?"

She pushed hard on the arm of the sofa and got to her feet.

"You won't get children from this one! Just see how long you can go without that! And you!" Urswick pointed a bony finger at Oliver, who sat white-faced and completely still. "How long do you think you can keep a woman? How long before she turns aside to find the satisfaction you can't give her? Can you live with that? Turning my daughter into a wanton?"

Ruth had never heard such filth, not even in the brothel. "Take me home, Oliver," she said, keeping her voice deliberately low.

Oliver didn't seem to hear. He stared at Lord Urswick, his expression fixed and still. He seemed in a trance, so still was he. "Who told you?"

"The offended party's batman," Lord Urswick's spoke quietly. He no longer

needed to bellow, he was well in control now. "Undeniable, eh?"

"You shouldn't listen to idle chatter." Oliver stood up and faced his lordship. "I deny nothing. Neither do I admit it. If you had allowed me to court your daughter properly, if you had asked me in the course of that, I would have answered you. Instead you terrified her; so much that she risked her life to go to strangers for help. Well, thank God for strangers, I say." He turned to face his wife, his face still white and set. "Will you come home with me, or will you return to him? It must be your choice."

"There is no choice." She moved to his side. "We are married truly." She turned her head to glare at her father. "Were he the most indulgent father on earth, I would do the same."

She took Oliver's arm and they moved towards the door. "Wait!" The harsh voice stopped them. Hoping for a reconciliation, even a concession, Ruth faced her sire. "If you proceed against me, if you allow my nephew—" he spat the word—"to succeed in his claims against me, the whole world will know. I'll make sure of it."

The rictus that he produced couldn't be called a smile.

Ruth and her husband went out; straight to their coach that Lady Hartington had had the perspicacity to order for them.

Chapter Nineteen

They sat on either side of the carriage, not touching, until they reached Brook Street. When the steps were let down, Oliver helped Ruth down and then into the house. Then, while she discarded her hat, cloak and gloves, he left her.

That hurt Ruth as much as anything her father had said, but tonight, before it had time to fester, she must sort this out. She must discover the truth.

She didn't immediately storm her way into his room, but let Chantal undress her and help her into her night rail and robe. When her maid brushed out her hair and began to braid it, she shook her head. "Leave it. I'm not going to bed immediately."

"Would you like some refreshments, my lady? I can have a small collation sent up for you."

By the look on Chantal's face, Ruth knew what she meant. A romantic supper for two. How she wished she could accept! No, this was far too serious. She was so afraid of striking the wrong note, that was why she'd taken the time to prepare for bed. It gave her a breathing space, time for her fury with her father to die down inside her, to be replaced with a vague plan of action.

To have his virility challenged must have been so humiliating for Oliver. The worst thing was, she couldn't entirely refute it. She knew he hadn't been gelded, she'd seen and felt enough on the one occasion at Mother Brown's to be sure of that, but she had no way of knowing if that was an aberration or not. What was it he'd said, as he covered her body with his own? "*You're about to perform a miracle.*" Was that it, why he was so sure he wanted her? Or was it his chivalry after all, the desire to rescue a damsel in distress?

Staring in the mirror, brush in hand, Ruth realized the truth of it. Whatever he was, whatever he could or couldn't do, she loved him. She wanted to be as close to him as he would allow, taking what he could give her. She would never willingly leave him.

Armed with that knowledge she put her brush down and went to the connecting door. Holding her breath she turned the handle and to her relief the door opened.

"Come in, Ruth," she heard him say. His voice sounded tired. She went in.

She'd never been in his bedroom before. While it was obviously a man's room, it wasn't aggressively masculine, but from the books scattered about and the toiletries carelessly laid on the dressing table, it was a well-used and comfortable room. Two chairs stood facing each other either side of the fireplace. Oliver occupied one and he waved a hand to indicate the other. He hadn't undressed, but wore a loose coat over his shirt and breeches, instead of the formal coat and waistcoat he'd had on earlier.

The situation was too formal for Ruth, but she had little choice. Should she have waited for him to come to her? No, he might never have come. Then this would have festered between them and got worse. She knew Oliver well enough by now to know he locked his problems away inside himself. He wouldn't share unless she asked him to. Perhaps not even then.

Ruth sat down and only then noticed the glass he clasped loosely in one hand. It wouldn't be his first brandy. He didn't look at her at first, but remained staring moodily into the fire. Then he looked up and seemed transfixed.

Ruth couldn't work out why he was staring at first. Then she realized. This was the first time in a long time he'd seen her so informally dressed. Her hair hung loose over her shoulders, her face was clear of paint or powder. She plucked at her dressing gown. "I

suppose I shouldn't have come to you like this. I'm sorry."

"No. You look lovely." Then he looked away again, breaking the contact. "It makes it all the more difficult." There was a pause Ruth didn't try to break. "I have to tell you don't I? The one incident in my past I'm truly ashamed of, the most sordid thing I've ever done. I used to think my brother was the black sheep, but I beat him hollow. And paid for it." He gave a mirthless laugh and took another drink. "Ruth, I'm so sorry for everything. When you've heard me out, we'll decide what to do, but I promise I won't hold you to anything."

She stayed silent.

In his eyes she saw a wealth of sadness and regret. "I entered the army at fifteen. I chose what my father offered; the usual choices for a younger son, the army, the church or politics. I loved it and at first I saw a lot of action. I was a major by the time I was twenty." He must have been good to have got so high so quickly. "I served here and abroad and I thought I was set for life." He twirled the almost empty glass in his hand, watching the amber liquid slip around the sides. "There was the camaraderie—I still miss that. And the exhilaration of being in battle and the guilt afterwards when you realized who was missing. You feel strange after a battle Ruth—empty is the nearest I can get to it. Then you want something else, something that meant as much. I got used to it, but it could still find me sometimes. That was when—" he paused, wouldn't look at her and took another drink—"When I went to the brothels. I just used them. I didn't think of the whores as people; they were a convenience." He glanced at her. She concentrated on keeping still, not allowing her aversion to show. He was telling her the truth and she must respect him for that, but she was afraid of what she might hear. Had he caught a disease? Was that it? She discarded her father's statement as lies, but now she knew she was about to hear the truth.

"I never mistreated the whores, always showed them common courtesy, but they didn't seem real to me. My brother used to prefer mistresses, women he could forge a deeper relationship with, so in a way I was worse than he was. At least he saw them as people." He shrugged, looked into the fire, now banked down and glowing dully. "I didn't go often, but it was a normal thing. Even some of the married men went and those with regular women."

"Then peace came. After the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle things died down and there was less excitement. I got bored, but I could see war would return. I still think that. Not everything has been resolved and I'm sure it will come back. But not with me. I was the dashing young major, the man about town and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I had a few affairs. That's what led to my downfall." He got up and poured himself a drink, offering one to Ruth, with a quirk of his eyebrow. Ruth shook her head and he took his glass and sat down again.

"Everyone knew Sergeant Close's wife spread her favors around. Apart from Sergeant Close, that is." He gave a short, bitter laugh. Ruth clasped her hands tightly together in her usual nervous gesture.

Oliver's voice became hard and he stared at his brandy glass. "I should have stuck to the whores. They were more honest. Well, I let her lead me to her quarters and we did what you do on these occasions. I never found out how it happened, but someone told Close. I don't think it was her, because she was looking at me as a future prospect, someone she could move on to after she'd left her husband. Perhaps his batman or the poor devil she'd ousted so she could go after me told him. Anyway, he came home." He stopped and put his hand to his forehead.

How Ruth yearned to smooth the furrows away for him, make him forget! She didn't feel jealousy or distaste any more. How could she when she loved him so? "He was deeply distressed, he loved his wife and to see her—it's only now I can imagine what it felt like." He paused. "He drew his saber and slashed at me."

He looked up then, met Ruth's agonized stare dead on. She wouldn't have looked away if the house had fallen down about them. "If I hadn't moved quickly he would have achieved his aim. As it was, he cut deeply into my leg and then they stopped him." The corner of his mouth twitched. "They took him away and later sent him before a court martial. He was found guilty of assaulting an officer and shot by a firing squad. I tried to stop it. This wasn't anything to do with the army, this was man to man, but I was a major and he was a sergeant and they shot him. The day he was executed I wished he *had* gelded me."

His eyes glimmered with unshed tears. The breath nearly stopped in Ruth's throat at the agony she saw there. She had to hear the end of the story and if she'd stopped him then he might never tell her. A solitary tear made its way down the side of one of his cheeks and then no more. He made no effort to hide it, no effort to sweep it away.

"I was ill for some time. Then I was invalided out and the whole thing was hushed up. Those who knew didn't blame me, but I blamed myself and I always will. I'd love to find out who told Close that evening. I would willingly kill him. Though I must take the blame for the whole sad affair. No one forced me; I went into it with both eyes wide open. Such a fool that I was!"

He flung his head back in a gesture of despair and his mouth twisted in self-disgust. Ruth held herself back with an effort. She wanted to hold him, soothe him. All thoughts of her present predicament were temporarily banished when she realized what he must have gone through. He'd been the victim of a scheming woman. She'd have bet good money that Mrs. Close herself made sure her husband knew, and if Oliver had killed him, she would have claimed him in marriage. It had nearly killed him and he still suffered. She hoped Mrs. Close was in her own personal hell now.

Oliver took several deep breaths before continuing with his narrative. "Charles died and it seemed to most people that I gave up the army to come home and take my place here. I did my best, played the game. It's a hard job sometimes, but the work helped me to cope with everything and Charles's death wiped a lot of things out for a while. It was so unexpected, the shock kept me going, in a way.

"I knew I had a problem. I tried whores again, but it didn't work. I wasn't aroused at all, not by any woman anywhere. Until I saw you."

Then there was a smile, a real one. Small, but there and the warmth reached his eyes. She smiled back. "That first evening I liked you and I felt something I hadn't felt for some time. Then you exploded back into my life like a mortar bomb. I was foxed, otherwise I would never have taken you to that house. The rest you know."

They gazed at each other for what seemed like a long time. Oliver swallowed and then Ruth seemed to find her voice. "We've all done things we regret. Not all of us have been asked to pay for it quite so much."

"What have you ever done?"

She got up, went over to his chair and sat down on the arm of it. "Left it too long before I tackled the problem of my father. I should have contacted Edmund long ago, but I kept hoping it would be all right, even when it was obvious it wasn't. Now he's hurt the man I love."

He looked up at her sharply. "Me?"

"You."

He stretched out his hand and she took it. He concentrated on twining his fingers with hers, watching the way they joined together. "I don't deserve this, Ruth."

"Who does?"

"What do you want to do now?" Before she could speak he went on, "Whatever you decide, I'll agree on, even if you want to go back to your father. But there's no chance of that, is there?"

"No."

"You can go and live at Iveleigh, or stay in London. You can live with or without me. Whatever you want, Ruth. Just say it."

"I want to go to bed."

His fingers stilled; he stared at her, his gaze searching her face for her meaning. "Sleep? Are you tired?"

She shook her head. "No. I want to go to bed with you."

"I might not be able—" he paused, meeting her gaze frankly. "I can promise you nothing."

She leaned forward, touched her lips to his forehead. "I want to go to bed with you. Just to hold and comfort. I'm tired of sleeping alone."

"I don't sleep much. I seem to have lost the knack of it."

She yearned to touch him, to hold him, to bring him some oblivion. He blamed himself for it all, didn't seem to see where others were at fault. She wanted to soothe him, her feelings at the moment more maternal than lover-like. "Come to bed anyway. Come to my bed; you might like it there."

His expression lightened. "I might."

She stood up and he allowed her to pull him to his feet. Watching only her he followed her through the connecting door into her room. Once there, she turned to face him.

He took her face in both hands and kissed her. Kissed her as though it was all he wanted, as though he would never stop, in a way she hadn't felt since their betrothal day. Ruth slipped her hands about his waist and felt him pull her tight against him, surrounding her with his masculinity, his smell, his firm body. While he continued to kiss her she moved her hands in front and undid the fastenings of his coat. She slid her hands inside. Only his shirt separated her hands from his skin. He released her, nothing but desire in his eyes, to slip his coat to the floor and pull his shirt over his head, casting it aside impatiently.

He paused, watching her study him. She let all her love show, nothing hidden any more. She had a strong feeling that the next half hour would make or break them as a couple.

"There are other ways of loving you, if you will allow it," he told her.

Ruth put out a tentative hand to touch his chest, rough dark hairs breaking the smooth muscle. He put his hand over hers and they regarded each other for a long moment before he drew her closer. "There may be more," he murmured, wonder in his voice. "Perhaps love is the answer after all."

He kissed her fingers, each one before he reached for the fastenings on her dressing gown. Watching her face, he undid them and she smiled when she lowered her shoulders and shrugged the garment to the floor.

The nightgown she wore was of fine lawn and hid very little from his intent stare.

She heard his quick intake of breath, and then she undid the buttons at her cuffs, reaching up and pulling open the ribbon at the neck. She waited for his response.

With a soft sigh, he gripped the thin fabric and drew it off her. Blinded by hair falling over her face she stopped to gather it in her hands and draw it behind her shoulders. When she looked back at him she saw a still, tight look in his dark eyes. She was afraid. She was totally vulnerable, totally open to him and this could all be a terrible mistake. Was this it then? Did he not like her any more? Did he doubt his ability to make her happy? All he had to do was love her and hold her. That would be enough, although she couldn't deny she wished for more.

She had misinterpreted his stare. He reached for her and she went willingly to fill his arms. The release of her fear made her relax and soften against him. Now his kiss consumed her. It fired her until all thought left her. There was no gentleness here, only raw, hard desire. She felt his hand move between them, to the buttons on his breeches. She would have helped if she could have stopped her fingers shaking.

He seemed to manage well enough on his own. Breeches, underwear and stockings came off all in one, to be cast aside as carelessly as his other clothes.

At last, naked, they faced each other. He smiled, the warmth reaching in to every part of her. "See what you do to me?" His member was erect, standing strong and proud for her.

This time she looked. "You can't see what you do to me, but I can feel it."

Still smiling, he reached out and touched her furled nipple, achingly erect. "I can see. You're flushed, tight and ready. For me."

"For you," she echoed. He reached out a hand and she put her own in it.

"Ruth, I hurt you before. I was too impatient, too needy. I'm just as needy now. You've gone through so much recently, I don't want to hurt you again, force you into anything you don't want."

"I want this," she whispered, her voice a mere breath in the stillness of the candlelit room.

His expression changed, burning need replacing any trepidation he might have felt. "Oh God, I want you, Ruth! More than I've ever wanted anyone in my life!"

With a sudden, impulsive movement he picked her up and laid her on the bed, following her down. Lying over her, his strength surrounding her, he said, "Tell me you want me."

"Oh yes, yes, I want you Oliver. Only you."

He leaned over her and pushed his knee gently between her legs, easing them apart. He smoothed his hand over her body, one long stroke from breast to thigh and then touched her.

Her convulsive movement made him pause, but she said, "Oh no, don't stop!" in a breathy voice which was all she could muster. She reached up to touch his shoulder, gleaming from a touch of the candlelight in an intimate chiaroscuro. He moved over her, nestling his legs between hers before parting her with his hand and easing himself inside.

The warm jolt that surged through her made her close her eyes and gasp.

"The only reason I'll stop now," he said, his voice a shaky murmur, "is if I hurt you. I want to love you, Ruth, show you what it means to love. I'll do my best to make you happy, my love, my sweet." He said no more but lowered his head to capture her lips as he began to move inside her.

Gently at first, to give her body time to accommodate him and then with more

power she felt him surge inside her, reaching a mystical center no one had touched before. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and she flung her arms around him, pushing up to take him, every part of him. They moved together and although they had never danced in this way before, they knew the moves, knew how to bring pleasure to one another. He filled her, her body, her mouth, entered every part of her and she welcomed him in joyfully. This was what she had been waiting for; this was the heart of it all.

He swallowed her cries, then pulled back to kiss her jaw, her throat. She nipped his shoulder where it lay over her mouth, sighed and managed; "I love you so much! Oh Oliver, Oliver!"

He chuckled, albeit shakily but didn't stop moving and loving her. When she thought it couldn't get much better it did and she lifted her bottom off the bed to push urgently up against him. He held her tightly when she cried out, held her safe while she left herself and entered him, for that all too brief moment of total ecstasy. Murmuring sweet endearments, he brought her back to open her eyes and gaze up at him in wonder.

"Is it always like that?"

"We haven't finished yet."

She stared up at him doubtfully, then reached behind his head to release his hair from its confining ribbon. It flowed around them both and he shook it behind his shoulders in a movement she felt everywhere, caressing her senses with wonder. "Now we're both completely naked."

"Not quite." He lifted her left hand and kissed the ring he'd placed there.

"Mmm," She shifted a little and felt his back muscle ripple where her right hand rested on it.

He lifted a little and looked down, studied their conjoined bodies, then back up to her face, relaxed and happy. "Promise to tell me if you hurt, but not yet-please not yet!" He began to move again. Biting her bottom lip, Ruth refused to think of anything other than this man loving her and her loving him back.

He moved harder, shaking her with every deep, firm stroke. She felt her breasts quiver, wondered how it felt to him. She relaxed beneath him, only tensing to meet his onslaughts, each a new revelation, increasing the seed of warmth he planted within her, so it grew to consume her utterly. This time she tried to keep her eyes open, to watch him. She saw passion, searing through him as she felt it pulse through her. It darkened his already dark eyes, made his lids half close over them, but he watched her and bent his head to kiss her throat. She felt his breath heat her skin then lifted his head again, watching each other, taking and giving at the same time.

She closed her eyes, pressed close to him and cried out from the depth of her throat, from somewhere deep inside. She heard his answering shout as he found his release, held her so tight she couldn't breathe and then collapsed on top of her.

They lay together, their panting and the occasional pop from the coals on the fire the only sounds in the room. His arms around her he rolled to one side, taking her with him to lie close.

When she opened her eyes and looked at him, she thought she'd never seen him so tender, so dear. He was watching her, his mouth softened by a half smile, his eyes gentle. "My love," he whispered, almost no sound at all, but she heard him, deep inside where she still thrummed from his attentions.

"Oh Oliver!" She buried her face in his shoulder and shed a few tears.

"No, no!" he murmured, concerned until she lifted her head and smiled at him,

softening his worried look.

"It's almost too much. I thought—after what you said we would have to take it easy, perhaps hold each other, discover each other first. I didn't expect—" she broke off, unable to explain any more.

"So did I. But when I saw you, so lovely, so trusting, infinitely desirable, everything left me except the desire to make you happy. When you said that you love me, it made me believe anything was possible."

"Will I become pregnant now?"

He laughed softly. "Maybe. We might have to make love a few more times, just to be sure."

"Do we ever have to stop?"

"To eat perhaps. If you're going to work me this hard, I'll have to keep my strength up."

It was her turn to laugh. "I'm glad I didn't know about this before. I don't think I would have been quite so patient."

He leaned forward and kissed her. "And you were, without knowing why."

"Why did you leave it so long?"

His smile disappeared. "Because I was afraid. Sweetheart, I'm deeply in love with you and I couldn't have borne it if I'd disappointed you, if I couldn't love you properly. Foolish pride, maybe, but I didn't know if I could stand it if you turned away from me."

"Oh, Oliver! I thought you didn't like me, that you married me from chivalry! I know you told me you loved me, but I thought perhaps you didn't mean it. I wasn't quite sure."

"Are you sure now?" He watched closely for her answer.

She nodded.

"Good. Because I couldn't be more certain. And I'm sorry to have brought you even a second's unhappiness."

"It doesn't matter, not now." She leaned forward and kissed him. He caught her close and made it deeper than she'd intended.

She loved the feel of him against her, the touch of smooth muscle and the crisp body hair, now damp from exertion. His hands held her close. He caressed her back. "The world," he murmured his lips against hers, "can go hang. I don't want any more than this."

"Neither do I."

He pressed her head on to his shoulder and she relaxed, feeling totally happy. His hands and his soft words soothed her to sleep. He wasn't long in joining her.

Ruth woke suddenly. When she moved she found she was alone in the bed, but it was still dark, the dull glow from the fire her only light. Perhaps he'd returned to his own bed. Perhaps she'd dreamed it all.

No, she was naked and there was a strange feeling between her legs. Not hurt exactly, although perhaps a little tender. She was sorry he'd left, but perhaps he preferred to sleep in his own bed. If she weren't so drowsy, she'd be tempted to join him there.

Then she heard a dull thump and a soft curse. She moved, rustling the sheets. "Ruth?" she heard. "Oh I'm sorry, my love, I didn't mean to disturb you. I had a call of nature." He moved closer. "I'm not as familiar as I thought with the geography of this room."

Ruth felt the bed beside her sink when he got back in. She moved over to join him, slipping an arm around him, going to him as though she belonged there. "Who had this room before?"

"Cecile, Charles's wife," he said, but then corrected himself. "But not for long. She moved to a larger room downstairs. My mother used it, but that was a very long time ago. Cecile must have decorated it. It's yours now. If you want to keep it, that is."

"So long as you're next door," she said.

He caressed her shoulders. "I don't know if I ever want to sleep alone again. I've not slept so deeply for a long time." He lay on his back and drew her close to him. "Would you object if I stayed here most nights?"

"What do you think? You were gone a few minutes and I woke. Now you're back and I feel happy again."

His laughter warmed her. "You should try to keep me at a distance, love. Keep me guessing, keep me courting you."

"Why?"

He paused and chuckled again. "Damned if I know. You don't have to try. I'll be here as long as you want me."

He moved her hand across his chest, loving the bigness of him. His response was to stretch his arm around her, holding her close. She felt herself drifting, safe. She slept.

When she woke up, they were in exactly the same position they had settled in when they fell asleep. It was light now, filtering through the gaps in the shutters and Ruth could see him properly. When she opened her eyes, his hand moved over her skin and by that she knew he was awake. She looked up and smiled. He bent his head and gently kissed her. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Good morning. How are you?"

"Better than I've been for years," he assured her. When he spoke, she felt the sound vibrate in his chest. Most intriguing. "Something left me in the night. I don't know what it was, but I'm better off without it. Resentment, perhaps."

"Resentment?"

He looked down and smoothed a dark tress away from her face. "Against the world, which was so cruel to me. What a fool I was! When all I had to do was to reach for you."

"Have I cured you then?" she asked, mischief in her voice and lighting her eyes.

That made him laugh. "Completely. I have to keep you close, do you see, as a talisman. Without you I might sink back under the waves again and let myself drown."

"Then I can never leave?"

"Never."

She rolled over on top of him resting her weight on her elbows either side of his chest. "Just as well I don't want to leave."

He reached for her hair, smoothed it and played with the long waves. "I hope I can keep you wanting to stay."

She lifted herself up to kiss him and heard him gasp. "What is it? What's wrong?" she touched him anxiously, lifted herself off him to see where she'd hurt him.

His agitation seemed a little worse, if anything. His eyes darkened, his breath came quicker. "It's a very long time since I've woken up to find something this good in my bed. If ever."

She flushed, but smiled as well. She'd felt so comfortable she'd forgotten her scandalous state of undress. Caught by his expression Ruth saw the power she had over him. This was something new to her and entirely fascinating. She sat up, draped lightly with the bedclothes. Intrigued, she watched his erection grow; his visible need of her. She looked back at his face and smiled.

"Oh Ruth," he whispered.

He would have brought her back down to him but she stayed sitting up, her smile turning wicked. "Can we do it like this?"

He regarded her, a smile on his own lips when he understood what she meant. "I'm your slave. We can do whatever you want, whenever you want."

"I'm an ignorant mistress," she confessed. "I don't know what to do."

"Then command me to obey you."

He lay back, smiling, totally at ease, waiting for her. He tucked his hands behind his head, gathering his hair out of the way. He seemed unashamed of his readiness for her and she studied it, dared to touch it.

The skin was soft, belied by the rigidity underneath. When she glanced back at his face she saw his eyes half closed, the smile gone. She looked back down. Before last night, she had no idea her body could welcome something so alien, but something inside her was made for this, a custom made setting for a hard, bright jewel.

Its color darkened and a small drop of moisture seeped through the eye at the tip.

With an impulsive gesture, she bent her head and touched her tongue to him, tasting him. Ignoring his weak, "Oh!" she dared to deepen it. She turned the caress into a deep, tasting kiss, wrapping her hand around the base to hold him. Her lips left him and she dared to look up, hoping she hadn't gone too far.

Their eyes met and he reached down to grasp her under her armpits, draw her upright once more. "That was wonderful. Any more and you'll unman me. Let me show you what comes next."

She lifted up and watched him put his hand down to cover hers and guide him. He urged her on to him until she was poised over him. Then he watched her face and she looked back at him while he entered her.

His hand moved to grasp her waist. She felt trapped, but in a honey trap she had no desire to escape. He supported her and pressed her down until he was completely inside her. "See?" All you had to do was tell me what you wanted."

She was past banter, trying to experience the feeling of him inside her, trying to remember it. "This feels so good." Awe and love mingling in her gaze.

"It will feel better," he promised and using his hands, lifted her off him and then pushed her back down again. It did feel better. Much, much better.

He gave her no quarter and she asked for none. When she got the rhythm, she continued on her own, leaning back a little to keep her balance. Reaching behind, she leaned her hands on his thighs, feeling his muscles flex to support her. She felt something on his skin, a crease as though the sheet had caught between them, but thought no more of it for the time being. There was something else on her mind.

He invaded her completely, not just that part of her which was made for him. He caressed her, his hands steadying her and stimulating her at the same time. Waves of warmth engulfed her, forcing her to cry out and then he moved.

With one heave, he sat up and clasped her in his arms, setting his mouth to her breast, where his hands had been so short a time before. He delved inside her, rocked her,

sucked her nipple and set up a thrilling connection she'd hadn't been aware of before. It made her arch her back, but he followed her and increased the almost unbearable thrill coursing through her body. She watched him, eyes half closed, enjoying her and reached a hand up to touch his hair, winding her fingers though its gleaming depths.

A wild force rushed through her, through every pore, every bone, every muscle and for an instant time froze while she called to him, though she didn't know what words she used.

He pulled away and watched her, watching her face flushed with love, his love. She couldn't hide it, she didn't try to. Blue gaze met brown, both softened, both loving, both amazed by the intensity of it.

Ruth watched his face stiffen in its expression and knew what was about to happen. He cried her name, pulled her hard down on to him and warmth flooded her.

They stayed like that for uncountable minutes; recovering and enjoying the moment, savoring it until he slowly sank back, taking her with him.

Ruth kissed his neck and rolled off him. Then she felt something, a hard ridge of skin under her thigh, and sat up again to see what it was.

"Dear Lord." Glancing at his face, still and quiet, she moved his now sleeping member aside and looked at what lay beneath and to one side of it. "It was a near thing, wasn't it?"

"Damned near." He kept his face still, schooled to show no emotion.

"No wonder you were concerned. Did it hurt?"

The scar was long, the edges hard and ridged, traveling across the top of his leg from below the hip to just under the scrotum. "It was probably the first time Close missed what he aimed for," he said. "He was a good swordsman."

"What happened to his wife?"

"Soldiers usually have some prize money salted away. She would have got that." He frowned slightly. "She might be a camp whore by now."

"Oliver! That's a bit hard!"

"Forgive me, my sweet, if I don't feel very charitable towards her."

She touched the scar, but he moved to take her hand and move it gently away. "It feels odd," he explained. "Not tender, just nothing. I don't like it touched."

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. And if it pleases you to touch it, touch it as much as you like."

"Even though you don't like it?"

"A small sacrifice."

She studied it once more. "It must have been very deep."

"It was. I nearly died. It bled like a fountain, but there were enough sawbones around to see it stopped. I was lucky I didn't take an infection, but it healed cleanly." He paused. "It made no difference to poor Close."

"How can you feel sorry for him when you feel nothing for his wife, who seduced you and probably betrayed you?"

He studied her for a moment, his gaze traveling slowly over her creamy curves. "I can understand why he did it. He loved her and he didn't know what she was doing." He caressed the curve of her waist. "If you did something like that, I would forgive you."

"If I took lovers?"

His gaze turned bleak, just for a moment. "Even then. I can't help myself, you see.

I have to have you, to be near you."

Reaching out, he pulled her down so she lay with him, her soft body nestled against his. "Don't take that for permission. I might beat you before I forgave you."

"I might like it."

This was so startling; he stared at her for a moment. "I hope not, but I'll try to accommodate you."

She chuckled, moving closer. "No, I can't think why people like it. I didn't know such places existed before I went to Covent Garden."

He relaxed again and smoothed her back, feeling the texture of her skin. "You learned more than was comfortable there."

"I read a book," she said. "One of the girls lent it to me."

"Really?" He turned his head to see her wicked grin. "Then you'll have to give me lessons sometime, love."

Chapter Twenty

They didn't get up that day. When Ruth suggested it, Oliver commanded her to stay and then put on his dressing gown to go and instruct his valet. Food was brought to them and they ate at a small table set up in his room, before climbing back into bed.

Ruth couldn't get enough of him and Oliver felt the same about her. They talked, all barriers down, nothing hidden and learned about their early lives, their hopes and fears. They made love, or just caressed, touching, learning what they should have learned weeks ago. In his arms, Ruth felt entirely safe and entirely wanted. It was all she had dreamed and despaired of in her blackest times. She felt safe at harbor.

Edmund called and when told the earl and countess were indisposed left a note. "All quiet. Will tell you if anything transpires. I'm very glad for you both." Other callers were sent away. Invitations arrived, piled on the desk in the bookroom to wait for their attention, stiff little gilt-edged cards, holding the magic keys to open the doors of society. They didn't care.

On the third day, Ruth woke up and stretched, only to be clasped in strong arms. "We should get up today," she said.

"Why?"

"People will talk."

He kissed her forehead. "They'll come to the right conclusion, then. It can only be to our advantage, sweetheart."

"Why?"

He put a finger under her chin, turned her face up to him. "Remember what your father accused me of? Well, the more speculation there is, the more he will be laughed at."

Ruth's face creased in concern. "I don't like to think of my father being laughed at."

He kissed her mouth softly, trying to smooth the lines of worry away. "Hopefully he'll agree to return home. Then he'll be safe and cared for."

"How can you be sure?"

"Edmund and I will make sure of it. He won't suffer. If his mind is disturbed and I really think it is, then he will be better off in the country, where he can be peaceful and quiet."

"Father, quiet?" She laughed. "But I see what you mean. Thank you, Oliver."

"Shall we go home?" he asked suddenly.

"Home? You mean to Hampstead?"

He smiled. "No, to Iveleigh Castle. Let me show you where you belong, place you in your setting."

"Oh Oliver, you make me sound like a jewel!"

He reached out and touched her. She welcomed his touch by snuggling a little closer. "Perhaps not," he conceded. "You're too luscious for a jewel." She kissed his neck while he caressed her. "If we give the instructions today, we'll be able to leave the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, I'd like that. Won't people think it strange us leaving in the middle of the season?"

"I don't care. I want you to myself. And until this business with your father is arranged, I think it might be more comfortable for us both to be out of town. However discreet we are, news of his indisposition has to come out and there will be gossip."

"Oh, Oliver!"

He kissed her again, soothing and gentle. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. It won't last long and it won't do anything to us in the long run. The best we can do is help him to retire quietly to the country after a hearing and then let gossip die down."

She couldn't let go of her anxiety. "Shouldn't we stay to support Edmund?"

"We'll only be in Hertfordshire, love. We can come back if he needs us. I want you away from the worst of it and I think Edmund will agree with that."

He was ruthlessly cherishing her. Since she couldn't help her father any more and the thought of having Oliver to herself was too potent a lure to deny, she gave in.

The arrangements were easily made; they would leave in two days. That gave Ruth time to do a little shopping and visit her father's man of business with Edmund. She wanted to make sure everything was done for Lord Urswick's comfort and Edmund wished her to make a signed statement about his state of mind. Edmund assured her that was all they needed from her. "Once I have him safe, I promise no harm will come to him. He might not be aware he's being looked after, even."

"Oh, I hope not!" Her eyes widened with anxiety. "Do you think that's possible?"

"Well, I intend to give him several burly footmen, who will prevent him doing anything foolish," Edmund said. "All his correspondence will come to me first. I intend to deal with it personally. He won't know it comes to me first."

"Oh Edmund, thank you!" She took his hand.

He dropped it with an embarrassed laugh. They stood, outside the grimy offices of Smith, Smith and Smith in the City, the narrow street busy. The carriage was coming for them, but Ruth hadn't wanted to stay in the poky offices. She said she felt suffocated. In fact, she'd felt the need to get out, away from the place that made her feel even more a traitor to her father than ever.

"People will talk, Ruth."

"They already are talking."

He sighed. "True. They won't talk much longer. I'm glad Iveleigh's taking you away. You're best out of London at this time." His gaze held a little more warmth. "I can see he's making you happy."

"Oh yes!"

They were destined to be the last words Ruth spoke to her cousin that day, for around the corner came a coach. Not the town carriage they were expecting, but a traveling coach, the boot full of cases and trunks. It swept around the corner at a fair pace, the four horses pulling it threatening to sweep away the beggars and hawkers in its path. The street people were cannier than that and moved quickly out of its path, turning the air blue with their curses.

The coach came to a halt by a bemused Edmund and Ruth. Edmund tried to draw her back, away from the commotion, perhaps back to the offices, but before he could, two large men leapt down from the vehicle and seized her.

"Edmund!" A large hand clamped over her mouth and choked off her frightened appeal. She fought for breath, to be free of the ungente hands holding her, but she was swept off her feet.

She heard Edmund shouting behind her, calling for help and then he suddenly fell silent. What had they done to him? She could see nothing when something heavy and black was thrown over her and she was lifted into the vehicle. Although she fought, it was

no use. Then the hood was lifted from her.

She saw no one she knew. Two large men stared at her where she lay on the floor. She opened her mouth to scream, but hands came from behind and something was pressed to her throat.

Despite her struggles to stay awake, the skilful pressure on her neck won the day and she fainted.

Edmund woke stretched out on a hard bench in the office of Smith, Smith and Smith. The youngest Smith leaned over him, waving something pungent under his nose.

Recalled immediately to a sense of his predicament, Edmund pushed the burnt feathers aside and sat up. "Get my coach," he managed and promptly vomited.

He allowed himself no time at all to recover. Thrusting a handful of coins into a clerk's hand, "for the damage" he hurried outside and into the carriage. After giving his instructions to drive straight to Brook Street, he leaned back and felt his head gingerly. His wig had been lost in the struggle, but he still had his hat. And a large lump on the back of his head.

It seemed an age before he reached the house and then of course, Oliver wasn't at home. Instead of setting forth himself, he sent a footman to find his friend and ordered a brandy and a bowl of cold water.

Oliver found him like that half an hour later, a glass in one hand and a cold cloth in the other. "Good God, Oliver, what have you been doing?" His smile, at first vaguely amused, turned cold. "And where's Ruth?"

"Gone," Edmund managed. He took a gulp of brandy. "Taken. Outside the lawyer's office." Oliver sat down heavily. "She wanted a breath of air, so I took her outside. They must have been waiting. I'd say it was a professional job. They hit me, knocked me out and took her."

"Footpads?"

"They were in a coach," Edmund said grimly. "They threw her inside and drove off. There's only one person capable of doing this."

"Urswick!" Oliver stood up, went to the door. Glancing back, he said. "You stay here. I'll go and find out if she's been taken to his house."

"Take someone with you," Edmund said. "He won't let her go easily and he's employed a choice selection of bullies from what I saw."

Oliver nodded curtly and left the room.

Calling to his footmen he bade them all follow. The butler stared at him strangely, but Oliver said, "I'm not at home. I'll tell you more when I return."

It was quicker to walk. Followed by four footmen, Oliver strode quickly to Urswick's, not acknowledging anyone, face grim and set.

The house was shuttered and the knocker gone from the door, but Oliver rapped on it with the hilt of his sword. He stood back and a very surprised manservant opened the door. Not the same one as before. Without waiting to explain, Oliver forced his way inside. His servants followed him. "Where is she?"

"I-I'm sorry, my lord where is who?"

"My wife. Your master's daughter." Without consciously doing it, Oliver had reverted to army major mode. He snapped out the words, expecting an answer.

The manservant had never been in the army and quavered a vague reply. Oliver gestured to his men. "Search the house." It had the sound and feel of an empty residence

and he held out little hope.

The manservant bit his lip, seemingly deep in thought. Oliver reached into his pocket and instead of the pistol resting there, he drew out a handful of coins. "Ten guineas if you tell me where she is."

The man put his hand to his chin, thinking deeply. "It might mean my position, my lord."

"It'll mean your life if you don't," growled Oliver. "For if anything happens to her, I'll kill anyone who stopped me before I got to her."

His target visibly quailed. "Well if you put it like that..." They were interrupted by one of the men coming back down the stairs. "They're gone. Everything's shipshape, nothing to say where they went."

Oliver's attention snapped back to the man quailing before him. "The guineas or the pistol? Your choice."

It didn't take him long. "His lordship has a small house just outside Bath. He's gone there. Said the waters would do him good."

"And he took Ruth?"

"He said he would like his daughter to attend him, but I don't know if he—"

"Enough!" Flinging the money down on the small table, Oliver whirled around and left the house.

His men had a hard time keeping up with him. He reached his own house in record time.

Snapping out orders as he passed through the hall, Oliver hurried upstairs to Edmund. He'd recovered somewhat from the blow, but still looked a little white. "He's taken her to Bath," Oliver said. "You know the house?"

"Yes."

"Give me the directions. I'm leaving within the hour."

Edmund didn't bother to argue. "I'm coming too. We can stop at my lodgings for some togs. I'll take you there."

Oliver stared at him doubtfully. "Are you sure? Wouldn't you be better here, pursuing the case against the old man?"

Oliver shook his head. "That will run its course. I've done all I can there and Ruth gave her evidence today. Oh God, Oliver I'm so sorry about this! I should have taken better care of her!"

"Don't be a fool, Edmund, who could have foreseen this? Who would have thought the old man would do something as insane as this? Dear Lord if anything proves his madness, this does! What is he thinking of? How can he possibly expect to get away with it? Oh God, Ruth! Will he hurt her? I'll kill him if he does!" From anyone else that might have been hyperbole, but not from Oliver.

"If I'd known he had anything like this in mind, I would have locked him up myself!" Edmund said. "I don't think he'll hurt her, if she behaves with circumspection."

"What do you mean?"

"He wants her back, he wants her to deny you and go back to him. If she has the sense to dissimulate, she might be able to get away."

Oliver closed his eyes and brought his fist softly against the mantelpiece. "I might kill him anyway."

A sharp determined rapping at the door made them both look up. At Oliver's cry of "Come!" the door opened and someone came in.

Oliver stared at the newcomer for a minute before he recognized who it was. "Mrs. Brown's house?"

"Aye, my lord. Vic I'm known as."

Bemused, Oliver asked, "What do you want here?"

"I heard about Millie-er — her ladyship."

Oliver's look became decidedly more sharp. "How did you find out?"

"My brother my lord. He works in the City. He heard rumors and told me. I came round to warn you, but it's too late. I want to make it right. Mrs. Brown says I'm not to go back until I've made it right."

"Good Lord!" Oliver said, shaken. "Who else knows?"

"Nobody, my lord. If I'd been a bit quicker, she wouldn't have been taken." Both gentlemen waited for him to explain. "Mrs. Brown has spies and somebody came and told her not half an hour ago. She says her father is mad and might hurt 'er and so I says, shall I go and help and she says yes and 'ere I am."

He stopped abruptly, staring at Oliver. "Nobody else knows. Mrs. Brown'll say I'm ill or something. I'm to help you all I can."

Edmund grinned. "I always said there was honor amongst thieves!"

"No sir, but I don't want that young lady 'urt, especially by that madman. 'E near destroyed that 'ouse, all out of spite."

Oliver was in no mood to argue. "We'll be glad of your help. We think he's taken her to Bath. Do you know any different?"

Vic shook his head. "Sounds about right, m'lord."

"And she's my lady now. I married her. That makes her the Countess of Iveleigh."

Vic grinned. "Yes my lord."

Soon after that, a more respectful knock told them their transport was ready. The repacking had taken very little time. Oliver had ordered a few of his and his wife's clothes transferred to the smallest, fastest chaise he possessed. Edmund's bags were slung in the boot and they got on their way without further delay, the mighty Vic clinging to the back in lieu of a liveried footman.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ruth groaned and put her hand to her head, keeping her eyes shut. The pain blocked out anything but the most immediate concerns; the effort not to be sick with the ache throbbing through her temples. Eventually her thirst made her force her eyes open to look for some water.

At first, she thought she was dreaming. When she reached automatically for the pitcher of water she usually kept on her bedside table, there it was. She sat up and groaned again, but managed a drink.

She couldn't do anything else for some time, perhaps half an hour, while she drank almost all the contents of the pitcher and tried to recall what had happened to her and how she'd got here.

At first, her thoughts were a jumble of disconnected memories, pictures that had no meaning. She sat up in bed, sipping the water now the worst of her thirst was assuaged, waiting for the pain to die down a little.

Everything was where it should be, everything where she had left it. The confused thoughts in her mind had no connection with what she saw.

She was at home, in her room at the Priory, dressed in one of her heavy nightgowns. She couldn't remember how she'd got here, or what had happened. There were some confused dreams, vague memories of male voices, strange rooms. Had she been ill, or—with a jolt she sat up, the pain clearing a path to her memory.

Oliver! Where was he?

Feeling the need for the necessary she got out of bed and was forced to hold on to the bedpost. The familiar feel of the smooth, bulbous oak helped to steady her. She stood barefoot on the bare floor for a while until she thought she could move on her own, then went to use the necessary in the next room, her dressing room.

The door was locked. Hardly able to believe it, Ruth went to the other door, the one to the corridor and tried that. It was locked, too. What was going on? Why was she locked in?

By now desperate, Ruth found the pot under the bed and used that. She was only thankful there was some water in the basin on the washstand, albeit nearly cold.

Looking around the room for some clothes, Ruth found nothing. Not even a petticoat. A large chest stood under the window, but there was nothing in that. She frowned. It usually contained papers, her journal, letters, but also some underwear, the overflow from an inadequate chest of drawers in her dressing room. Now that was gone.

She could hardly wander around the Yorkshire countryside in her nightgown. With a groan she gave in to the pain and went back to bed. She must get rid of this headache. Then she would be able to think properly, work out what had happened to her.

When she woke up it was still daylight, but the sun had moved across to an afternoon position, shining through her window. No one had been in, or if they had, they hadn't replenished the water. She sighed. At least the pain in her head had dulled to a low ache.

Try as she might she couldn't remember how she'd got here. The last thing she remembered with any clarity was waking up with Oliver. Her husband.

She liked the thought of that. Where was he? Would he come soon?

The sound of a key grating in a lock woke her to reality and she sat up, tense.

A woman she'd never seen before, bearing a tray which held the appetizing aroma of fresh bread and cooked meat came into her bedroom, and was careful to lock the door behind her. Ruth stared at her, bewildered. "Who are you?"

The woman didn't look surprised. "Jessop, ma'am." Ruth blinked. When had she been demoted back to 'ma'am'? She'd only just got used to being 'my lady.'

"What am I doing here?"

"You must take it slowly, ma'am. You've been ill and your father had to bring you home to recover. What do you remember?"

She ignored the question. "How, ill? And where's my husband?"

An expression, which looked like exasperation, crossed the older woman's face. "You have no husband, ma'am. You are Miss Ruth Urswick and you were taken ill in London."

Panic began to grow inside Ruth. She fought it down. "Ill?"

"Your father was unable to help you so he brought you home for your own safety. We will look after you."

Ruth flung out of bed and raced to the door. "Let me out! I want to go home!" Wherever Oliver was, that was her home now. She would go back to him if she had to walk. "You have no right to keep me here! Let me out!"

She rapped on the door, shouting, hoping someone would hear. Her hands balled into fists, she hammered at the sturdy, unyielding wood, hammering and hammering. Tears pouring down her face she turned back to Jessop. "Please let me out, let me go! I don't want to be here, I don't want to stay!"

She sank to the floor, frightened and sobbing. Jessop had put down the tray and stared at Ruth, until all the fight left her. Then she put her hand on Ruth's shoulder. "Let's get you back to bed."

There was nothing Ruth could do. She allowed Jessop to lead her back to bed and tuck the sheets firmly about her. Then the woman wet a cloth in the basin and washed Ruth's face, as though she was a child. "Now, ma'am, don't take on so. You nearly died and we can't have that, can we? You sit there and I'll feed you, then you might remember what happened."

Thoroughly confused, Ruth allowed the woman to wait on her. She ate the beef broth and some of the bread and drank a dish of tea, all in silence, trying to think. There was a gap in her memory, except for vague, distorted images. Perhaps she had been ill after all.

"What happened?"

Jessop's thin face relaxed momentarily into a mirthless smile. "You caught a fever in London, the day after you arrived. Your father thinks it might have been at the assembly you went to, at Ranelagh, he said. Then you started to rave, all sorts of nonsense, so he abandoned his business and brought you home."

"I don't remember," Ruth whispered, thoroughly confused now.

"No, dear. Don't worry, just give it some time. You'll remember one day."

"I remember now!" Ruth cried. "I married!"

"No, you didn't marry. Your father said you kept babbling about that in the worst of the fever."

"Can I see him?"

"All in good time."

"My husband? He's here?"

Jessop gave a long-suffering sigh and put her hand gently over Ruth's. It felt like hard, cold iron. "You have no husband. I was speaking of your father."

With an effort Ruth kept quiet and listened to the nurse. "I've told your father you need your rest, which is true. I hope now the fever has gone you will recover some of your memory and good sense. I am told you spent many years caring for your father in this house; it is my opinion and the opinion of Dr. Lamming that your mind was overset by the nature of London society. Too much at once."

Ruth listened in horror, trying with all her might to keep her expression steady, show nothing of what she felt. "Can London do that?"

"It has been known. It might be best if you never return," said the woman.

Oh God. What was she to do?

Left on her own, Ruth drew her knees up to her chest and tried to think, to remember. Was she really going mad? Did Oliver not exist? She dismissed that. Although the story sounded plausible, there was one thing she did remember.

She knew nothing about making love before and now she did. It convinced her as nothing else could have done. Most of the other things could have been illusion, but not that. Not the joy of loving her husband, the horror of examining the scar on his thigh, the feel of his body above hers, below hers, the words he spoke in the height of passion. No, she couldn't have imagined that.

It must be her father, her poor, mad father. If it was true, if Edmund was bringing a case against him, all she had to do was wait. She didn't know how long and at that thought and the happiness she had known too briefly, she laid her head on her knees and wept. Sleep overtook her.

Ruth awoke and it was light again. She knew before she moved someone else was in the room. She blinked, allowed herself to become completely awake, before she moved. She wanted all her wits about her.

She turned over and sat up. Jessop was there and so was her father. Ruth held her breath and made a conscious effort to control her panic. They were sitting in hard chairs facing the bed, where they could see her as soon as she awoke. Ruth folded her hands neatly in front of her; the dutiful daughter. "Father." Her heart went out to him when she saw how unkempt he looked. Slightly grubby, clothes creased from too much wear. Where was his valet?

"I'm glad to see you awake at last, daughter. How are you feeling?"

She stared at him. Had he always been this old, the lines between nose and mouth graven so deeply? He'd taken to wearing a grey bob wig instead of the more fashionable white queue. That didn't help him look any younger.

"I still have a headache."

He turned to Jessop. "Perhaps more physic?"

"I'll see to it, my lord." Jessop got up and left the room.

Ruth was taken by a sudden realization. Was she so groggy because of that? They were giving her something. Her mind seized that fact and held on to it.

"In time, we have hopes you will recover completely," said Lord Urswick. Heavens, she was alone with a madman! She must do everything she could not to provoke him. Or perhaps-no, she wouldn't think it! He looked completely at ease and calmer than she'd

seen him for a long time. "You were taken with a kind of fever, raving all kinds of nonsense."

"Where is Lord Iveleigh?"

Lord Urswick heaved a heavy sigh. "That gentleman you met at Ranelagh? I haven't the faintest idea."

Ruth had an idea. Her memories were returning to her. Just not how she'd got here. What she needed to know was what she was expected to remember, what her father's version was. "What happened, father? Will you tell me what happened?"

A trace of a smile touched her father's melancholy features. "Well, we went to London and we went to Ranelagh. That much is true. There, you seem immensely taken by this young man, this friend of your cousin Edmund's and you wouldn't leave him alone. So much that I had to take you home. Then you became ill. You fell into a fever, raved about this man you had only met once. I had to leave the business to Smith and bring you home."

She gripped the sheet between her hands, began to twist it. "You mean Oliver? Where is he, father? What have you done to him?"

Her father laughed shakily. "Nothing, dear. He was embarrassed by your attentions; I had to explain to him that this was most unlike you and you would be better in a while. He sent his best wishes for your recovery and left."

"He came to the house?"

"The house in London, yes." He was still calm. "I wouldn't have liked you seeing him further, Ruth. His reputation is not good."

That was a lie. Oliver was well respected, had been the target of many matchmaking mamas! Ruth bit her lip to stop herself retorting.

"I think it was merely the bustle of London and your illness which overset you," her father continued. "I didn't want to take any chances. I don't think we'll be going back. At least you won't and I'll keep my visits short."

"Am I to stay here then?"

"Yes my dear, I think that would be best."

"Until I die?"

His mouth pursed in shock. "Really Ruth! What a thing to say!"

To her horror Ruth saw his face become suffused with color. His eyes narrowed. "I begin to think I should have left you to rot in London! I am appalled by your ingratitude! I think I must put it down to your illness and hope you will recover."

With a convulsive movement he stood and Ruth quailed. But he didn't come any closer to where she cowered in the bed and instead left the room, almost colliding with Jessop who was returning with a large bottle full of thick, brown liquid.

She made no comment on her employer's temper, instead coming over to the bed and looking at Ruth coldly. "He has been very thoughtful of you. You should be thankful."

Repressing an urge to say, 'Yes miss,' Ruth said instead, "What is that?"

"Something to keep you calm and quiet. It will help you recover."

Ruth had no option but to take the stuff. From the taste she knew whatever else it contained, there was an opiate in the mixture. The sweet, sickly taste and the color indicated poppy was one of the main ingredients. She must find a way to stop taking it. She must not take any more.

The now familiar dizzy drowsiness crept over her. She slept.

The medicine left Ruth lethargic and docile. She was fed, dosed and talked to. The same things over and over again. She'd been ill, close to madness. She was here for her own good. Then dosed again. How to stop them doing it? She couldn't think straight, couldn't work out a plan. Her first ambition was to stop taking the medicine.

About three days after she first woke, as near as she could work out, she made her first attempt. "Could I stop taking this?"

"No, not yet, Miss Urswick. It's good for you."

The second time she was more careful. "I don't like the taste. Can I have it diluted in something?"

Jessop considered and obviously considered the request reasonable. She left the room, taking the bottle with her and returned with a tumbler full of cordial mixed with the stuff. Ruth drank it and thanked her. "Can I have it like that from now on? It tastes much better." It didn't, the vile flavor permeated everything, but she felt she'd gained a small victory.

She still slept and often woke with a headache. As day followed day the routine became almost normal.

Ruth knew she couldn't afford to rush things, though her impatience and longing to be away from here might drive her mad in truth. She started her campaign. When given her medicine, she sipped at it and then asked, casually, "What is the date?"

"June the second, ma'am," came the calm reply. Heavens! A fortnight since she'd last been in London! Ruth groped frantically in her mind to try to account for the time. Had they kept her asleep for a week? Where was Oliver? Oh God, what if it was all true!

It was the first crack in her defense, but she managed to spill a little of the medicine on her mattress without the woman seeing.

She still slept, but now she could keep track of the days.

They hadn't locked her window. The bedroom was too high for Ruth to jump or climb down. There was nothing for her to hold. She asked for it to be opened and the sash was lifted. Now she had somewhere else to throw the cordial. She had to drink some, but she managed to secrete most of it in the chamber pot, which she left sticking a little way out from the bed. Then, when she was sure there was nobody about, she threw the contents out of window. It was hard fighting the sleepiness, but she managed to discard the stuff before sleep claimed her. She went three days like that.

On the next day she asked, "When can I stop taking this?"

Jessop smiled. Ruth hated her smile. It seemed to radiate power and control. There was no kind of friendliness or humor, else she would have tried to persuade the woman. "When you get those foolish ideas out of your head about a husband."

"I see."

Ruth thought she would go insane if she went on much longer.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A few miles away, there was a distinct, if muffled confusion.

Outside a large, stone built farmhouse a battered traveling coach drew up. It wasn't a fashionable equipage, bore no crests and was pulled by four job-horses.

As soon as the vehicle came to a halt, the door opened and the steps flung out. Down them came two gentlemen dressed modestly but in the first kick of fashion. The skirts of their drab colored coats were pleated at the back, the buttons silver and carved steel.

Jessica Thorne caught her breath in delight. A young lady of sixteen summers, just embarking on her seventeenth, she never dreamed that fate could deposit two such likely looking bucks on her own doorstep. Bouncing away from the window she almost collided with her Mama, hurrying to the hall to see what the commotion was.

"Behave yourself child!" she snapped. "See to your hair, it's come down from its pins again!" She took off a rough apron and thrust it at the housemaid who appeared, slightly red faced and out of breath from the kitchen, where she had been indulging in one last cup of tea before seeing to the bedrooms. Mrs. Thorne glanced in the mirror, straightened her cap and waited for the visitors.

The farmhouse had only just begun to employ a butler, who was more of a first footman, something Mrs. Thorne had dreamed of for years and this was the first time he'd answered the door to strangers. By rights, the lady of the house should be upstairs in the parlor sewing a fine seam, but Mrs. Thorne had been overseeing work in the dairy. She couldn't get used to the life of a lady of leisure, although she made concessions to it from time to time.

The first gentleman entered the spacious hall, pausing for a moment to look around him. Mrs. Thorne forgot her place *'again'* and went forward. "It's Mr. Urswick, isn't it? How nice to see you again!"

Edmund, similarly forgetting his place, enveloped Mrs. Thorne in a great hug, as far as he could, because the lady was no featherweight. "Mrs. Thorne! It's lovely to see you looking so well!"

He stepped back and made an elegant leg, but glanced up mischievously. "See how fine a gentleman I've become?"

"You were always a fine gentleman!" she exclaimed. "Never forgot your manners, you were always welcome here!"

Edmund glanced up and saw Jessica. He seemed overwhelmed, but held his hand out to her. To her delight, when she put her own in it, he lifted it to his lips. "It can't be Jessica!" he exclaimed in mock amazement. "Such a lovely young lady from that little minx who used to pester me to take her up when I went hunting!"

"I have a horse of my own now," Jessica informed him proudly. "And my papa says I can ride to hounds if I wish to."

He dropped her hand. "I should like to see that."

He turned to where Oliver waited patiently by the door. "Mrs. Thorne, may I present my very good friend Lord Iveleigh?"

Mrs. Thorne stared for a brief moment before she sank into a deep curtsy before Oliver's elegant bow. "And Miss Jessica Thorne? This is Major Oliver Bridgman *'retired'*, Earl of Iveleigh, Viscount Iveleigh, Baron Courtholme."

The great lord gave Mr. Urswick a sardonic glance. "You forgot Lord of the Manor of Berryborough."

Jessica was overcome. Flushing a deep, becoming pink, she gave the noble visitor her deepest and best society curtsy. Rising up, she found the gentleman holding his hand out to help her, just like she was a duchess at Court. He kissed it and Jessica thought she was in Heaven.

Her mama was watching her performance critically and when Jess glanced in her direction, smiled very slightly to show her approval.

"Would you come up to the parlor, my lord, Mr. Urswick?" she said. Jessica admired her mother's calmness under fire and demurely went over to her side.

"That would be delightful," said Mr. Urswick, "Unfortunately, our arrival is not entirely social. May I ask where George is at the moment?"

"Yes, in the fields," said Mrs. Thorne. "I'll send for him at once." She turned to the maid.

Oliver stopped her. "If you please, it's important that no one knows we're here until we've seen Mr. Thorne. Please don't tell him who is here when someone can overhear and don't gossip."

Startled, the maid looked at her mistress and Mrs. Thorne said firmly, "You heard the gentleman. Send a boy to him and tell him it's urgent, but don't say why."

The maid bobbed a curtsy and hurried off.

George arrived ten minutes later. He'd run from the fields, but wasn't the least out of breath. Oliver regarded his wife's old friend with interest and was forced to conclude that she had good taste, at least in this regard. A well set up youth, with short, sun streaked light brown hair and friendly, hazel eyes. The breadth of his shoulders proclaimed his original calling and his clear, slightly puzzled gaze, his honesty.

Oliver stood up when he entered and gave him a bow when Edmund introduced them. Then he stood up and offered his hand in friendship. Instinctively, he knew he'd like George.

They sat down and Mrs. Thorne made herself busy distributing tea. Nothing of note was said until the maid left the room, then Edmund began their explanation. "I'm sorry to bring trouble to your door, ma'am but we're in a fix and we need all the help we can get. It's about Ruth."

"I thought it might be," said Mrs. Thorne, grimly.

Oliver's head snapped round. "Why do you say that, ma'am?"

"His lordship brought her back and said she was ill. He's not let anyone in to see her. George here has tried several times and he even took Jess with him once, for propriety. Lord Urswick won't let him in. And the Priory is shut up, tight as a drum. He's dismissed most of the servants, there's only a few up there now. Most of them are new."

"Dear God, if he's hurt her I'll kill him!" Oliver exclaimed, his mouth compressed to a straight, tight line. All eyes turned to him in amazement and Oliver was forced to explain. "Ruth is my wife. We've not been married long. He's taken her away from me. I beg your pardon for using such intemperate language, but I meant what I said."

"Well, I'm tickled our little Ruth has done so well for herself! I should congratulate you, but I'm sorry to hear what that old curmudgeon's done to you. I take it he wouldn't give his consent?"

"Worse than that." Oliver went on to explain the situation. He told the truth, except

in the instance of Mrs. Brown's. That part he skirted past as lightly as he could, but he knew, from the skeptical look in her eye, that Mrs. Thorne knew he kept something back.

Apart from several exclamations not commonly heard in the parlor, her audience let him explain without interruption.

"We don't want our presence advertised just yet," Oliver concluded. "That's why we hired a chaise in York to bring us here. We found other things out, too."

Edmund took over. "Lord Urswick has applied to have Ruth committed. He claims she's having delusions. I think we've been able to stop that and stop word getting to him for the time being. He's paid a dubious sawbones to help him and the man's provided some of the new servants at the Priory. I've applied to get Ruth out of his clutches, but I'm afraid for her. Lord Urswick showed such signs of madness in London I've started proceedings myself." He bit his lip. "It will be some time before we can enforce them and we need to get Ruth out *now*."

"Why don't you just walk in and take her?" asked Mrs. Thorne. "If you're married, sir, you have every right."

Oliver looked grimmer than ever. "I want to look the place over first. I wouldn't put it past him to kill her rather than let her go." George gasped, the sound sudden and sharp. "I need to know the layout of the Priory and where they're likely to keep Ruth. If I can get her safely out, that will be enough. For now."

"Right." George got up and went to the desk in the corner. After a fumbled search he found some paper and a stick of charcoal. He went over to the small table under the window. Oliver and Edmund stood up and joined him, watching silently while he sketched. "The Priory has three main floors and an attic floor. They won't keep her there, because she could get out on to the roof and try to escape that way. So my betting is they'll keep her on the second or third floor, where she can't jump out the window."

"Where was her bedroom when she lived there?"

George took another sheet of paper and sketched the back of the house, with its three deep bays. "There." He indicated a window on the second floor. "She's had that room since she was little. There's a dressing room next to it and only two doors."

"A servants' door?"

"Not in that room."

George looked at Oliver, who stared at him very strangely. He blushed to the roots of his hair. "When they were small, Ruth shared it with her sister Naomi. We used to play there sometimes. John was fond of hide-and-seek and we played it for hours."

Oliver nodded and smiled. "Did you run tame there as a boy?"

George nodded his affirmation. "I think, once we found the coal on our lands, Lady Urswick thought I might do for one of her girls. She always said she wanted someone who would look after them, not a great lord she couldn't be sure of."

Oliver smiled. "I will look after Ruth."

Lover and best friend regarded each other steadily for a moment, faces tense, openly assessing. George broke the silence. "You'd better." Then he smiled and the tense moment dissolved into something else. A different kind of tension.

They turned back to the drawings. Oliver felt his training come back to him; the hours spent poring over diagrams and maps. This was a siege. There were a few ways of breaking a siege. The most bloodless way was to wait it out, but this was out of the question here. Lord Urswick was insane and getting worse daily. He might do anything to Ruth; beat her, hurt her, even kill her. It went without saying that if he killed Ruth, Oliver

would kill him, but that would be small recompense for losing what he'd come to realize was the love of his life.

The place could be stormed. If it was understaffed, they could probably force their way in, but what good would that do? If they couldn't get to Urswick quickly, he could do his worst before they got to Ruth.

They could look for a sneaky way in. This, at the moment was their best chance. To find a secret passage, to bribe a servant, to inveigle themselves in. He'd decided this before he'd seen the place and now his decision was confirmed.

The final way was to spirit Ruth away, perhaps with the help of a rope, but there was danger in this, too, for Ruth. She might not be capable of holding on to a rope, or be too afraid. He just didn't know. Best to try to quarter the place first. Once he had Ruth he would fight his way out if he had to. It was a relief to find the Thornes so helpful. They had a farm; they could muster a band of men if they needed to.

He'd never staked so much on a siege before and the thought of Ruth in the power of that madman made him feel sick. Mentally he sent a message to her, as he had done every night over the last weeks. *Hold on my love. I'm coming.*

George was speaking. Oliver recalled himself to the present and listened. "We're not exactly friends with the Urswicks at present. You know I offered for Ruth?" Oliver nodded. "Well, Urswick threw me out after I offered for her. I wanted her to get away, I knew there was something wrong. We all did. I was going to write to you, sir," he said to Edmund. "Considering what's happened, perhaps I should have written anyway."

"About Ruth?"

"That and the other thing." George glanced at his mother and then back at Edmund. "Lord Urswick went to London to see his man of business. To try to get the coalfields off us."

"What?" Edmund stared at him, thunderstruck, clearly unaware of this until now.

"The richest seam is on the border between our lands. Lord Urswick has started a land dispute, to try to win them. He wrote to me, I wish I still had the letter, but I burned it in a rage."

"I told him that was stupid," his mother said.

George cast her a look of apology. "I know, but it made me angry. He said it was to stop me being such an upstart as to think I could ever be worthy of Ruth. It'll cost him a fortune, because we can't afford to let it go. Those coal seams have made us rich and the land's been in our hands for generations." He turned to his drawings and then, taken by another thought, turned back to Edmund. "Of course, whatever happens I'll still help you with Ruth. It's obvious she's in a lot of danger there. If you want to carry on with it all, that's your privilege, but I'll fight you."

Edmund put his hand over George's, now clenched into a tight fist. "No need for that. As you say, a dispute could cost us both a fortune and I don't begrudge you yours."

George's face lightened. "I'm glad we won't be enemies."

A knock came on the door and the maid re-entered. "There's a-man here sir, says he knows Mr. Urswick and his lordship."

Edmund and Oliver exchanged a glance and grinned. "Show him in."

Vic's large, lumbering form didn't show to advantage in Mrs. Thorne's neat parlor. He stood, turning his hat in his hands after he'd bowed. Jessica stared at him in awe and even George showed some respect before Edmund demanded, "Well? How did you get on?"

Vic beamed, showing a distinctly gappy smile. "I got in. I gave them the doctor's name, just like you said, my lord and told them I'd been sent to help, if they needed me. I was taken on the spot. They think I've gone to the village to get my things."

"Oh well done, Vic!" Oliver said, relieved the first part of his plan had gone well. "Do you know where she is?"

"Not yet, my lord, but there's a hatchet faced woman there, name of Jessop, who looks after her. She 'ad to approve me. She didn't know me, but I said I was new in the North, needed to get away from London for a while."

"Clever!" Edmund remarked. "Well, you could hardly hide that accent!" Vic spoke a clear, vivid Cockney, as different to the dialect of Yorkshire as Welsh.

"I let her think what she wanted and she accepted it. I had to show her the note you'd forged though, my lord; she wouldn't have taken me else." Oliver had taken a chance on them not knowing the doctor's handwriting and it seemed it had paid off. "I'm to help the others in guarding the place."

"How many are there? Can we overpower them?" Oliver rapped out.

"Not easily, my lord. They showed me my quarters and most of the house is locked up, but there's enough strong muscle there to put most attackers off. Two indoor maids, a cook and Jessop are all the females that are left, but there's plenty of men. None of them local, from what I could gather."

"Pity," said George. "I might have been able to get to one of them."

Oliver liked the way George was thinking. "You'd better get back, Vic. Come and see us tomorrow and don't forget *not* to call me my lord. Did you bespeak rooms at the inn for us?"

At this, Mrs. Thorne made a clucking sound. "Plenty of room here, sir, no need for that. We'll say George has some old school friends staying, if anyone asks. You'd stand out like a sore thumb at the inn, they don't have many foreign visitors there."

"Much obliged, ma'am." Oliver swept her a low bow and made her smile. "And don't let anyone call me by my title. I'll be Mr. Smith or something while I'm here, at least until I have Ruth safe."

"Certainly sir," said Mrs. Thorne, casting a warning look at the brute who seemed to take over half her parlor. "He might hear and suspect anyway."

"Yes," Oliver said grimly. "We've little time to waste, we have to get her out soon."

George straightened up. "Then what? What do you plan to do after you have her?"

Oliver blinked. "I'll take her home."

Edmund added, "And I'm trying to get his lordship committed. I want him to be well cared for, but unable to run his estate. He can pretend to, but I'm asking the court for power of attorney." He glanced at George, face still rigid with disapproval and added, "No need to worry, I'm pretty warm myself. I don't need this, but if he carries on like he is, he'll bring scandal to the whole family."

George still looked a trifle cynical, his mouth pursed downwards, but he nodded, accepting it. "Best that way, I suppose. You won't have him locked up?"

"Not in an institution. There's no reason he shouldn't be cared for at the Priory, is there?"

"No."

Oliver was carrying on a muttered conversation with Vic, making sure he knew what to do in any eventuality. "If she's in danger, get her out of there. It can't be more than three miles between here and the Priory as the crow flies—bring her straight here. If

there's a secret passage or suchlike, let me know immediately. I'll see you tomorrow." He turned to George. "Where's a good place to meet Vic tomorrow night for a report?"

George considered for a moment, before saying, "There's a spinney about half way. You can't miss it, it's the only one there, in the middle of the fields." He gave Vic swift instructions on how to get there, impressing Oliver with his intimate knowledge of what he was beginning to think of as the terrain. He'd kept his sanity this last week or so by treating it as a military exercise, trying to think in the way he'd been taught. So far it had worked, but now, with her so close, he was in danger of cracking.

"I want to move in the next few days," Oliver said. "She's been in danger long enough." And he didn't know how much longer he could hold out.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The day Ruth sipped her cordial and tasted nothing else there she felt she'd turned a corner. Jessop showed no sign of any change, so she didn't mention it. Perhaps her keeper had forgotten somehow. She was too lethargic to be inquisitive. Repeated doses of the drug and a growing feeling of her helplessness had made her acquiescent and given her a sense of unreality. Everything outside her bedroom diminished in importance, so that nothing had any reality any more. She'd even stopped standing at her window, gazing out at the increasingly wild garden beyond, hoping to see something, someone.

The Priory seemed deserted. The only people she ever saw were her father and Jessop. Perhaps nobody else existed. Lord Urswick came to sermonize and to see how she was doing, if she was completely obedient yet. When he'd mentioned, as casually as he could, her delusions of a husband, she'd sparked up, demanded to see him, so he'd ripped up at her and condemned her as an ungrateful daughter, leaving her in tears.

Ruth wasn't even allowed to dress. All she had was a succession of clean nightgowns and her old wrapper which she'd discarded in favor of a new one when she'd left for London. She hadn't even got anything for her feet, but since the days were getting progressively warmer, there was less need.

At one time she'd decided to count the days, but had given it up out of a sense of futility. What was the point in knowing what day of the week it was when every day was exactly the same? She took to sleeping to pass the time. She was allowed no books, no pen, no paper, no way of amusing herself.

She took to making up stories and remembering the fairy tales from her childhood. Perhaps that was all the memories of marriage and someone who loved her were; fevered imaginings of her bored mind. Perhaps her father was right and her illness had given her the thoughts. It didn't matter any more. She'd never get out of here and if she did, he would only bring her back.

She did hope he might let her resume her previous position in the household. What she had before her visit to London seemed tedious in the extreme, now seemed so exciting she didn't know if she could sustain it.

Then came the day she was given only cordial. After that, the sweet smelling, sickly taste disappeared from the fruit drink and the sense of unreality began to recede. She said nothing, waiting for something, she didn't know what.

Vic was making headway below stairs. The other footmen were hired bullies, in it only for the money and what they could steal. There was precious little to steal. The rooms with the real treasures had been locked away and his lordship mainly kept to the library and the dining room, eating off the everyday china, not the Meissen. They didn't care that the master had a lunatic daughter. They were paid well and they had a roof over their heads.

Although Mrs. Brown's household had been, to say the least, unusual, it had been well run. Vic was bemused at the lack of regular servants. The two housemaids came in from the village daily and cleaned only the parts of the house in use. The cook had only a kitchen maid and a scullery maid to help her, not the usual battery of kitchen staff. There was no butler, no housekeeper.

And then there was Mrs. Jessop. A sharp featured governess of a woman, who

never cracked her face in a smile. She was the only live-in female servant, though no one would touch her unless they were desperate. She wore her dark, lank hair under a cap that held the minimum of trimming. Her side hoops were modest and her gowns uniformly dark and serviceable. Vic's heart bled for the poor young lady upstairs.

Since he'd got in on the basis of the forged letter from the York doctor, he was considered Mrs. Jessop's personal assistant. What she'd told him about her young charge made his blood boil. "She's a danger to herself and others," the woman told him. "Just before her father brought her home she attacked him with a knife. He's having her committed for her own good."

"Will she be sent away?" Vic asked.

"Maybe, but she'd doing better now she's away from the city. It was too disturbing for her, it overset her completely. She must have been going mad for a long time." The woman sounded as if she was talking about an animal, not that sweet girl who was so polite to him and so afraid in Mrs. Brown's house. If Vic hadn't known different, he'd have thought she was talking about a different person. "I think his lordship wants to keep her here. He's devoted to her, nearly went out of his mind when he saw what London did to her."

"What's she like?" Vic ventured. "Will I see her?"

"All in good time. She's young-ish, in her mid twenties, pretty, if you like them thin and deceptively mild. We have to be careful introducing new people. And she has delusions. She claims she's married, to someone she only met once."

Vic looked suitably startled. "Isn't that unusual?"

Mrs. Jessop gave him a superior look, right down her nose. "On the contrary, it's very common." She spoke using large words she wasn't quite sure of, always on the edge of getting it wrong. She spoke them with absolute certainty and often used the same words over and over, when she found one she particularly liked. "Contrary" was one of the words. She was a contrary woman.

Vic wondered if Mrs. Jessop believed these things, or if she accepted them. After all, she was making a good living. "You will prepare her meals and her medication, take them up and bring them back down. When I move her out of the room, you will clean it. You'll empty her chamber pot and do as you're told."

"Yes, missus. When do I clean the room?"

"It needs doing. We'll do it tomorrow."

Vic cherished this piece of information. Perhaps when they moved her would be the best time to take her?

That evening in the spinney, which he'd found without much trouble, he reported all his findings to Lord Iveleigh and Mr. Urswick. Oliver was pleased. "You can stop whatever muck it is they're giving her and perhaps get a message to her."

"I can do that, sir. Whatever they're giving her is in cordial. I can just give her the cordial."

Oliver looked up at the sky. "Good girl!" he breathed. He looked back at Vic again, his expression a touch lighter. "From what you've told me about the woman looking after her, she wouldn't think to sweeten the dose. My betting is Ruth asked for it herself." He took a turn around the small clearing and then came back to Vic. "Can you get to see her? Tell her we're here?"

Regretfully, Vic shook his great head. "They won't let me in to see her yet and Mrs. Jessop has the keys with her all the time. The men live in, she could call them at a

moment's notice."

"How many are there?"

"Eight. All bruisers."

Oliver thought rapidly. It could be done.

"I don't suppose you can pick a lock?"

Vic shook his head again with even more regret. "Never needed to know. Usually broke the door down rather than fiddling with locks."

It was not ideal, but it would still work. Oliver outlined his plan. He'd kept it as simple as possible, but with several fallback positions. The final tactic was, as it usually was, brute force.

"You'd better go. I'll see you tomorrow." With a brief salute, Vic left.

Oliver made his decision. After studying all the information he had available to him, he made his mind up. He couldn't leave Ruth there much longer. Her father might discover he'd arrived and then he would have lost the element of surprise. Or Ruth might give up. Most of all, he admitted to himself in his lonely bed, he wanted her back. He missed her with an intensity that surprised him. He knew that even had things not worked so well between them he would still rescue her with just as much dedication, but he wouldn't have been so sick at heart.

The diversion to Bath had been almost unbearable. They'd found a run down house, only caretaker staff in residence and realized they'd been duped. Although they set off immediately for Yorkshire, there'd been no guarantee they would find Ruth there until they arrived and discovered her whereabouts. Even though no one had seen her, he was sure she was there. And if, by some terrible chance he'd stowed her somewhere else, Oliver would make Urswick tell him where she was. Oliver was painfully aware that this could be another blind. Only the Jessop woman, who'd never met her before and her father had seen her. He deliberately decided not to think about that. He would be ready for it, but he would only cope with it if he had to. If it weren't for his training, he might have committed murder by now. As it was, he'd had a hard job stopping Edmund from running amok in Bath.

Drawing on all his training, Oliver forced himself to sleep. He would need all his strength for what lay ahead.

The next day they called the men from the fields and outlined their plan. At first incredulous, they were given a short time to discuss what was planned. That had been Oliver's idea. He wanted no reluctant converts. To a man, they agreed and Oliver found himself in charge of a company of ten. "I probably won't need you. I want you to remain totally silent about it all, at least until we're gone. There will be no repercussions, I promise you. "

"I can promise you that, too," said George, standing behind Oliver, arms folded, his usually good-natured face bearing an unaccustomed grim expression.

Oliver pulled out his watch, the only elaborate thing about his appearance and consulted it, tucking it well out of sight afterwards. Testing the strap around his waist he could only be grateful that the late Mr. Thorne had seen action and his son had seen fit to keep his father's army saber in good condition. Only so-so with the fashionable foil, Oliver was far more confident with his weapon of choice-the saber that had been by his side for more years than he cared to remember.

His London friends wouldn't recognize him, but his appearance would be all too familiar to his erstwhile colleagues and subordinates. He wore simple, plain dark clothes, loose fitting to allow ease of movement. His hair was tightly tied back, his hat a plain one with a single line of black braid around the brim. His expression was determined, far more focused than the elegant, slightly amused countenance he presented to society. There was no amusement there now. The deep pockets of the far from extravagant coat held a number of interesting and useful objects.

Edmund was similarly attired, but unlike his friend, looked less comfortable. He'd never done anything more than attend to his duties and practice fashionable sporting activities. He'd never done anything like this before, not for real. But he was game.

George took it in his stride. He'd been impressed to see the way Ruth's husband had taken charge, pleased to know she'd have a good man to take care of her. If they got her away.

For Ruth, the day started like all the others had. Jessop opened the door, locked it behind her and set the tray down. It contained tea, bread and butter and the glass of cordial. After one cautious sip Ruth was pleased to find no sickly aftertaste and drank it down. Then she was allowed to eat her bread and butter and drink her tea.

Jessop watched her closely and aware of it, Ruth allowed her lids to droop over her eyes. The morning dose was designed to make her drowsy and acquiescent, not send her to sleep, but Ruth sensed her keeper was waiting for something.

"The dose was heavier than usual," she said. "I want you to sleep for an hour or two."

Why? What was she planning? Dear Lord could this be her chance? What should she do? While the thoughts raced around her head, Ruth remembered to allow her eyelids to sink down over her eyes. "I must confess," she said slowly. "I do feel sleepy. Why have you done this? Are you moving me? I'll be good, I pro—" Unwilling to make a promise she would do her utmost to break, Ruth let her head fall to one side.

She concentrated on acting asleep. She knew it wasn't as easy to feign as many people supposed, so she deliberately concentrated on every limb, made everything lax and then opened her airways, made them soft and receptive.

It seemed to be enough. She heard Jessop give a soft grunt of satisfaction before grating the key in the lock.

Should she try now? Leap at the woman? No, for Jessop was strong and more practiced. Besides, she didn't know what lay behind the door.

When she heard Jessop say, "Come in," she was glad she'd waited. "Take her to the room I showed you, then lock her in and come back." Jessop said.

Heavy footsteps crossed the room then, to her horror, the sheet was pulled down and masculine arms closed firmly about her. Very strong, very large arms. Effortlessly she was lifted against an extremely broad chest and then her porter moved.

He took her down the corridor and into one of the guestrooms at the end. She was deposited gently on the bed and then the most amazing thing happened.

"Miss Ruth? Ruth?" Then, in a more despairing tone, "Millie?"

Her eyes jerked open in shock and there—was she dreaming or was it a real delusion? —sat Vic.

"Vic?"

She had spoken too loudly; he put a finger to her lips, shushing her. "Yes miss. I've

gotta be quick. We're going to get you outta here. Give me your night-cap." Wondering, she untied the strings and gave it to him, watching him roll it up and stuff it in his pocket. He glanced at her, looking for something, she wasn't at all sure what. "Now all you have to remember is to be asleep," he cautioned.

Then he went out and locked the door, calling, "Would you like a cuppa tea, Missus? I can easy get one. All that dust must be makin' you thirsty."

Startled into life, into action, Ruth shot over to the window and peered out. It was just as high here, but there was a ledge of sorts, formed by the overhanging roof of the oriel window underneath. She was still a floor up and if she missed she could be killed.

Deciding to take her chances with Vic she returned to the bed. How had he got here and what was more important, who were 'we'? Oh please let it be Oliver! She so longed to see him again, to feel him holding her safe!

She heard the rattle of crockery when someone carried a tray past the room, then the sound of someone approaching. Hurriedly she half submerged her face under the covers and closed her eyes, concentrating on keeping her breathing even.

She knew who it was. When her father had visited her in her prison she'd smelled uncared for, unwashed humanity. His clothes were stale, his body unwashed. Even after all he'd done to her she wanted to look after him properly. It was obvious nobody was doing it now. The smell grew stronger when he moved over to the bed, but Ruth kept her breathing steady. She stopped herself flinching when he touched her, but he only touched her shoulder and moved away.

The chair by the window creaked when he sat down. It was an old chair, but still serviceable so she'd had it carried up here. It seemed such a long time now since she'd performed such a mundane household task but it couldn't have been more than three months. He sighed and then he spoke. "My poor daughter! So badly led astray! Who would have thought a visit to town could have done this to you? I could have had you arrested as a wanton, locked away for your immorality, but I thought this was the best way. I was never more shocked than when I heard those dreadful lies issuing from your lips and to see you in those scandalous clothes was more than I could bear." Ruth had heard much the same from him before. His repetition seemed to strengthen his resolve, renew his delusions. "And I need you here. You have to look after me now. I get headaches, Ruth and I need your skill with physic to soothe them away. You were always so good at that." He stood up and the air crackled with tension. "You must get better soon. Jessop says you're quieter, so that's a good thing. I want things back the way they were, I don't want this any more!"

He moved over to the bed, put his hand on her shoulder again. "Bless you, my child." He moved away and left the room, locking it securely behind him.

Ruth took a deep breath and opened her eyes, now filled with tears. She couldn't understand why he was doing this to her, though it was obvious what he thought she'd done. She had married Oliver, nothing could change that, but if she weren't careful he would end up a widower. Her father's instability was increasing daily now. He complained of headaches, dizzy spells and persisted in his delusion that she had moved in with Oliver without benefit of clergy. Such immorality could often result in a girl being locked away for life. That mustn't happen to her.

She wiped her face roughly with the sheet. She mustn't break now, she must hold on.

When the door opened again it was Vic. He deliberately said something so she

would know. "Shall I take her back now, Mrs. Jessop?"

"Yes, didn't I tell you to? Come on!"

Vic lifted her and Ruth only just stopped herself clinging to him. This was her chance of safety. She had no idea what they had in mind, but whatever it was she would do it.

Back in her prison, the room she regarded her sanctuary when she'd been little, Vic laid her on the bed.

Mrs. Jessop's voice came sharply. "Her night-cap? Where is it?"

"Must've fallen off in the other room, mum. Shall I go and see?"

"No, no." There was a pause, then a strange sound from Mrs. Jessop. "Can you wait here until I get back? I won't be long, I just need to use the —"

The rest of it remained unspoken. The sound of hurrying feet up the corridor showed how desperate the woman was.

Cautiously Ruth opened her eyes and saw Vic's gap toothed grin. "Put something in her tea," he said. "She'll be a while yet."

"Oh how clever!" Ruth sat up. "Can we go? Now?"

"Hold on, missy," said Vic, coming over all paternal. "There's a plan."

He indicated the dirty sheets, discarded in the corner. "You're going out with that lot. You'll have to take your nightgown off."

Ruth blushed to the roots of her hair.

"We need to dress the bed."

At once she understood. With no more thought to her modesty she undid the buttons and took off the gown. Vic had his back turned to her and she picked up one of the discarded sheets from the floor and wrapped it around her. "All right."

Vic turned back and took the nightgown from her. Without a superfluous word he slid the bolster out from under the pillows and stuffed it into the garment. Ruth helped him dispose the thing in the bed. When he was satisfied, he took a couple of the pillowcases and stuffed one into one arm, draping it above the covers. Then he took her night-cap out of his pocket. Only it had something attached to it. Ruth moved forward and touched it. A braid of dark hair, sewn on to the bottom. It looked enough like her own braid to pass muster, but was a little shorter. They got around that by tucking the end under the covers.

Stepping back Vic and Ruth took a few seconds to admire their artistry. It looked convincing enough, a huddled body, one arm above the covers, the head hunched down in sleep.

"Now you." Vic said and Ruth lay down on the floor, allowing her savior to bundle the sheets about her. Two sheets and the light quilted counterpane were enough to disguise her presence.

Only just in time. A belch announced the return of her jailer. Ruth's stomach contracted and she feared she might be sick with fear, but she fought it down and tried to breathe shallowly. The bundled sheets felt suffocating, but she could just get enough air to breathe.

"Not well, missus?" said Vic, only to be hushed for his loudness.

"Don't wake her. It'll give me a while to get myself sorted out," said Jessop. "It was a big dose, if you gave her what I told you to, she should be out for another hour or two."

"The poor miss!" said Vic. "Pretty young thing!"

"Full of wickedness," said Jessop. "She was enticed into sin and she must be saved."

When she repents of her wickedness and begs her father for forgiveness, we can begin to make her life better."

There was a short silence before Vic managed, "Amen." Anything to get the woman out of there. Ruth lay as still as she could.

Mrs. Jessop jingled her keys. "Come on, let's leave her alone." A step, then she said, "Pick of those things and bring them downstairs."

"Where do they go?"

"There's a cart coming for them soon. The master sends his laundry out to the village, now the maids don't live in."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ruth felt his arms under her, feeling for her body so he could lift her without her slipping. He managed it and she lay still while he lifted her and followed Mrs. Jessop out of the room. She locked the door. "I'm going to lie down for an hour. Then I want you back to help me."

"Yes, ma'am. Shall I send a maid to wake you?"

"Yes. And send some tea up."

"Yes Mrs. Jessop."

Vic strode down the corridor and Ruth heard Mrs. Jessop hurry in the other direction. She stifled a chuckle. Bundles of linen didn't chuckle.

Down the stairs to the kitchen. Ruth heard the crackle of the fire lit for the meat and felt the heat when Vic walked past it. He went outside and Ruth felt a blast of cool, fresh air. She was dumped down. "Not long now," Vic muttered and left her. More linen was thrown on top of her and then she heard Vic go round to the front and climb up.

With a jerk they were off, a single horse clopping over the cobbles of the old yard at the back of the house. They passed on to a hard, smoother surface and they were away.

Ruth waited, hardly daring to believe she'd got away. They could still be discovered and she could be brought back. She'd never get away then.

She counted, partly to pass the time and partly to keep her anxiety down to a manageable level. She'd always done that when she was worried and it usually helped. Eventually she felt her heart beat less strongly, down from a pound to a throb. It was better and her panic also subsided. No doubt Vic wasn't alone and he would be armed. They could fight.

The cart drew to a halt and she heard Vic get down and come round to the back. He let down the tailgate and reached for her. "Nearly there, Miss. Here we are."

He cleared the heap of laundry away from her face and she blinked in the bright sunlight.

"Good day, my love," said Oliver.

Twenty-Four

"Oh, Oliver!" For the first time since her capture, Ruth burst into tears of relief. Oliver swept her up and held her tight, as though he would never let her go.

Both were recalled to the present by the stoical Vic. "M'lord."

Oliver lifted his head. "Yes," he said. "We'd better go."

Wrapping her in a single sheet Oliver carried his wife over to where his horse stood by a small clump of trees. It was accompanied by four sturdy field hands, all mounted, all near to tears at the reconciliation of husband and wife. Not that any of them would admit it.

Vic took the precious burden while Oliver mounted, then lifted and took her up to her husband, still swathed in her sheet. A bare shoulder showed for a moment and when Oliver lifted a querying eyebrow Vic explained, "I couldn't get any more nightgowns, so we used the one she was wearing." Oliver frowned, but was too relieved to finally have her back in his arms, so he merely made sure she was comfortable and started his horse into motion.

Vic watched them go and then got back up and drove the cart to the village. He would leave the laundry and make his way to the farmhouse on foot.

Ruth was happy to gaze at the handsome countenance of her beloved while he steered his horse into a gentle trot, getting further and further away from the Priory. He glanced down and smiled. "We have you safe now. He'll never get you back, I promise."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm not leaving you until we have your father properly taken care of. You'll be as closely guarded as ever you were at the Priory. With a better outcome."

"As long as you're with me."

"Always," he promised, drawing the sheet closer around her.

Ruth recognized the farmhouse and gave a glad cry. "I should have guessed George would help you!"

"A fine fellow," Oliver agreed. "We couldn't have done half so well without him. I'm luckier than I thought."

He wouldn't explain the laconic comment, instead, lifting her down to someone and then dismounting and taking her back in his arms. Without another word he took her inside.

There was a reception committee waiting, but Oliver didn't stop. "We have her! She's hardly ready to receive company! Give us a little while, would you?"

He swept her up the staircase and into the room he'd been given.

Setting her on the bed he stood up and smiled down at her. "You have no idea how adorable you look."

"I don't feel it," she answered. "I need a bath and some clothes."

"I'll order the bath," he said, "and I brought some of your clothes up with me. You haven't got any?"

"Nothing." She held up her left hand. "They even took my wedding ring away." She tried very hard to stop her lip trembling. "They said I'd been immoral, but we did marry, didn't we? It was real, wasn't it?"

He sat down on the bed, took her hand. "Very. I have the license to prove it.

There's nothing immoral about what we've done, nothing." He released her hand; slipped off the signet ring he wore on his smallest finger and put it on to hers. "There."

She looked down at the ring and back up at his face, still tight with anxiety. "It was the thought of our time together which kept me going. I knew I couldn't imagine what we did."

She didn't look at him until he put his hand under her chin and urged her to look up. "I'll never forget it," he breathed. "I hope to put more memories there to keep them company."

Throwing off his hat he leaned forward and kissed her, very softly, nothing but love in it. She closed her eyes and accepted it. "What do you want to do? Will you sleep?"

"No," she heard herself saying. "I want to dress and thank everyone. I haven't dressed since they took me. They kept me in my nightgown."

"I didn't bring Chantal with me, but I'm sure Mrs. Thorne can provide someone to help you. Shall I leave you alone?"

"No," she begged. "Please don't go, not unless you have to."

"Rather unusual." She could see he was pleased by the smile he gave her. "I'll stay if you want me to."

Her smile faded when she noticed something new about him. Reaching out, she threaded her fingers through his hair, now jaw level and neatly cut to frame his head. "Your hair!"

"Where else could we find a braid?" he asked lightly. "Will it make a difference to the way you feel about me?"

"I quite like it," she confessed. It enhanced the sharp, clean line of his jaw, but she was sorry he'd made the sacrifice. "It will soon grow."

"That it will." He took her hand, kissed it. "Let me go and find a maid for you."

So he did and soon returned with a maid and a tray of tea.

Ruth sat up and looked around her. She'd seen most of the farmhouse in her time, but she wasn't so familiar with it in recent years. If this room was anything to go by, the furniture had been replaced with better pieces, but with none of the vulgarity so many people newly come into money could display. The original furnishings had been replaced by ones of better quality, that was all. The bed she sat on was new, but solidly carved in fine mahogany, the drapes a good quality silk instead of the embroidered linen she remembered.

She was still a little bemused by the day's events. It seemed so simple, yet it must have taken a great deal of planning. No one had been hurt and she was where she belonged. All done very smoothly, the sign of a good strategist. She felt she was only just beginning to understand her husband.

The maid hadn't the skills of Chantal, but she didn't need them. Unconcerned, Ruth stood up and let the sheet drop. Her husband, busy pouring tea, looked over at her and his face set. The maid blushed. "What did you bring?" Ruth asked, loving what the sight of her was doing to Oliver. She could tell as surely as if he'd been naked as well.

"At the moment I wish I'd brought nothing at all," he confessed. "Then you'd be forced to stay that way. I let Chantal choose. I had other things to do."

Hastily the maid came over with a fresh shift and dropped it over Ruth's head. The tension in the room eased. It could almost be felt. Ruth was efficiently laced into her stays and a pair of side hoops, pockets and petticoat followed.

Ruth made a selection and she was dressed in a gown of blue watered silk, with a

matching petticoat. The maid's eyes widened when she saw the lace ruffles edging the sleeves and the delicate fichu tucked into the low neckline.

Her hair was dressed into a light knot with a few curls left to fall on one shoulder. When she had done, Oliver came over and lifted her hand to his lips. "Better?"

"Much," she answered him. "I'd better go down and see them."

"Only if you feel up to it."

"I'd like it," she told him frankly. "I've spent such a long time immured in that room with only Jessop and my father for company."

"My poor love." He gently drew her to her feet. "Come and meet my co-conspirators."

He took her downstairs. The parlor was full; Ruth looked about, enchanted.

The first person who greeted her was Edmund. Used to her London polish he came forward and embraced her, planting a firm kiss on both cheeks. "Wonderful to see you so well!"

Ruth turned to George. George stared at her for one impolite moment before she threw herself at him. "George! It's so good to see you!" Startled, he put his arms around her and gave her a bear hug. "I thought you'd be tired."

"They kept me asleep for much of the time," she said. "In between the sermonizing and the lectures."

"How did they keep you asleep?"

"Some filthy stuff. There was poppy juice in it. Vic stopped that. I take it that it was Vic?"

No one had seen Vic blush before, but when Ruth turned and beamed at him they were all treated to the awesome sight. The room fell silent for a mere second or two. Then Ruth went forward with both hands outstretched. "Thank you, Vic. You were a gentleman and very brave."

Vic was speechless, but not so Oliver. "Resourceful man. I think I'll be asking you to name your price, Vic."

Vic bowed and Oliver acknowledged it in his best lordly manner.

He led his wife to a chair and stood behind it. Mrs. Thorne came over gave her some tea, while Jessica stared at her, speechless. A very unusual state for the lively daughter of the house. Ruth didn't notice at first, so much more was happening. The most important being that she was back where she wanted to be. The presence to one side of her chair dominated the room, for her.

"Are you quite well, dear?" asked Mrs. Thorne. "Did they hurt you?"

"No," Ruth answered. "They wanted to save me. I think the woman who looked after me, Jessop, is some kind of religious maniac. And my father needs caring for. He is woefully neglected!"

Her voice broke and Oliver laid his hand over hers. "He'll be looked after, I promise." Ruth looked up at him and they exchanged a small smile. She turned back to the others. "He's just ill, I'm sure of it. Will it effect the case if we tell the court? I don't want him locked away, I couldn't bear the thought of that!"

"I planned for him to be looked after at the Priory," Edmund said. "But it will be some time before we have legal sanction."

"Can we do it-informally?" Ruth asked.

"Yes," said Oliver. "If you wish it, then it can be done. I'll see to it."

Edmund demurred. "You have something else to do. And it's my concern."

Oliver conceded the point with a small nod. "I want to take you home tomorrow, Ruth."

"To Iveleigh?"

"Yes. I want you away from here." He gave Mrs. Thorne a small bow. "I hope you won't take offence at that. I want to see Ruth safe, that's all."

"Not at all. I would want the same thing."

Ruth proved unexpectedly stubborn. "May I stay to see my father safe? The household isn't what I would wish for him at all. I want him to be looked after and he has a prize selection of bullies and villains there. How will you clean the place out?"

Edmund smiled, a charming, ebullient smile. "I must confess I hadn't thought that far ahead. I'm sure I'll come up with something."

"Well I want to see it before I go."

"Surely you will obey your husband's wishes?" said Mrs. Thorne, rather sternly Ruth thought.

"Of course." She knew what Oliver would say.

He said it. "Ruth's wishes must also be mine. I wouldn't want her to be any doubt that her father was being less than cared for. I'd like this matter cleared up as soon as possible. I want her to get some peace."

"How long will it be before you can go to the Priory and see things are set as they should be?" Ruth persisted.

Edmund frowned. "Legally it could take some time. I've done all I can to hurry things along, but I don't think we'll have a hearing much before the end of the summer. Then we'll have to get him out and to York or London, wherever it is to take place."

"Can we do it forcibly?"

"Not with any legality. I don't think it would be good for you to stay that long, Ruth. You should listen to Oliver and go home."

"Yes," Oliver said. "I can make sure you're totally safe there. Until your father is secured, I'm afraid you must be guarded. This will not be allowed to happen again."

"You want me in the country, so you can go gallivanting about town?" It was Ruth's effort at raillery, but it evoked a serious response.

"If I had my way," Oliver said slowly. "I would never be more than a mile or two away from you ever again. I'm half a man without you, Ruth."

The response nearly brought her to tears again. To Ruth's mind, that confession was as brave as anything else he'd done that day. The least she could do was match it. "I want to see you every day from now on." A fleeting touch on her shoulder told her what that meant to him.

The pause was small but significant. Mrs. Thorne's expression visibly softened and George looked faintly surprised. Ruth wondered why, but she couldn't ask him now.

By common consent everyone retired upstairs for an early night. The convivial but peaceful evening had been bliss for Ruth after her recent trials, spent with the people who were most dear to her—all except one and she wasn't sure about him. She refused to think about her father tonight.

When they went to bed Ruth blushed to be entering the same room as Oliver, but the farmhouse couldn't offer separate rooms. It was as well this was an old house and the walls thick.

His concern for her stretched even as far as this. "I can either send a maid to you

and leave you for a while, or I can act as your maid."

She laughed. "I don't want you to leave, Oliver. Shall I be your valet?"

"If you wish, but I can make do for myself."

Her eyes darkened a little. "There are some things a valet can't do."

"And some things a maid can't," he answered, moving closer. "Oh Ruth, how I missed you!"

They moved together and kissed properly for the first time since he'd contrived her escape. Ruth felt her doubts and fears leave her when he closed his arms about her, held her close so he could ravish her mouth and her senses. She returned his ardor in full measure, only pulling away to begin to undress.

They took off their own and each others' clothes, leaving them where they fell in their haste and fell into the small bed, kissing and touching in a frenzy of recognition and mutual desire. There was no hesitancy about Oliver's actions now and no shyness in hers. She loved him and she had no other thought other than to show him how much, give him all she could.

He swung her on to her back, his tongue feasting on her mouth and entered her. She shuddered, wound her legs around his to pull him closer. He plunged inside her, giving no quarter to tenderness, taking her with a raw intensity that shook them both. They didn't speak; there was no need, their bodies communed in perfect understanding. He showed her his agony when he'd lost her, his desperation to get her back and his overwhelming joy to hold her once more. She showed him her despair, her helplessness and her strength, but most of all her love and trust. All without speaking, the expression in their eyes and bodies doing it all for them.

His desperation to possess her was replaced by a need to give her pleasure and bring her joy to make up for all she had been through. After she cried out his name once and shuddered, straining against him, he waited until she opened her eyes and smiled at him, then kissed her more softly, murmured her name. "I love you Ruth."

"I love you," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "I've never felt so alone before."

"Never again, my sweet. Never again."

He rolled over, so she was on top of him. Stopping to brush her hair out of her eyes she reached out to touch his. Even short it was straight, straight as rain. He smiled and turned his head so he could kiss her hand. Then he took each of her fingers into his mouth and caressed them with his tongue, while holding her breast in one hand, stroking it before he began to move inside her. He pulled her bottom close to him, undulated his hips until she exploded with a violence he watched with unshadowed pleasure.

Ruth moved over him, so he held her backside when she increased her movements, urging her and helping her on. She drove him, exhorted him to forget himself, to take what he needed from her and let her take in her turn.

He arched against her, his convulsive movement lifting her off the bed, so she had to struggle to press her knees against the mattress to gain some control over their movements. He forced her off the bed, lying over him, helpless to stop the urgent driving rhythm of his thrusts, held to him only by his hands on her body, firming her to him, pressing her close.

His body twisted to one side when he felt the pulse that told him he was about to release his seed inside her. With one last cry she pushed, his hands strong on her buttocks, pressing her to him as hard as he could.

Sweating, panting, she lay over him until his hands moved to her waist and he eased

her to one side. She buried her face in his shoulder and shed a few thankful tears. He contented himself by kissing her forehead and hair and holding her tightly.

They lay like that for a long time, letting the warmth and togetherness seep through them. Neither of them slept, unwilling to let the moment go.

"The Chinese room," he murmured.

Surprised, she lifted her head from his shoulder. "What?"

"I think we should occupy the Chinese rooms at Iveleigh," he said.

"What a time to be thinking about décor!"

Her warm smile filled his heart. "No, love, not décor. The Chinese rooms are interconnecting; there's no room between them. Most of the other bedrooms have a sitting room or a dressing room between one room and the other. Either that or they're entirely separate. I don't want to be too far from you. In fact, you'll be lucky to have your bed to yourself ever again!"

"I don't want my bed to myself," she said. "I want you in it."

He laughed, gave her a hug. "I fear you're stuck with me. I need to be with you as much for my own peace of mind as for your safety. Once we've made sure of your father, then I'll feel safer."

"Does that mean you'll want to spend your nights in your own bed?"

"Only if you're with me." He pulled her close and smoothed his hand down her back.

"Good." She sighed happily. "I like it here. This bed is smaller than the ones we usually use, isn't it?"

"Yes. We'll have to sleep closer, that's all."

"Good."

Because they stayed awake, talking and making love into the small hours, Oliver and Ruth were late getting up the next day. When the maid came in, bearing a tray, Ruth tried to burrow her way down the bedclothes, but Oliver drew her firmly to his side, explaining, once the maid had gone, "Now we have a witness. Your father won't be able to claim non-consummation or any such nonsense."

"Perhaps once," she began tentatively. "Do you think you're cured now?"

His laugh shook the bed. "Completely. Truthfully, I don't think there was much wrong with my ability to love. I've had time to think about it recently. I think I felt so terrible after my encounter with the Closes that I lost interest in it. That way trouble lies, you know? And when Charles died I was miserable for a while. Sex was the last thing on my mind. My conviction that I was incapable lay more in disuse and the state of my mind than any physical difficulty. Certainly now, all I have to do is look at you—" he moved and she felt the evidence for herself. He took her mouth in a bruising kiss and then threw the bedclothes aside and got out of bed to pour them both some tea. "I would be a monster if I denied you your morning dish of tea," he said.

She watched him, strong and supple, moving unselfconsciously to the tray and then back again. "I wouldn't have minded," she said, turning and deliberately allowing her breasts to show above the covers. He put the tea down on the nightstand and just stood and looked at her, the corner of his mouth quirked up and the expression in his eyes softened. "Later, sweetheart," he said and rejoined her in the bed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ruth ordered a bath and enjoyed the long, luxurious soak inordinately. Although her troubles were far from behind her, she felt happy and secure. She knew she would be cared for. Her only concern was the trouble people had gone to for her sake. Why they should do this passed her understanding; it never occurred to her that it might be because they liked her.

When she went downstairs Oliver was waiting for her and they took a late breakfast in the dining room, a new convention for Mrs. Thorne. "It used to be," she informed them, "everybody went to the kitchen. We'd clear the long table and the hands would come in from the fields for a bite. Sometimes I miss that."

"Why?" her son demanded.

She turned a fond look on to him. "Because that was the way I was brought up, dear and it's what I'm used to. Breakfast in the kitchen, dinner in the parlor or the dining room later on and an early night. I still go out and see to the hens some mornings. I don't seem to be able to sleep in."

"You'd find some difficulty in London, ma'am," Ruth told her. "People don't commonly get to bed much before five or six."

Mrs. Thorne threw back her head and laughed heartily. "Fools! Just think what they're missing!"

"They can get up equally early in the country," Oliver pointed out. "It depends where you are and what is happening. In the country there is the hunt and early morning walks, gardening and so on. In London day is turned into night for the fashionable set."

"You were a soldier, my lord," Mrs. Thorne stated. "That must have meant early mornings."

"Sometimes," said Oliver, his guarded look back again.

After breakfast George offered to take Oliver and Ruth around the garden. "My mother's turning it into a pleasure garden," he said. "Though she won't get rid of the kitchen garden."

"I should think not!" said Ruth, scandalized at the very idea. "Every house needs its kitchen garden!"

"Or its Home Farm," Edmund said, with a significant glance at Oliver.

When they reached the back door, Ruth realized she'd forgotten her bergere hat and the sun was out today. "I might get freckles," she said.

"I think you'd look adorable with freckles, but I'll fetch your hat." Oliver was happy to leave her in George's care and he suspected George would like to talk to her. Despite Ruth's protestations that George looked on himself as her brother, he suspected there might be something else, but he was secure enough in her love to know she wouldn't give him a moment's jealousy. So he tactfully made himself scarce.

Ruth and George moved down the garden, almost out of sight of the house. George showed her the new roses his mother had installed and was delighted to see the beginnings of small buds. He touched one with a callused but gentle finger. Ruth was reminded of the way he would hold baby ducklings and chicks. "A farmer at heart, George," she said.

"Aye and always will be," he responded. "It's what I was born to be and what I was."

"How are you taking to business?"

"Well enough. It has its interests and I can give some more jobs to needy men. Coal mining isn't the most pleasant job, but it pays well."

"Relatively."

"Aye."

They walked in companionable silence for a while. At least Ruth did, but George seemed increasingly uncomfortable, not meeting her gaze, turning away to talk nonsense about the land, things Ruth already knew and he must know she knew.

Eventually she could bear no more. "What is it, George? Come now!" She touched his sleeve. "I know you too well for that. You want to say something and you don't know how! Just say it."

George did look at her then and his good-natured face creased in a smile. "You know me too well! All right then, Ruth, it's this-how well do you know the man you've married?"

She answered without hesitation. "Very well. He's told me everything. The good parts and the bad ones. We talk a lot, George, about all sorts of things."

"I sort of noticed that. But Ruth-do you love him? Really? Do you know him well enough for that? Oh, tell me to go and duck my head if you like, I know I have no business asking, but since your brother died-well, I've sort of felt responsible for you!"

"That's all right, George, you have a perfect right to ask. Yes, I love him and yes, I do know him well enough. It's strange-it's almost as though I've known him forever."

"Good," George said.

"And I was going to ask you something, George. When all this is over, when my father is properly cared for, will you let Jessica come to us? I could give her a season. She'll do very well."

"Jess with a title?" George laughed. "I never thought of that. Even so, I'm sure she'd love it. But shouldn't you discuss it with your husband first?"

"I intend to. I just thought I'd see if you were willing. Would you like to come with her?"

George considered. "I might, just for a week or so. There are some things I've always wanted to see. And London certainly seems to have done you some good!"

Ruth smiled and began to tell him about London.

They were engrossed in their conversation, smiling and laughing together when they heard a voice behind them, from the gate to the fields. "Very pleasant. And I won't allow you to marry *him*, either!"

Ruth started and clutched George's arm. "Father!"

"I thought I might find you here. You're coming back with me, young lady. How I've managed to keep my hands off you so far I don't know, but this time you're in for a thrashing!" He opened the gate and came in. It was only then they saw he held a pistol in each hand.

"Father, you should be at home," said Ruth. Her voice was steady, but her eyes were large with fear. She no longer knew what mood he was in or what he would do.

"So should you. Come on. We'll have to walk; I didn't bring the carriage. Good day, Thorne! I'll thank you to let my daughter go."

He spoke as though this was an everyday occurrence. Except for the pistols it might have been.

"I can't come back with you, father."

"Why not? Engaged yourself for dinner have you? I'm sure Mrs. Thorne will

understand. And to be honest, I no longer care whether she does or not. This young man had the audacity to ask for your hand, Ruth! And you choose to spend time with him? He is not worthy of you, you know that. The only reason he dared was because of that wretched coal seam and he won't have that much longer!"

George stood up and tried to step in front of her, but Ruth pushed him aside. "If you do that he'll hurt you," she said, keeping her voice as calm as she could. "It's what he's waiting for. He won't hurt me, will you father?"

Lord Urswick shook his head. Then he winced and put one hand up, heedless of the gun he held. "God, I wish I could shake off this headache!"

"Does it trouble you father?"

He glared at her. "You're the cause of them! Never had a man such a willful, disobedient child! You will come home with me at once, miss and then we will see! How dare you run off? It was obvious where you'd run to, anyone could have guessed! Well you will not do so any more, I swear it and you will be watched night and day. I am making provision for you to be accepted into a most careful establishment, one made for people like you!"

She must keep him talking, stop him trying to take her. Surely Oliver would be here soon? She knew he was taking his time and giving her a chance to talk to George, but he would come along soon. If she could keep talking, make him talk, Oliver would hear his voice and be alerted to his presence.

"Father, I'm sorry you found me such a trial. Perhaps you're better off without me."

"I'm beginning to think so." Slowly he moved the pistol, so it pointed at her heart.

Ruth stared him in the face, ignoring the weapon trained on her. "If you do that you'll have no one left."

"If you do that," said a voice, "I'll kill you."

Oliver!

He stood up. He was behind the gate. His saber was strapped to his side and he held a pistol.

Lord Urswick whipped around. Ruth could see George tensing himself, ready to spring, but they were too far away for that. She put her hand on his arm. George glanced at her. "Don't argue with me, Urswick," Oliver said. "Drop the weapons and we'll go inside and discuss the matter."

"And if I kill you?"

"You won't." Ruth wasn't so sure. She ached for him. "Ruth, go back to the house."

"No!"

When Ruth stood up her father swung round and faced her once more. "You'll come back with me, young lady."

"No, father, I won't. I'll stay here with my husband."

"Husband!" Lord Urswick spat, something he would never have done in the presence of a lady in his right mind. "You have no husband. The man has enticed you, seduced you!"

"I thought you said he was impotent?" Ruth knew that couldn't hurt Oliver any more.

"So he is!" Her father blinked and shook his head as though a bee was buzzing around him. "Yes, but-but—" Behind him, Oliver transferred the pistol to his left hand and silently drew his sword. It flashed in the sun and the light made Urswick spin round to face him. They stared at each other. Oliver held his saber point down, but there was no

doubt of his ability to sweep it up if he had to. He fixed his target and waited.

"You sir, are a cad and a deceiver," said Urswick.

"I'll meet you if you wish," Oliver said. "Or I would, were you not my father in law."

"You are not! You have tricked my daughter, but you will not trick me!"

"Your daughter is of age. The only thing you can withhold is her dowry and I've married her without that. You cannot withhold your permission. She's of age, the deed is done. Had you been in your right mind, I would have suggested you live with us. Not now."

"So what will you do? Kill me?"

"If necessary."

"Will that make her love you?"

Ruth gave a small cry. So that was it! If Oliver killed him, she was supposed to repudiate her husband. She wouldn't do that, but it would drive a wedge between them. Oliver carried a burden of guilt from the time he spent serving his country. He'd done things he hadn't been proud of, but he'd told himself that was his duty and had done them. This would add to it, perhaps make his burden too hard to bear.

She had to do something, say something. "I love him, father and I always will. I love you too, you must know that." Slowly, Lord Urswick turned back and stared at her. Ruth felt Oliver's tension relax, but he watched carefully for his chance. Urswick moved aside a little. He could see any movement Oliver made out of the corner of his eye, while looking at his daughter. George stayed completely still, watching Oliver, ready to support him in any way he could.

"Father, every girl must leave home one day. And if she's lucky, she'll find someone like my husband, a kind, good man who wants to care for her. I love him, father, nothing will change that, nothing. I married him, in front of witnesses. If you kill him, I won't go back to you. I'll spend the rest of my life hating you. Do you want to do that to me, to yourself? Father, let me go, let us all go! Give yourself some peace and accept what is, instead of trying to recreate something that is past!"

For a long drawn out moment Lord Urswick stared at his daughter. He looked like the father she loved, the kind, thoughtful man she'd lived with before he'd changed. It nearly undid her. Forgetting the pistols, forgetting her husband poised behind him, she took a step forward. There might have been only the two of them there. "Father, please!" She held out her hand to him and the two younger men held their breath. Oliver quietly cocked the pistol and raised it.

Lord Urswick stared at his daughter, his eyes hangdog and sad. "I can't help it," he said, so softly she had to strain to hear. "I'm getting headaches so bad I think I'm going blind and I can't think properly. It's getting worse and worse. My dearest girl, I'm so sorry!" He lifted the pistol and fired.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Everything happened at once. George leapt at Ruth and bore her to the ground, while Oliver lifted his saber and took a controlled swing at Urswick's arm, the one he lifted. Urswick's pistol clicked uselessly against his own head. At the same time, Oliver's blade sliced into the limb and the arm fell uselessly to his lordship's side.

Blood poured from the wound, but Lord Urswick took no more notice of it than if it had been a scratch. He stared at Ruth, as though he couldn't get enough of her, hungry for any sight of her. She was leaving him, going away forever. Or was it him?

He lifted the pistol, pointed it at her, but she, brave girl, didn't move. Then he pointed it at his head but with a hefty kick Oliver put it beyond reach.

Ruth's anguished cry was muffled as George threw himself between her and the dreadful sight of all that blood, while Oliver dropped his sword and ripped at his neckcloth to tie the limb off and stop the terrible bleeding. George flung his arms around her and dragged her to his chest.

Oliver flung down his weapons, useless now and ran through the open gate to his wife. With a glance at his face, George relinquished her and stepped back. "I'll stay with him," he said. "I know what to do. It's no worse than a cut from a scythe." Oliver nodded and swung Ruth up into his arms, careful to obstruct her view of the man sprawled on the ground.

For the first time in her life Ruth fainted. Oliver felt her slump in his arms and was glad of it. He would be able to see her safe now and there was no question of her saying farewell to her father—he would be lucky to get out of this alive. For Ruth's sake and for his own, Oliver prayed he hadn't killed Lord Urswick. How could she look at her father's killer with anything but revulsion?

Carrying his wife back to the house he could feel the tears pricking his eyelids. This would hurt her. If the old man had planned it he couldn't do better. He still hadn't the faintest idea why the man should have become so unstable, but he guessed he'd been overset by the death of nearly all his family and it had slowly developed from there.

Reaching the house he strode straight through the kitchen and up to the parlor, laying Ruth carefully on the biggest sofa. Mrs. Thorne followed, her face creased in anxiety. Edmund entered the room precipitately and paled at the sight of his cousin, pale and unconscious.

Wasting no words, Oliver outlined the events and then Ruth began to stir. He'd hoped she would be asleep longer, but she recovered and passed her hand over her eyes.

Immediately he knelt by her side, smoothing his face into a deliberately bland expression. Mrs. Thorne hovered over him, with vinaigrette. The door opened and closed quietly, but Oliver didn't turn round.

"Oliver?" she quavered. She held out her hand and Oliver grasped it in his. "Is he—did he..?" she broke off, unable to articulate the word.

"George is looking after him," Oliver told her. It was all he could think of saying. Glancing up at George, who had come up to stand behind the sofa, he added, "He'll be on his way home now."

Ruth looked up at George and they exchanged a long stare. "I'm sorry all this should be brought to your door, George."

He shook his head impatiently. "Don't be foolish, Ruth, it was bound to come to—" he paused—"this some day. It wasn't too bad a cut, it just bled a lot. I called some hands to stretch him home. He'll live."

She turned back to Oliver, still holding her hand. "Shall we stay?"

"No. I'll take you home tomorrow or later today. As soon as we know your father is out of any danger. My home and yours. Edmund will take care of things here."

"Of course I will," said Edmund, from his station by the window. "You're not to worry, Ruth, I'll make all right here."

"Maybe you'd prefer to stay here," suggested Mrs. Thorne, "the Priory isn't very welcoming at present."

"I'd like that," Edmund moved to the door. "I'll go and ask for some tea."

The universal panacea, Ruth thought and quavered a smile. "May I sit up now?"

"If you think you can." Oliver helped her to sit and then took the place next to her, taking her hand in his once more.

"I feel numb," she said. "I don't feel a thing."

"It will pass," Oliver assured her. That was one reason he wanted her away from here. When her shock passed and grief struck he didn't want her faced with constant reminders of her father's current state of mind. With time she should be able to remember her father's happier years and push the last few terrible months to the back of her mind. For eighteen years of her life he'd been a good father to her. It was only when the madness struck him that it had all gone bad.

It didn't matter any more. It was over.

From the "Daily Gazette," November, 1754

It is with regret that the death of Charles, Lord Urswick is announced. Lord Urswick died peacefully at his home, The Priory in Yorkshire, attended by his heir, Mr. Edmund Urswick, now the new Baron Urswick. His late lordship's only surviving child, Lady Iveleigh, was unable to attend her father in his last hours, being in an Interesting Condition.

In February 1755, Ruth Bridgman, the countess of Iveleigh, gave birth to a son. His lordship, banned from her bedroom for the whole of the previous day, was finally allowed in to see his wife and son. Both were carefully washed and dressed, but nothing could have kept the tiredness from her face. Or the joy.

Ignoring the chair set for him beside the bed, Oliver sat on it and took her hand, smiling with happiness and relief. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected." She grimaced a little when she moved to give him some space. "And very smug."

"So you should be." For the first time, he looked at his son. The baby had a thicket of dark hair and blue, blue eyes, just like his wife's. It was too early to know if he would inherit his father's soft brown eyes, but Oliver hoped he wouldn't. He could never get his fill of looking into eyes so brilliantly blue.

He turned back to Ruth. "Thank you. It turned out rather well, didn't it?" He quirked a smile at her. She smiled back.

"It did. What shall we call him?"

"You did all the work. What do you want to call him?"

She smiled. "Charles. It was your brother's name. And my father's."

He gazed at her, tears misting his eyes, but he knew her too well now to prevaricate. "I'd like that. If it wouldn't bring you any sadness?"

"Or you. We've both lost someone called Charles," she reminded him. She reached for a letter on the night-stand, touching it but not picking it up. She didn't need to. She knew the contents by heart. "I'm glad we found out why my father went mad. They said the growth they found in his head would have driven him out of his mind."

He reached for her hand and gripped it, beyond words.

"Edmund said underneath it all he probably loved me just as he always had." Since she'd received Edmund's reassurance the letter hadn't left the small table. Oliver knew how much that had meant to her, that underneath her father's madness was the gentle, loving man she'd known in her childhood.

"Another letter has arrived, wishing us both well and asking for news. He says his courtship of the lovely Emma is proceeding apace. I expect a wedding as soon as her family will allow it." He was delighted to see her smile of pleasure, taking her mind off the melancholy decline in her father's health.

Ruth shifted restlessly and Oliver was quick to stand up and help her, putting his arm behind her shoulders to lift her against the banked pillows. Then he sat down again on the bed, holding her hand in his. "The midwife tells me everything went well and you should be up and about again soon."

"I hope so. I want you back in my bed."

"Hussy!"

They shared a smile. "Not at all," she said. "I want you to hold me. I sleep much better when you're here."

"As do I, my love, as do I."

She gripped his hand a little tighter, bringing his attention back to her. "We go forward now. There's only the future."

"And that, my sweet, will be as good as we can make it."

"Then it will be wonderful."

And it was.

The End

