



DISCREET YOUNG
GENTLEMAN
By
M.J. PEARSON

Seventh Window Publications

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Chapter one

A man is what he makes of himself, Dean Smith's father had always insisted. The words mocked him tonight to the clomp of the horses' hooves as his ancient coach jolted over the pitted road back to Carwick. A *man* is *what* he *makes* of *himself*, over and over in the gathering twilight.

A few hours earlier, Dean had decided that tonight he would make himself into a Fair-But-Stern-Landlord. He had carefully dressed the part, donning his most respectable long-tailed jacket, a somber black that had been new for his uncle's memorial service in May, adding an embroidered grey-and-white waistcoat purchased for the same occasion. Tied his cravat neatly, if without flair. Even hunted through his things for an old diamond tie-pin that used to be his father's, and setting it to glimmer demurely on the knot of his cravat.

As satisfied as he could be with his appearance, and borrowing confidence from his new position as Earl of Carwick, he had tucked Uncle Parm's account book under his arm and set out for the first of several farms which seemed not to have paid any rents for several years. Soon, Dean wouldn't need the arrears, but the money would stand him in good stead for the wedding next month.

"Eh? What's that? Rent?" Farmer Dickenson laughed in his face, emitting a cloud of onion and tobacco. The elderly man then shuffled over to a worn wooden box kept on a shelf by the fire, producing two scraps of paper. The first, unarguably in the peculiar chicken-scratch distinctive to his uncle, stated that one Mr. William Dickenson, of Windy Farm in the county of Worcestershire, was exempt from the payment of rent for a term ending at Christmas Quarter Day in the Year of Our Lord Eighteen-Hundred and Twenty-One.

Dickenson poked at the date. "Got more than six years left, young man." His rheumy eyes dared his visitor to insist on a more suitable form of address, and Dean feared if he tried, Dickenson would laugh at him again and bring up some nonsense of having dandled his new landlord upon his knee on some mythical past visit.

"But why?" Dean asked, handing the scrip back to the farmer.

"Adored my apple brandy, your uncle did. Few years back, I was hankering to move up to Yorkshire, to be near my daughter, see? Parm give me ten years free rent if I'd a stayed."

"Ten years? But that's—" Absurd. Eccentric. Indicative of no business sense at all. "Uncle Parm," Dean finished, shaking his head.

The farmer's second bit of paper sent Dean slinking off into the summer evening, tail firmly between his legs and any thought of visiting the other farms on his list in tatters. Not only was Mr. Dickenson to live rent-free for years to come, but shortly

before his death Uncle Parmenius had promised to bear full responsibility for a brand new apple barn, to be completed before harvest. The work, the old man pointed out, had best be started soon if Dean was going to fulfill his obligation in time. Dickenson would hate to have to bring the matter to court.

A man is what he makes of himself. Dean had made a right fool of himself tonight. Hell and damnation. How was he to pay for the barn? He'd been too proud to ask his future father-in-law for a loan thus far, and shrank from doing it now. Perhaps the workmen could be persuaded to extend him credit—after all, they wouldn't have to wait very long. He and Minerva would wed at the end of September, and after that—

A harsh wordless cry echoed from the driver's box, and Dean felt the carriage lurch as the horses crashed to a precipitate halt. "Erich," he called, "*Was ist das?*"

The answering voice did not belong to his coachman, being lower and richer of tone, and the words English. "Stand and deliver!"

"Oh, Christ." Dean took a brief second to bury his head in his hands. This, he was starting to think, was not going to rank among his favorite nights. Frustration welled up in him as he slowly opened the carriage door and unfolded the steps to the ground. He'd had reason to expect that he would end this day more prosperous than he'd begun it. Now, after losing ten years of rent and the price of a new barn, he was supposed to give up even his meager purse and his father's tie-pin? Dean halted on the steps, tight-lipped with anger.

The highwayman stood in the shadows on the road, a black horse looming behind him. His shirt billowed whitely in the fading light, the black mask covering the lower half of his face a dramatic contrast. A wide-brimmed hat covered his hair and shaded his eyes. In one hand he held a pistol, and a second was tucked into the wide scarlet sash at his waist. Dean glanced up at Erich on the driving box, and his hands curled into fists at the frozen look of fear on his coachman's face.

"That's right," the smooth voice said, amused, from beneath the black mask. "Your driver is being very sensible. I suggest you do the same." The robber took a step toward the coach.

Sensible? Erich was terrified. Red dots of fury danced in front of Dean's eyes, and without stopping for thought, he launched himself at the highwayman, hoping vaguely that the height advantage from the coach steps would work in his favor.

It did. With a cry of surprise, the robber folded backward onto the road, Dean atop him. There were taut muscles beneath the billowing shirt, strength in the wide shoulders, but the highwayman, apparently winded by the impact with the road, did not attempt to fight back. His gun flew from his grasp, skidding several feet down the roadway.

"Wait," the highwayman gasped. "This wasn't—"

"Shut up." Dean grabbed the second pistol from the man's sash, flinging it as far as he could into the bushes by the side of the road. A horse whinnied at the crash of gun

into brush, and Dean looked up to see the highwayman's mount wheeling and cantering off into the distance. He pulled himself onto his knees, staring down at the highwayman, who was still struggling for breath on his back. If a man is what he makes of himself, this man had failed to make himself a very effective criminal. Dean reached and pulled the black mask, which proved to be a length of heavy silk, from the robber's face.

The highwayman was younger than he would have expected, perhaps in his mid-twenties, and dark of hair and eye. "Get in the coach," Dean said. "I'll be taking you to justice for this."

The dark-haired man managed to draw a long breath, and incredibly, laughed. "Am I to assume," he said, "that you weren't expecting me?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course not." Dean herded the man into his carriage, calling a destination to his coachman. "Fraulein Minerva—zum Haus ihres Vaters, ja?"

"Honestly, I'm not a highwayman," the dark-haired man continued, settling into one of the worn leather seats. In the late-summer twilight creeping into the carriage, he looked remarkably calm for the circumstances. "Would I have made such a botch of it if I were?"

Dean, on the seat opposite, folded his arms, his breathing returning to normal. "One can, of course, understand my confusion. It's not so much the mask." He considered, tilting his head. "I'm not in with the dandy set, so I'd believe you if you said everyone's wearing them this season. And the pistol? I assume it's just a sensible precaution in these troubled times."

"It wasn't loaded, you know," said the other man, a hint of inappropriate amusement flickering in his dark eyes.

"More the fool you," Dean said mildly. "Now, the part where you blocked the road with your horse and shouted 'Stand and deliver!'. That was...?"

The highwayman laughed. "Poor Nell! Our little set-to scared the liver and lights out of her. She was a hire—I hope she finds her way back to the stable in town."

"A lesson learned: skittish horses are not an asset on the High Toby. Too bad you won't live to profit from it." It was a pity, in a way, that a man who faced his end with such apparent bravery had to die, and Dean couldn't help but wonder how the robber had turned out as he did. Perhaps he was one of the thousands of soldiers left to their own devices since Boney's defeat at Waterloo in June. Even so, becoming a highwayman was his own choice, and he had to suffer the consequences.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Dean's prisoner settled himself back against the coach cushions, raising a long-fingered hand to smooth his dark hair, disordered in their brief scuffle on the road. To Dean's disgust, the sleek locks fell instantly into place. The miscreant's mane was positively ruly, in sharp contrast to his own wiry hair, of an unfortunate shade of ginger.

The hair wasn't the man's only asset, either, Dean noted sourly. The highwayman's

legs, long and sculpted, displayed to advantage in skin-tight buckskins and knee-high Hessians. His fine linen shirt had been torn down the front, and the chest that gleamed through it was equally well-muscled, tapering to a trim waist. And although the light was too uncertain to see clearly, Dean was unaccountably sure that the smooth skin sported not even a single disfiguring freckle. Oh, women would weep when this one dangled on the gallows.

Grooming seen to, the highwayman continued. "It was a simple mistake, sir. I thought you were someone else."

Dean raised his brows, so pale as to be almost invisible. "Obviously. Someone who wouldn't fight back."

The other man threw back his head and laughed, a merry sound. "I'm not much of a fighter, but you were remarkably handy with your fists." A tone of admiration crept into his voice as he assessed Dean's physique. "But perhaps you box to keep fit? The speed with which you disarmed me was quite—"

"Excuse me," Dean said. "But in this case, flattery will get you absolutely nowhere."

Gazing at him sidelong through a thicket of black lashes, the highwayman murmured, "Pity, that."

"Yes, I'm sure you would prefer not to face justice. But the laws are rather unambiguous on this one, I'm afraid." Dean frowned, reminding himself that the man was a criminal, and deserved death. Of course he did. "And don't think you can charm the magistrate, either. He's my future father-in-law, and knows the sort of man I am. He'll accept my story as the gospel truth."

His captive leaned forward, placing a warm and conciliatory hand on Dean's knee. "Listen. When I said I thought you were someone else, I meant it. Obviously you thought I was a highwayman—I was playing the part of one. It was a sort of prank." He gave the knee a pat and withdrew.

"A sort of prank." Dean's hazel eyes narrowed. Was it possible?

"Honestly. If I were really a hardened criminal, wouldn't I have loaded the pistol?" The dark-haired man's smile was winsome.

The horses slowed, and the coachman rapped on the roof to signal that they were approaching the magistrate's house.

"And if I had been this other person, I would somehow have been amused by this? Quickly now, you have about ten seconds before someone comes out to see why we're here."

"I swear to you. This was all arranged in advance, and the gentleman in question was expecting me. If you had been the Earl of Carwick—"

"Oh, you stupid fool," Dean said softly, banging on the coach roof. In response, the coachman hallooed the house, and almost instantly a voice called a reply. "Allow me to introduce myself. Dean Smith, Earl of Carwick, and I most definitely was not

expecting to be robbed tonight, in fun or in earnest. Magistrate Lewis will hang you for this."

"Lewis? Oh, Christ. Please. Drive on." The highwayman's face was pale at last. "We must discuss this—"

There were voices outside, approaching the carriage, and among them Dean recognized the deep rumble of his fiancée's father. "It is too late. You know the name, so Lewis knows you. He knows you're a highwayman."

"No," the other man said. "He knows I'm a prostitute."

And then the door to the coach opened.

The interview that followed in the magistrate's office would stand among the most unpleasant experiences of Dean's life. Mr. Lewis, portly and prosperous, was not at all happy to find his future son-in-law alone in a coach with a male strumpet, both of them showing signs of obvious disorder. Neither of Dean's companions helped the issue. The highwayman rolled his eyes and fiddled with his torn shirt while Dean sputtered through his accusation. When pressed for his own story, the dark-haired man hesitated for a moment before confiding, "I feel somewhat at a disadvantage here. His lordship said you would accept whatever he told you as the gospel truth."

"Did he now?" Mr. Lewis's tones were icy. He beckoned to Dean's coachman, standing several paces back by the office door. "You there—come forward. Your version now, and be quick about it. What happened? And don't you carry a gun for protection against thieves?"

The coachman approached with reluctance, blinking worried brown eyes. "Mein Herr?"

"Erich doesn't like guns, and he doesn't speak English," Dean said impatiently. "Just listen to me—"

"He's a witness." Lewis rose from his polished mahogany desk, its size designed to awe and intimidate. "Surely he can stumble through a basic explanation?"

"Oh, Christ. Erich, help me—er..." His German, though improving steadily over the past few months, had a tendency to fly from his head in times of stress. "Kannst du mir helfen? Erkläre dem...dem...magistrate—oh, hell, dem Mann auf Englisch—" Erich stared at him blankly. "Hell and damnation. Mr. Lewis, I can translate for him."

"And what good would that do? Am I to rely on your version of his words?"

"It's the truth!" Dean shouted.

"The *gospel* truth?" Mr. Lewis glared, hands on his substantial hips.

"Why wouldn't you believe me?" Dean was just able to stop himself from grabbing one of the heavy volumes of Blackstone's *Commentaries* from the shelf and throwing it at someone. "Why on earth would I bring this man to you if he hadn't tried to rob me?"

The accused highwayman lowered his eyes. "Bit of a misunderstanding, Magistrate, about—about certain... expectations. Um...how shall I put this?"

Lewis held up one hand, grimacing. "Spare me the details— please. Listen, Rob, I've warned you before to stay out of Worcester. If you ever appear before me again, I will deport you to Van Diemen's Land, is that clear?"

The prostitute nodded, his pose contrite.

"Good," Lewis said. "You have until dawn to clear the county line." He turned back to Dean. "And you, Carwick. We will keep this quiet, of course. If your filthy vices become known, it won't be through me. But if you ever come near Minerva again, I swear I'll denounce you to the world for the vile, unnatural creature you are."

Dean's face flamed as red as his hair. "You can't—"

"Yes, I can." The magistrate's voice was cold, his face set. "Your engagement to my daughter is over. Now get out of my sight!" "Sir." Dean bowed stiffly. Through his tumult, he was vaguely aware of the dark-haired man—Rob, the magistrate had called him—holding the door for him and following him outside the house.

"I'm sorry," Rob said. "But if he'd believed you, he would have hanged me for a highwayman, and I'm not. Your engagement wasn't worth dying for."

Dean shook himself. "Not in your opinion. I'm ruined. Jesus Christ," he whispered as it sunk in. "It's true. I'm ruined."

"There are plenty of women in the world." The prostitute reached to lay a hand on Dean's arm, then dropped it as the other man stiffened. "You're an earl, and a fine-looking man at that. You'll find another."

Dean dismissed the compliment as an empty courtesy. Fine looking? With his unfortunate hair, eyes of an indeterminate color, and damned freckles all over his face and body? He cast a glance of pure loathing at Rob, whose unmarked skin shone luminous in the light of the rising three-quarter moon. "There are no other women. I need Minerva."

A wistful expression flitted across Rob's face. "You care for her very much?"

Dean looked away. "Of course I do."

"I'm sorry. Truly." There was an awkward silence. "Look, dawn comes early these days, and I doubt I'll find my horse again. Good luck to you, my lord." The man bowed and started down the road.

"Herr Graf?" Erich, never the most cheerful of souls, sounded more anxious than ever.

"What is it?" Dean replied in German, staring after the dark-haired stranger. None of this made any sense.

"That *Straßenräuber*—I didn't think he would hurt you," Erich said soberly in the same language.

In context, the unfamiliar word wasn't that difficult to figure out. *Straße*, he knew, meant street, or road. Road-robber. Highwayman. Erich was apologizing, in his own way, for not coming to his defense. And maybe he had a point: the man didn't seem like a violent criminal. There was so much he didn't understand—he had to know

more. "Das ist schon in Ordnung, Erich," he said gently, taking a moment to search for the right words before continuing in the still-unfamiliar tongue. "But help me now. We have to catch him, all right?"

The coachman nodded, looking determined to make up for his earlier lapse. They took off in pursuit of the would-be robber, Erich skidding the horses to a stop just beyond him. Dean leapt from the coach. "Wait, damn you! Is there any truth to your story at all? Did someone hire you to play the highwayman with me?"

Rob met his gaze steadily. "Yes."

"I still don't quite— You're a—"

"Whore. Yes, I am. It was playacting—a fantasy come true. I was supposed to stop your coach, and then decide it wasn't your money I wanted. Undress you at gunpoint. Overcome your token resistance. Take you into the coach and—"

Dean winced. "I get the picture." He ran a hand through his wiry curls. "Why the hell...? Oh, Christ, I'm slow tonight. Whoever it was knew that I wouldn't—that I'd fight back. And the spot where you stopped us is so close to Lewis's, it's only logical I would have taken you there. So I have to assume the whole purpose was to disrupt my engagement."

The other man shrugged. "He told me you just needed a good screw."

Dean could feel his face burn. "Who? Who told you that? Who hired you?" "I couldn't say." "Couldn't? Or wouldn't?"

"My lord, let it go." Rob looked down the road. "If you'll excuse me?"

"No. I can't. I have to know who did this to me."

"I'm sorry. I can't help you. Even if he mentioned his name, I couldn't tell you what it is now."

"What did he look like? Dress like? Smell like, for Christ's sake?" Dean felt his hands ball into fists of helpless fury. "Give me a clue, here!"

"All right, all right. Give me a moment, I only met the man when he gave me the commission." Rob's brow furrowed. "Medium height. Brown eyes."

"Like yours?"

"Well, perhaps not so..." Gorgeous, Dean thought in disgust, "...dark," the prostitute continued. "I suppose they could have been hazel. Medium-brown hair. Well, brownish, anyway."

"Brownish hair, brownish eyes, medium height. That could be Erich, or Lewis, or half of England!"

"I'm sorry. I'm bloody awful with descriptions, aren't I? For what it's worth, I'd know him if I saw him." Rob paused. "He might have said something about Bath, if that helps."

"Bath?" At last, a glimmer of light pierced through the clouds of confusion. "God damn it! Minerva's there now, at her aunt's."

"So?"

"There's our motive, right there. Whoever he is, he's after Minerva for himself, and now that he's got me out of the way, he'll be wooing her."

The prostitute looked dubious. "I think you're making too much of this. It might have just been a joke, not a devious plan to spoil your engagement."

"A joke?" Dean stared. "Suppose I'd been carrying a pistol? You could be dead now. Suppose Lewis had been out, and I'd dragged you to another magistrate—one who did believe me? Suppose—" He couldn't finish the thought out loud: suppose Rob had been a little luckier in their fight, and mistook his struggles for 'token resistance.' "Damned dangerous joke, if you ask me."

"Excuse me, my lord. I don't see how else I can help you, and I still have a long way to go. If you'll permit...?"

Dean folded his arms. "No. I will not permit. All we have to do is go to Bath, and see for ourselves who's hanging after Minerva."

"We?"

"Yes, damn it. I need you to identify the man who hired you to ruin me."

Rob lifted an expressive hand. "So what? You'll know your rival. What then? Pistols at dawn? Very romantic, Lord Carwick, at least in theory. I understand that getting shot is actually quite painful and messy, and I'd prefer not to have anything to do with it."

"No, you idiot! A duel won't get me Minerva back. But what might is some sort of proof that I was set up tonight. If I can convince Mr. Lewis that things weren't as he imagined, then I have a chance."

"Oh, blast." The prostitute appeared to be considering it. "Would it kill you to say 'please'?"

"Look, Rob, if I can't get Minerva back— Oh, Christ, my life is over." Dean closed his eyes in misery, and felt a warm hand on his shoulder.

"She must be very special." Silence for a moment. "Listen. I'll tell you right out: I don't think you're going to get Miss Lewis back, even if she wishes it. Her father's taken against you, and he's known to be a stubborn bastard. But I could use a lark, so I'll come with you to Bath if you want me to. I'll do what I can to help you plead your case to the lady."

Dean rubbed his eyes. "Get in the coach, then. We'll stop for the night at Carwick, and leave for Bath first thing in the morning." He rapped on the door to get his coachman's attention. "Nach Hause, Erich!"

"All right." Rob climbed into the coach. "But I still think you should have said 'please.'"

Chapter Two

Dean was silent as they approached Carwick House, located in the countryside several miles to the southwest of Worcester. In the daytime, the old stone manor made an attractive picture, with the Malvern Hills rising beyond, and the Little Stream gurgling through a wooded park on its way to rejoin the River Teme. At night, though, Carwick House was dark and mysterious, barely glimpsed against the looming hills.

"Is that it?" Dean's passenger leaned out the coach window for a better view. The right front wheel chose that moment to hit a rut of unholy size, and the young man's head banged painfully against the top of the sill. Served him right for his curiosity.

"Ow." Rob grinned and rubbed his head. "The house looks dark, my lord."

If there was a question implied, Dean ignored it. Once they'd stopped, he descended from the carriage, addressing the coachman with a mixture of German and broad pantomime. "Abendessen, Erich. Haben wir...oh, hell." The word escaped him. He took a small book from his jacket, *Schade's New and Complete Pocket Dictionary of the English and German Languages*, and consulted it. "Haben wir Koteletts, or something?"

The servant, a thin young man with brown hair and a faint scar on his upper lip, nodded soberly. "Ja, Herr Graf."

Rob watched the exchange with interest. "Can't your coachman speak any English?"

"No."

"Then why—?"

Dean remembered that he was the Earl of Carwick now and stiffened his back, the better to remind Rob that he was being impertinent. "Erich suits me. If it's any of your business."

"My apologies, my lord." Rob followed him onto the steps leading to the front door, lingering to look up at the facade. "The house looks old."

"The foundations date back to the 1300s, I'm told. But it's burned a few times, so I think most of the current building is Jacobean or something."

"Tudor, more likely," Rob said absently.

"Weren't Tudor buildings usually half-timbered?"

"Half-timbering was a money-saving device. Presumably, your ancestor could afford stone throughout. But the E-shape of the wings is typical Elizabethan construction. Meant as flattery to the queen, of course."

Dean scowled. "You must learn so much from your patrons."

The man didn't seem to take offense easily. "Not so much, my lord. I had an uncle who was interested in architecture, and enjoyed lecturing me about it."

"Come inside. Erich will cook us some chops for supper, and we can make plans."

Dean marched down a hallway of closed doors and shuttered windows, wondering

what his guest made of its few pieces of furniture, draped in sheets. Their destination, a small sitting room, wasn't in too bad repair. Perhaps the velvet sofa his guest settled upon was a hundred years old, heavy and dark, but it was in fair shape. For its age. Dean rekindled the fireplace and used rushlights to light the room's tallow candles. He was acutely conscious of the lack of new-fangled gas fixtures, or servants rushing to perform these tasks, but thankfully the prostitute refrained from comment. If nothing else, he was courteous.

Dean lifted a bottle from a tray on the table nearest the window. "I don't have any strong spirits in the house. Will wine do?"

"Yes, thank you."

He poured them each a glass of burgundy, ruby-red in the candlelight, then settled into a wing-backed chair across from Rob. "Now. We have to come up with some reason for you to be traveling with me." He looked at his guest with narrowed eyes. "Will we need to avoid staying in public hostelrys? To avoid meeting anyone you.. .you've...?"

Rob lifted his brows, sipping at his wine. "If we did, do you think it's likely that he'd call vow names in public? But I don't think it's probable we'll meet any on the road. Most of my.. .companions... have been older gentlemen who don't mingle much in Society."

Dean's lip curled. "Forgive me for not knowing how such things are arranged."

He received a cool glance in return. "I don't work the streets, my lord. Tonight's commission was too intriguing to pass up, and would have been quite—" Dean shot him a look, causing the prostitute to abandon that thought. "But most of my custom comes through referrals. There are a handful of gentlemen I visit at their homes on a regular basis, and I meet others through advertisements in the *Times*."

"The *Times*!" Dean stared. "You cannot be serious."

Rob smiled. "*Discreet young gentleman required to act as traveling companion for tour of Tuscany. Must be clean, presentable, and have excellent personal habits. What on earth did you think such notices were about? If a man just wanted someone to write his letters home and fight with the concierge on his behalf, he'd take a nephew or friend's son, wouldn't he?*"

"Bloody hell," Dean muttered. "I'll never think of the *Times* in quite the same way again."

"Of course, I usually have to write the letters home as well." His mouth twisted. "But only if they insist."

Dean eyed him with suspicion. "You are clean and presentable, and you speak well for a...for what you are. Why haven't you found a respectable position somewhere? Or do you just not care to?"

"That, my lord, is another story." Rob folded his arms, chin lifted, clearly daring

the earl to press further.

Dean broke eye contact first, reaching for his glass. In its reflection, the firelight made his hair glow orange. He grimaced. "I can't pass you off as a relation, or an old school friend. Everyone who knows me will know you aren't."

"A servant?"

"Hardly. If you're right, and the man who hired you to accost me is indeed a gentleman, you'll need to travel in my circles to identify him. How on earth am I to introduce you?"

"What's wrong with: 'This is my friend, Rob'?"

"Friend?" He knew he sounded appalled, and flushed.

Rob looked at the floor. "Friend of a friend, then. Or maybe someone a crotchety old uncle insisted you show around Bath for a few days. You don't have to actually pretend to like me."

"I do have several crotchety old uncles," Dean admitted. "Seven of them, at last count. It's not impossible. But you'll have to stop calling me 'my lord,' if we're to appear to be on intimate terms."

"What shall I call you, then? Carwick?"

"Just call me Dean. Smith is too common, and Carwick too new for me to remember to answer to it—I've held the title for only a few months."

"Oh. I'm sorry." It sounded like true sympathy in the prostitute's voice. "About your father, I mean."

"Thank you, but he died over ten years ago. The last Lord Carwick was one of those uncles I was telling you about, and not particularly missed." Nor was his father, but that was hardly relevant to this conversation. Dean gestured around the room. "My uncle was a bit of a recluse—the place all but fell to pieces about him. But there's no sense in spending a fortune putting it to rights when Minerva will just change it all again once we're married. She'll want to hire her own staff as well, in case you were wondering. Erich is sufficient to look after me."

Rob looked around the room, shabby but presentable, the tables gleaming with polish. "He takes care of the whole place?"

"A couple of charwomen come from the village to clean, if it matters." Dean frowned, realizing they were getting into subjects that were of no concern to someone he barely knew—and wouldn't choose to know, if necessity hadn't thrown them together. He dragged the conversation back on track. "You're to call me Dean, then."

"Fine. I go by Robert, but prefer Rob." "And your last name is?"

"Well, since Smith already seems to be taken, let's make it...I don't know." He tugged at a lock of sable hair. "Black. Robert Black will do."

"But your real name?"

Rob looked up, meeting his host's eye. "I have family too, and out of respect for them, I don't use it." "But—"

There was tension in every line of the prostitute's body. "Ever."

Dean nodded shortly. "Fine. You're the son of one of my uncle's cronies, and I'm showing you around Bath as a favor." He hesitated. "Will I owe you a fee?"

"I've already offered to help you find the man who hired me, and I consider that a favor for the trouble I've caused you." Rob relaxed, his lips twitching in mischief. "Now, if there are other services you're interested in..."

Dean's back stiffened, and once again he felt a damnable flush flooding his face. "There most certainly aren't."

"Of course not," Rob agreed, contrite. "I was forgetting Miss Lewis."

"Do you live nearby? We'll need to pick up some things for you as soon as I'm packed."

"I hadn't thought of that. I'm based in Hereford for now—forty miles in another direction. Depending on the roads, that could add a few days."

Dean drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, releasing little puffs of dust. "We can't take the time. You'll have to borrow some of my clothes. Do you think we're close enough in size?"

"Stand up, and let's see." Rob rose and crossed to stand before the mirror hanging over the fireplace. Dean joined him, allowing his companion to consider their relative size in the reflection. "We're not so far apart," Rob said. "Right height, at least." He turned to face Dean, using his hands to measure the earl's shoulders. Dean had to fight to keep himself from shivering at the unaccustomed touch, trying to remember the last person who had put hands on him as many times as Rob had already in their brief acquaintance. "You might be just slightly broader through the trunk and shoulders," the prostitute continued, "but probably not enough to signify. If a few adjustments do turn out to be desirable, does Erich act as your valet as well?"

"If such a thing were necessary, I suppose he would. But if we're this near in size, I don't see any reason to bother."

"You don't need a valet?" Rob dropped his hands from Dean's shoulders, resuming his spot on the velvet sofa.

"Why everyone thinks a full adult needs another man to help him get dressed is beyond me." Dean sat as well, hand tightening on his wineglass. He'd been discomfited enough by the prostitute's hands on him just now. Imagine another man touching him like that, every day... "Do you have a valet?"

"Of course not. But you're an earl."

"And therefore incapable of buttoning my own waistcoat?"

"Stop scowling like that." A smile tugged at the corners of Rob's mouth. "I'm sure you're very capable."

"Well, I am," Dean muttered, feeling childish and unsettled. "Right. You'll borrow my clothes. We'll take the coach and pair. I'll need to visit a friend first, to—to—for an obligation I have to take care of, but that should still get us to Bath in, what? Four,

maybe five days if the weather holds. If we're lucky and find our culprit right away, we should be free of each other within a week."

"A week. I can manage that." Rob lifted his glass. "To a pleasant and successful journey." Dean didn't smile. "To a successful journey."

Chapter Three

In the moonlight, the highwayman's eyes were dark and liquid above the mask that covered the lower half of his face. The pistol in his hand was absolutely steady. Mesmerized, Dean held out his own hand, gold watch in his open palm.

"That's not what I want from you. " The highwayman stepped closer, and the watch fell from Dean's nerveless fingers, making a dull clank as it hit the road. Dean backed up a step, his back brushing against the carriage behind him. He could retreat no further. He closed his eyes, breath coming in gasps, as warm fingers touched his face, trailed down his neck. His cravat was loosened and pulled from his throat, and then the hand was gone.

"Take off your shirt, " the highwayman said.

Startled, Dean opened his eyes, and focused on the pistol in the other man's hand. Of course. Undressing is a two-handed job. Of their own volition, Dean's hands rose and began fumbling with his buttons. In dream logic he knew, without looking down at his exposed chest, that the moonlight was washing away his unfortunate freckles, making him look practically normal. Or there would be no reason for the heat in the highwayman's gaze, the low, throaty tone to his voice as he uttered his next command. "Now your trousers."

Dean awoke trembling, reaching by reflex for the length of blue ribbon he kept under his pillow. The idea of a man touching him should be appalling. And it was, wasn't it? Of course it was. He twisted the ribbon around his wrist, calming. There had been women in his university days. True, most of his experiences had been drunken encounters with Cambridge fancy girls, but surely he'd acquitted himself well enough to imagine he was anything like Rob and his ilk.

Obviously he wasn't like that. He was merely trapped in an unusual situation now, so it was hardly surprising that he'd dreamt about it. Before long he quieted and drifted back toward sleep. Still, Dean's last coherent thought was that the quicker he was rid of the damnable prostitute, the better.

They breakfasted in the same parlor in which they'd dined the night before, one of the few rooms Dean had bothered to open at Carwick since he'd assumed the title back in May. The grey light of early morning was less kind than candlelight to the threadbare drapes and worn oriental carpet. His guest tactfully failed to notice, but then again, as Dean was perversely satisfied to find, the man was not much of a morning person. Rob was mostly silent and heavy-eyed over his breakfast, lacking the easy grace and verbal facility he had displayed the previous evening. Apart from a mumbled thanks for the coffee and rolls Erich brought them, he didn't converse. Which was fine with Dean. Seeing one of his own shirts on the prostitute did not

sweeten his own mood. Tailored for Dean, it looked much better on Rob. God damn him.

Rob poured another cup of coffee, closed his eyes and inhaled the steam.

"Not used to getting up early?" Dean inquired tartly. "Not used to staying up late." Dean snorted.

Rob opened his eyes and glared at him. "I told you I don't walk the streets."

"No," Dean taunted, "you're a perfectly respectable whore. Used by one little old man every third Sunday, who barely touches—"

Rob set his cup down with a thump. "Stop it!" He took a breath. "Excuse me, my lord. I am what I am, and I've been.. .touched... plenty. But—and perhaps it's a subtle difference to you—I don't take on a dozen strangers a night. I have a select clientèle of older gentlemen, whom I visit anywhere from twice a week to once a month."

"Old men?" Dean pictured crabbed, blue-veined claws on Rob's firm young flesh and couldn't contain a shudder. "How can you stand it?"

Rob sighed and rubbed his eyes. "It's the stories."

"The what?"

"Never mind. I just can."

"But for how long? You're not going to be young and handsome forever."

"I hope to have enough put aside so that I can stop this in a few years. If it's any of your business." The prostitute reached for a roll and began picking it apart. Very little of it reached his mouth.

"So you don't like it," Dean stated. "Why do it, then?"

"We aren't all born to the purple, my lord."

"Ha," Dean said. "Yet most men find an honest career. Why not you?"

Rob's mouth twisted. "Perhaps there's little else I'm suited for. Could we please change the subject?"

"Or little else that would let you retire by the time you're thirty? Oh, guten Morgen, Erich."

The servant extended a wrapped bundle, the size and shape of a ledger. "Dieses Buch ist für Sie gekommen, Herr Graf."

"Danke." Dean looked at the item and scowled. "The Quarterly. I can't face my family just now."

"The Quarterly?" Rob pushed at the plate holding the tattered remains of his roll, and reached to pour them both more coffee.

Dean handed the book back to Erich. "Put it in the coach, uh, in *die Kutsche*. The Quarterly is a book that acts as a sort of circulating letter amongst my family. Each of us adds whatever news we have to the ledger, then sends it on. Since it takes roughly three months to make the rounds, we call it the Quarterly."

Rob's smile was bright and false. "Think of the fun you'll have describing this venture."

"I liked you better when you were quiet," Dean stood up with such force his chair fell over. "Finish your coffee," he said, righting it with a scowl. "It's time to go."

"Fine." The prostitute rose to follow his host to the entry hall.

Dean paused at the door. "Erich packed us each a bag. Yours is the one on the right."

Rob stared, then slowly reached out a hand and picked up the wrong bag.

"Idiot," Dean hissed, snatching it from him.

Rob flinched, and claimed the other valise. "Sorry, my lord. It's early yet."

"Go on out to the carriage. I have to lock up."

Dean finished his task and approached the carriage. A large and bulky closed coach, it, like the parlor, did not show to advantage in the chill light of morning. The Carwick coat of arms had once

been displayed on the doors, but had been so badly faded and peeling when he'd inherited that he'd covered them over with a coat of plain black paint. Just as well. Dean was not one who enjoyed calling attention to himself. He frowned to notice his companion of necessity talking to the coachman.

"See here, Erich. Horse." Rob patted the neck of one of the pair, a pretty bay mare. "One horse, two horses. See?"

Erich stared at him, unsmiling and wary. "Ein Pferd. Zwei Pferde."

Dean dropped his valise in on the ground. "Stop that. It doesn't do any good." "But my lord, if he's going to live here in England—" "Just get in the coach."

Rob shrugged and complied, but concern darkened his finely-cut features. He waited until Dean was settled on the leather seat across from him before speaking. "Don't you think it's a mite selfish, my lord? It might be convenient to have a servant who doesn't understand your conversations, but I imagine it must be blasted hard on him to try to function in a world where he can't communicate."

"He does all right," Dean muttered. "And if you must know, I'm not deliberately keeping him ignorant. Erich has a problem, that's all. He simply cannot learn English."

Rob frowned. "He can't learn it? What do you mean? Is he dim-witted?"

"He's not dim-witted—it's just...it's just..." Dean blew out a breath. He didn't owe this man any explanations, but it didn't seem fair to Erich not to defend him. "It's just the way he is. He's missing something, do you see? Like—like my Uncle Silas's housekeeper Holly, who can't tell red from green. There's no sense getting angry with her if she matches the wrong napkins to the tablecloth, she just can't see the difference."

A light flickered behind Rob's eyes. "That's something you have sympathy for? The inability to learn something?"

Dean looked out the window. "He works cheap. But don't try to teach Erich any more English. In the end, it will just upset him."

Rob nodded. "It's a good thing you speak some German."

"I don't. I've been picking it up from a book, and what Erich teaches me."

"Then it was even more admirable of you to take him on." It was softly said, and the tone was like a warm hand stroking along Dean's spine.

He shook himself. "Don't be stupid. There's nothing to admire about me."

Rob regarded him silently for a long moment. "I disagree. Most employers are less tolerant than you." "Oh. You have tried other work, then?"

The prostitute looked out the coach window at the bright August day, but his eyes didn't seem to focus on the rolling green hills, flecked bright red here and there with wild poppies and dotted with sheep. "Let's just say I have few skills to fall back on."

"What do you mean? Can't you read?"

"I can read."

"What, then?"

Rob's hands clenched in his lap. "You've said it yourself: I'm stupid."

Dean blinked. "You don't seem to be."

"Oh? Ask my teachers. They got tired of trying to beat sense into me, and tossed me out of school when I was twelve."

Dean shook his head. "Even so—at what point do you wake up one morning and think: I know, I'll sell myself to other men for money? I'd rather starve."

"Would you? Oddly, the people who say that are rarely the ones who've ever been in danger of it. You should try being hungry, it might open your mind."

"Never to that point."

Rob rubbed a long-fingered hand across his eyes. "What's the use? You'll never understand. I have nothing but my looks—"

A bark of harsh laughter escaped the earl. "And I have—what? Everything but?"

The other man looked at him curiously. "You're joking. You're a very attractive man."

Dean flushed. "Don't speak nonsense. I've been ugly all my life."

"Ugly? Hardly."

Dean looked back out the window. "Someone like you can never understand what it's like to be teased for your looks."

"No," Rob said softly. "I was never teased for something so insignificant."

Dean didn't respond, trapped in a repeating cycle of memories: Six years old, looking up at his mother with starry adoration, only to hear her sigh and say, "If only he'd got his father's skin."

The other children at school: "Hey, Ginger! What kind of pox is THAT?"

Shaking in his boots, the first visit to a brothel. "I'll take the dark one. Susan can have the orange spotty one."

Even complete strangers jeered at him in the street. "Hip, Michael," they'd shout, "yer hair's on fire!"

Insignificant, indeed. Dean rubbed at one freckled forearm, wishing he could

smooth the hated marks away. He flicked a glance at Rob, and let his gaze linger when he saw the other man was staring out the window, lost in his own thoughts. A man as handsome as that could have no idea.

And the ride continued in silence until it was nearly time to stop for luncheon.

Chapter Four

They circled around Worcester, avoiding the market traffic, then took the eastern road in the direction of Stratford upon Avon. The detour to visit Dean's friend Peter Chesterfield would set them back half a day, but the delay was a necessary evil. In the coach, Dean consulted a map, trying his best to hold it steady while the poorly-sprung carriage jounced over uncertain roads. "As long as the weather remains fine, we'll be back on the Bristol road tonight, and reach Tewkesbury just after sundown."

"I wouldn't mind a light rain shower to dampen the dust." Rob coughed, again.

Dean tossed his map aside, pulling the shade back down over the window. "This old coach is too heavy to be much good on muddy roads, so believe me, a little dust is preferable. Pray it stays dry."

Rob rolled his eyes. "This is England. Rain is an utter certainty. Unless, of course, one absolutely needs it. Italian summers are much more civilized."

"Are they? Isn't it damned hot over there?"

"Not as hot as Greece. And in the hills around Tuscany, it's cool and pleasant in the evenings."

"Well." Dean leaned back against the leather seat. "At least your profession lets you see the world."

Rob raised his brows. "I should think an earl with a large estate would have the opportunity to travel, if he willed it."

"Carwick is a prosperous estate," Dean admitted. "But it will take years to set to rights after my uncle's neglect, before it becomes profitable enough to support gadding about the Continent. So if you were hoping to snare a new patron, forget it. I mean, even if I had the least bend in that direction. Which I certainly do not. Obviously." He remembered his dream of the night before, and hoped the shaded windows blunted the effect of his crimson cheeks.

But perhaps discreet young gentlemen don't make a habit of noticing other people's embarrassment. Rob just smiled. "Of course not. Tell me, is Miss Lewis very beautiful?"

"Minerva is said to be the prettiest girl in Worcester," Dean said. "And I'm told she has marvelous taste: her couture is the envy of all the other ladies."

"Does she—?"

"Wait. The coach is slowing." Dean untied the shade and peered out. "Yes, this is Alcester. I told Erich to stop here so we can eat. And not a minute too soon, I'm starving." He rolled up the shade so they could see the village, a pretty little market town on the River Alne. Dean expected Rob to hang out the window for a better view, and he wasn't disappointed.

"Look, my lord." Rob pointed down the cobbled High Street at a large two-story building. The bottom half of it was built of grey and brown stone, rounded arches

framing each window, while the upper story was cheerfully patterned in rectangles of white plaster framed by dark wooden beams. "Now there's half-timbering for you."

"I think that's the old Town Hall, if I remember correctly," Dean said. "My friend Peter and I used to ride over here instead of Stratford, on the off chance we could keep his mother from knowing we were having a few drinks. Tudor buildings all over the place—look, there's a whole row of timber-framed shops."

Rob craned his head to look. "Nice." He nodded his head toward the church at the far end of the High Street, a clock hanging oddly on one corner of the tower. "Unusual church. What's it called?"

Dean racked his brain, calling up the days when he and Peter had been frequent visitors to the town. "St. Nicholas, I believe. The tower is.. .Norman?"

"Perhaps not quite so old." Rob squinted back down the street. "14th, 15th century. Where shall we dine?"

"I suppose you'll want the Swan. It's fairly new, very clean, and the food is good."

"I can get that anywhere," Rob protested. "A town this well-preserved must have something with a bit of history to it."

"Well..." Dean hesitated. "If you want character, there's the Red Lion. It's old enough to have crumbs under the tables dropped by Saxon knights—and probably does. I doubt the floor's been swept since the Conquest."

Rob grinned in pure delight. "Sounds wonderful. Are we likely to suffer much from the food?"

Dean felt himself smiling in return. "Not if we stick to bread and cheese. And the witch's ghost doesn't curse us."

"There's a ghost? How fascinating!"

"You can't believe in such things."

"No, not really," Rob admitted. "I just like stories."

"Ghost stories?"

He shrugged. "Oh, any stories. But hauntings are a popular subject. Along with romances. Tragedies." "Wars." Dean nodded. "Heroes."

"The best stories contain elements of all of them." Rob leaned forward, his handsome face radiating hope. "Can we please go to the Red Lion?"

"I suppose," Dean said. It would be cruel, and pointless, to deny such a simple pleasure. He wondered how old Rob was, and how long he'd been practicing his unsavory trade. It must be nice to have a holiday, to enjoy traveling with someone who had no intention of using him. "Bound to be cheaper, anyway."

Still, he looked wistfully at the Swan, just across the street, as they approached the Red Lion. The Swan's sign was brightly painted, and the roar of conversation was heard in frequent snatches as the door opened and closed repeatedly to a busy midday trade. The entrance to their choice, not of the charming Tudor construction so evident elsewhere but something even older and much plainer, stayed forlornly shut. The crude

depiction of a lion hanging above the door had faded to a dull orange. Dean, studying it, was certain that the sign hadn't been painted in the ten years or so since Peter used to insist on riding over to tease the pretty daughter of the landlord.

They pushed open the door and entered within, where the inn's air of genial neglect matched the decrepitude of the sign outside. The tables, dark with age, tilted on uneven footings, their tops scarred by a thousand careless knives. Once, the walls had been whitewashed, but it had apparently been a very long time ago, for they now showed the grey of decades of smoky fires.

Dean didn't recall the inn being quite so derelict in his youth, but back then there had been other distractions. The winsome serving girl, Patsy if he remembered correctly, was not in evidence

today. Instead, a withered old hag, one eye completely whitened with cataract, creaked slowly to her feet from a table near the bar, peering at them with surprise.

"Good God, it's the witch herself," Dean said under his breath.

Rob nudged him with a reproving elbow, and stepped forward, his feet sticking to the floor. "Good day, mother. My companion and I would like something to eat, if it's not too much trouble."

The crone frowned up at them, squinting through her good eye, then gave an almighty shriek, like rusty scissors cutting a sheet of tin. "WICKED!"

It should have been comical, the way Rob's mouth dropped open, but the flash of guilt on his face made Dean disinclined to laughter. He felt an unexpected glimmer of sympathy for the man. Did he imagine this crazed hag had somehow divined his shame? "Come on," he said shortly. "Let's go somewhere else."

"WICKED!" she screamed again, and footsteps were heard hurrying from the depths of the inn, where a kitchen might reasonably be located.

A middle-aged man appeared, bald but for a few scraps of fair hair, a dingy towel tied around his waist for an apron. "Hush, Mrs. Smart, I heard you, I heard you. No need to shout and scare the other patrons away. Good day, good day, gentlemen!" He smiled at them anxiously. "I'm your host, Mr. Wickett, and I'm very pleased to meet you. Very pleased indeed." The old woman, her purpose fulfilled, tottered back to her table, where a tall glass of gin formed the basis of her luncheon.

"Wickett?" Rob's face relaxed into a grin. "I thought she was casting judgment upon us."

"Oh no, oh no." Their host looked horrified at the thought. "No, indeed! Travelers, are you?"

"I'm Mr. Smith," Dean admitted, not desiring to claim his title in such a setting, "and this is Mr...uh, Black. We could do with a drink and bite to eat."

"Please," added Rob with a smile.

"Too busy over at the Swan, I suppose." Wickett shook his head. "Oh my! They do get busy. I have some stew in the back, or an eel pie, a nice eel pie."

"I seem to remember the local cheese is excellent," Dean said. "A hunk of that would do us, with a little bread and pickle. And take the same to my coachman, if you would."

The bald head bobbed. "That we can do, that we can do. Bit of oats for the horses, too. Some ale, gentlemen? We're rightly famous for it, rightly famous. Recipe goes back to the reign of Elizabeth."

"Yes, ale will be fine." Dean looked around the dim room.

There were perhaps a dozen tables, only one of them occupied, and that by Mrs. Smart. He waved at the closest. "Shall we take this table?"

"Aye, that would be—no, wait. Rather wobbly, that one. Perhaps...not there. No, not that one, either." Their host's eyes crinkled with distress.

"A bit of a wobble won't bother us, Mr. Wickett," Rob said with a gentle smile. He put his hands flat on another tabletop and leaned his weight upon it. "See? This one isn't so bad."

Relief flooded the publican's face. "I'll just fetch your ale then, sirs, fetch your ale right away, and then have your bits of cheese out in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Two shakes!" He hurried to the bar to fill their drink order.

"Two shakes of a rat's tail is more like it," Dean murmured, fascinated at the sight of one of those creatures strolling boldly across the floor, stopping to examine promising bits of refuse at leisure. "Look, we don't actually have to eat here. We can have a drink, hear the story, then go across the street for something more appetizing."

Rob's mouth twisted. "That would be a shabby thing to do, after such a warm welcome."

"After such a desperate welcome, you mean. I'd say this place has gone downhill, but from what I remember, it hasn't. But it was a nice, quiet place for a couple of lads to get drunk, and Peter was utterly smitten with the serving girl." Dean held his tongue at the return of Mr. Wickett, who placed two foaming mugs in front of them. Only a little sloshing occurred as the table adjusted to the weight of the vessels, good solid pewter but blackened with age.

"I'd rather stay," Rob said, as the man hurried eagerly to the kitchen to prepare their meal. "We'll be at your friend's house in a few hours. We won't starve before then."

Dean looked at him curiously. "All to save the feelings of a man you've never met before in your life, and will likely never see again? That's more soft-hearted than practical."

"So what's wrong with that? Aren't we supposed to treat people as we'd like to be treated?" Rob smiled and raised his mug. "And the ale is uncommonly good."

Dean lifted his and clanked it against the other mug. "Even if the casks also date back to Elizabeth, and probably haven't been cleaned since." With a fatalistic shrug, he took a swallow. The ale smelted of plums and hay, and tasted like summer itself.

"Damn. It is good, isn't it?"

Mr. Wickett, carrying their plates, positively beamed at the overheard compliment. "Yes sir, yes sir, indeed! The technique is a secret, a secret passed down through the generations, or I'd tell

you. I would tell you! May I bring you anything else, anything else at all?"

"Thank you, this looks fine," Dean said. And it did, much to his surprise. The black-glazed earthenware plates were still damp from a vigorous scrubbing, the food arranged carefully, and even garnished with radishes cut into the shape of roses. He blinked as the landlord scurried back into the dark reaches of the inn. "I still wouldn't try the stew, though."

They ate in a comfortable silence, broken only once when Mrs. Smart ran out of gin and screeched to be furnished with a second glass. When he had supplied her, Wickett returned to their table and inquired anxiously whether he could fetch them anything, anything at all.

"Please, Mr. Wickett," Rob said, pulling out the chair next to him. "Sit down and talk to us."

"I don't think I could, sir. No, I couldn't. So much to do before the supper crowd arrives, so much to do, sir."

This was accompanied by such a hangdog look that Dean nearly laughed. "Surely you have time for a quick ale? We'll take another round, as long as you let us buy you one as well."

"That was a brilliant ploy, brilliant ploy indeed, sir," Rob's impersonation of Wickett's speech made Dean smile as their host rushed to draw them more ale. "He can't afford not to join us."

It was no great task to persuade Wickett to talk about the resident witch. "Mistress Ann's cottage was right on this spot, right on this spot, it was. The Red Lion was built on the very same foundation, back in 1407. They burned it, you see, the townspeople burned the cottage after she died. Hoping to lift the curse."

"How did Mistress Ann die? Was she executed?" Rob's dark eyes danced with enjoyment.

"I want to hear about the curse," Dean leaned forward, intrigued. "Something to do with food, isn't it?"

"You'd be right. Oh, you'd be right, sir. And I can satisfy you both together, I can. They locked her up—no jail back then, didn't need such a thing as a jail back then. The world was a much better place."

"Except for the witches, of course," Dean said soberly. "You don't see so many of those nowadays." A foot, coming from Rob's direction, nudged his in silent reproof under the table. Or, of course, it could have been a particularly bold rat.

Rob, looking innocent, asked, "Locked her up where, then?"

The publican waved a vague hand. "Shed. Dovecote. Yes, dovecote, it was, an

empty dovecote about to be pulled down. They locked her in and wouldn't give her food nor drink, no food at all until she revealed the names of her coven. Thirteen of them, there would have been, thirteen dancing widdershins around the fires at Beltane, All Hallows. Midsummer and Solstice, too. Dancing merrily around the fire." He shook his head wistfully, and Dean was forced to wonder where the man's sympathies lay.

"Did Mistress Ann starve, then?" Dean's eyes strayed to the crone at her table near the bar, tossing back another gulp of gin from the steadily-diminishing glass. One could fancy it was the witch herself, making up for the drink denied so long ago.

"Oh, aye, she starved rather than give them up, starved. And it's a painful way to go, right painful it is, sir. So she cursed them, cursed them all, the members of the town, saying they'd damned well—pardon me, sirs, it's what she said. If they wouldn't give her meat nor drink when alive, they'd damned well give it to her when she was dead, or they'd suffer her agonies many fold. Manyfold, indeed."

"I'd have felt like cursing them myself," Rob said, twirling his half-empty mug between his hands. "There probably was no coven. No names to give that would have saved her."

"Oh, no sir! No sir, there were names. They were seen, seen by the priest of the village himself, led to the glade by a young girl they'd failed to convert. Failed to convert and she turned on them. Brought the priest to the glade by the standing stone, and they watched the white bodies dance widdershins around the May Eve fire. Beltane, in the old ways, and naked, they were. When they knew they were discovered, they fled into the woods, fled into the woods and the priest caught the ankle of just one witch. One witch, and that was Mistress Ann."

Dean shuddered. "Poor old lady."

"Old?" Mr. Wickett looked surprised. "I never said she was old, oh, she wasn't old, sir. Flower of her maidenhood—well, let's say flower of her youth, if it's true what they say about witches. She was young, sir, young as a spring morning and just as beautiful." His mouth trembled with what looked like grief.

Rob laid a hand on the man's arm. "It was over four hundred years ago."

"But people don't change, do they? They don't change."

"She was beautiful, then," Dean mused. "I suppose I picture the Anne Boleyn type for a young witch. Utterly fascinating, with jet black hair and eyes like sloes." It occurred to him that there was a masculine version of the species sitting just opposite, and Dean, flushing, was careful not to look at him.

"Oh, they said Anne Boleyn was a witch, too, bewitched the king, didn't she? Beautiful as she was, Queen Anne was nothing like our Mistress Ann. Nothing like, sir. Mistress Ann had hair as yellow as the narcissus by the river, eyes as blue as robin's eggs.

Lips like the blush of dawn, and when they curved into a smile there was a half-moon dimple appeared in her left cheek. Right here," he said, indicating the spot, "here in her left cheek." A tear spilled out of one eye, rolling unashamed down his broad face.

The description jarred a memory, and Dean realized it wasn't Mistress Ann that the landlord was grieving for. "Patsy. She sounds exactly like Patsy, who used to serve here."

Mr. Wickett wiped his face with his towel. "Aye. Patsy's gone now, isn't she? The witch is still here, though, still here, you can mark my words upon it. Those who don't want bad luck offer her a drop of ale or a bite of victuals now and again, now and again. Townspeople, of course, she'd have no ill-will to traveling men like yourselves, sirs. Oh, no ill-will toward you."

"But still..." Dean remembered the ritual, although the flirtatious Patsy had never told them the tale behind it. He lifted his mug and poured the dregs onto the floor, then scattered the remaining crumbs of cheese from his plate on top of it. Rob was quick to follow his example, and the publican looked pathetically pleased.

"Right kind of you gentlemen, right kind. And may Mistress Ann bless you with good fortune for your kindness."

Mr. Wickett excused himself, going back to his kitchen to prepare for the evening customers who would never come. "Is it a good thing or a bad thing," Rob wondered when he was gone, "to be blessed by a witch?"

"I'll take whatever luck I can get," Dean said, rising. "I wish I could ask what became of Patsy."

Rob remained seated at the table, straightening his dishes uselessly. "'People don't change,' Wickett said. Perhaps the townspeople..."

"Killed her for practicing the dark arts?" Dean shook his head. "Hardly possible in this day and age."

"No," Rob agreed. He rose to follow Dean from the Red Lion, not forgetting a courteous bow in Mrs. Smart's direction. "But if she did something they disapproved of, they could have made her life hellish enough to have tempted her into leaving it. Poor Patsy," he said softly.

"Wickett might not have meant anything at all. She might have died in childbed, or of influenza. I suppose we could..." Dean hesitated with his hand on the door, looking back toward the kitchen.

"Ask?" Rob shook his head. "I wouldn't. Ancient tragedy is fair game, but one can't inquire about recent troubles just out of sheer curiosity. Was Mr. Wickett her father? From what remains of his hair, he appears to have been fair himself."

They exited onto the street, both of them squinting at the bright sunlight after the dimness inside. "I remember Patsy's father," Dean said, raising a hand to shade his eyes, "and he was nothing like Wickett. Husband, perhaps, or brother, if he were a few

years older or didn't age well. Patsy would have just turned twenty-eight this spring—I seem to recall that she, Peter and I were all born within a week of each other in May of 1787."

"I'm the elder, then," Rob said, leaning against the sun-warmed stone facade of the Red Lion. "I was born that April."

Dean looked at him with surprise. "I'd have thought you were younger."

Rob grinned. "No, the flower of my maiden youth is well behind me, I'm afraid. And I'm very unlikely to retire before I'm thirty, as you once suggested. Thirty-five, if I'm lucky." His smile faded. "Although if I get desperate, I could always reconsider a few commissions I've refused in the past."

Dean rolled his eyes. "This from a man who sleeps with the elderly? I can't imagine anything less attractive."

"Can't you?" Rob's voice was unaccustomedly cool. "Perhaps you lack imagination."

"What, then?"

"Don't you remember? Recent troubles are not subjects for idle curiosity. Look, here's Erich with the coach."

Chapter Five

Abel Wickett looked up from the table he was clearing when the door opened, spilling a rectangular shaft of sunshine into the Red Lion's taproom. He blinked against the unaccustomed light. "Back so soon, sir? Decide on a little eel pie to take with you, or another drink for the road?"

But the figure that emerged from the shaft of sunlight was not that of either of the young men who had just exited his establishment. It was a woman, wearing a traveling dress of dove grey, with a veil of the same color to protect her equally against the dust of the road and the eyes of curious strangers. The dress was not of the finest quality, but there was something about the way its wearer held herself that commanded respect. "A drink would be most welcome indeed." Her voice was that of someone trying hard to overcome a country accent, and very nearly succeeding. "I'll have...I'll have..."

Wickett, a kind man at heart, thought he divined the problem and hurried to help her out. "Ladies here often enjoy a small glass of ratafia, they do. Just the thing for a lady." He emphasized the last word.

"That would be excellent." She sat at the table the gentlemen had recently vacated, which was the sturdiest the Red Lion could offer, and removed her gloves. The hands beneath were clean, well-tended, and seemed to belong to a woman not yet above thirty, but the signs of years of hard work were unmistakable.

Left over from the days when trade was busier were a few cordial glasses, which Wickett fancied were small and delicate enough. He blew the dust off a bottle and filled one of them with amber liquid, then dug in a box of odds and ends beneath the counter. "Ah," he said with satisfaction, retrieving an item. Returning to the table, he placed a yellowed square of lace on its surface before setting the glass upon it with care. "Here you are, mistress, here you are. Perhaps a bite of luncheon to go with it?"

"I thank you, good sir, but no." His guest stared at the liqueur, making no effort to remove the veil that separated her from it. "I.. I was hoping you might be able to provide some information about the gentlemen what were—who were just here." Her hand reached into her reticule, emerging with a gold coin.

Wickett blinked in consternation. He had little compunction about sharing what he knew, since he couldn't think of any way such innocent doings could be used against his visitors. But a guinea? Far too large for the meager information he could provide, far too large indeed. The woman's spine stiffened at his hesitation, and he sensed it would be an insult to refuse it: a suggestion that she couldn't afford the loss, or worse—that she didn't know what she was doing. And there hadn't been coin of that color in the Lion for many a year. "Mighty generous of you," he said, stretching out his hand for the blunt.

When Wickett had told all he could, the woman thanked him and left, the ratafia

untouched on the table. Wickett picked up the glass, intending to drink it himself, but his hand paused halfway to his mouth. "Here you go, Mistress Ann." He held the glass over the floor and overturned it, spilling the sticky sweet cordial onto the floor. "And whatever her goal is, if there's any help you can give that poor lady, I think she could use it." He shook his head. "Could use some help, indeed."

And old Mrs. Smart raised a shaky arm and screeched for another glass of gin.

Chapter Six

This will be a quick visit," Dean said as the carriage drove up the long, tree-lined avenue leading to Stonehurst, the house of his school friend Peter Chesterfield. Unlike the approach to Carwick, the road was smooth and well-kept, with nary a rut nor mud hole to be found. Shady elms lined the way, cool and restful on a warm summer's day. "You may as well wait in the carriage."

Rob raised his brows. "Half-a-day's journey for a few minutes' conversation? Surely we can spare the time for a cup of tea."

Dean felt his color rising, and wished with resentment that his pale skin didn't betray his every emotion. "I...oh, hell and damnation." He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small book. "I need a few pounds for the journey to Bath. Peter's been after me to sell this to him for years."

"What is it?" Rob took the volume gingerly. "*The Compleat Angler*. Oh." His voice was reverential, and he opened the pages with care. "Oh, my. A first edition, and inscribed, too. If this were mine, I wouldn't part with it for—"

"Wouldn't you?" Dean snatched the book back, flicking his eyes over Rob's body. "I can think of worse things to sell. Excuse me while I attend to my errand. And do stay in the coach."

"In case someone should see me in your company? I quite understand." Rob sat back against the seat, lips tight.

"None of my set would ever suspect what you are, I assure you," Dean said, and slammed the coach door on any reply that Rob might have. "They wouldn't have any idea creatures like you exist."

"Herr Graf?" Erich called to him, standing up from where he'd been examining one of the bay's feet. "Das Pferd hat sein Hufeisen verloren."

"He's—she's lost her what?" But the shoeless hoof made the coachman's meaning only too clear. "Oh, Holle." Peter's stable should be able to handle the job without sending for a blacksmith from town, but it would still take more time than he cared to spend.

And he could hardly leave Rob in the coach now. His words to Rob had been true: it wasn't that he was afraid Peter or one of his frequent guests would recognize him. But he was uneasy about passing off the prostitute as an acquaintance, when he still knew so little about him.

Dean racked his brain, trying to remember if there were anything obvious in his companion's speech or manners that would brand him as an inferior. There had been nothing remarkable about his table habits, as far as he could recall. And Rob's accents were comparable to those of his own set, or perhaps more akin to the careful speech of an upper servant, without the drawling tones or thieves' cant affected by some of the gentry. He would have to grit his teeth and hope the man could pass. In a way, he

supposed, it was good to test this out before they reached Bath. But did it have to be in front of his best friend?

Dean directed Erich to unhitch the horses and take them back to the Stonehurst stable, then rapped on the door of the coach. "Horse threw a shoe," he said briefly when Rob appeared. "You may as well come with me."

Dean tried to contain his apprehension as they approached the wide stone steps leading up to Stonehurst's front door. The house was a three-story box with no pretension of architectural grandeur, built of the local honey-colored stone sometime within the past century. It was comfortable and practical rather than stylish, with windows and fireplaces appearing exactly where needed instead of where they'd make the best effect. There was little wonder Peter's home was usually filled with guests.

Today was no exception. The door flew open in response to his knock, revealing neither staid butler nor imperious footman, but someone Dean vaguely recognized from Cambridge. "Christ's balls!" the young man cried, cravat-less and smelling faintly of brandy. "If it isn't Dean Smith. How are you, Smithy? Peter! Not you—the other Peter. Peter! Look what I found on your doorstep!"

Peter Chesterfield came at a run, sliding on stocking feet into the man in the doorway. "Well, come in, Dean! You remember Dick Cobblehill?" Dean nodded at the man who had opened the door, but his host didn't stop for breath, waving his hand toward the game room down the hall, source of greatest noise. "House party this week—you know, grouse season opening and all that. Good hunting this morning. We were going to do more shooting after luncheon, fell into a billiard tournament instead. How are you?"

There was a roar from the game room, over which an agonized whoop could be heard. "Damnation!" Dick Cobblehill turned and ran, shouting back over his shoulder at them. "That's St. Dennis out. I'm up next."

Peter rolled his eyes, taking Dean by the arm and pulling him toward the front parlor. "I've been out of the standings for almost an hour. Come, let's have a drink and I'll think where to put you and—urn." He turned to Rob. "Do I know you?"

"Robert Black," Dean offered quickly, searching his mind for the story they'd agreed on and coming up blank. "He, uh, went to school with me."

Peter looked a trifle confused, as well he might. "Oh? Then he went to school with me, too. Harrow or Cambridge? I'm afraid I don't quite recall."

"Harrow," Rob said, shaking Peter's hand with easy warmth. "Of course you don't remember. I was quite dreadful back then, fat and spotty. You were all hideous to me, calling me the worst names."

"Blobby?" Peter threw back his head and shouted with laughter. "You're not Blobby, are you? But you must be: Robert, Bobby, Blobby. Of course!"

Rob grinned. "I prefer 'Rob' nowadays."

"I imagine you do." Peter cuffed his shoulder good-naturedly. "You certainly have

improved. Brandy? Whisky? Hock?"

"A brandy would be delightful, thanks."

Dean declined a drink, not certain his hands wouldn't tremble on the glass from their near miss. He felt a reluctant admiration for Rob's quickness in salvaging their story. The man was definitely a fast thinker, and good with words. "We can't stay long. I came to surrender the Walton, and my horse threw a shoe. Do you have a farrier on staff?"

"Yes, of course. Don't you? I heard you're at Carwick now." Peter grinned, making an exaggerated bow. "My lord earl! You weren't even Honorable when I first knew you. Which makes two of us, of course. Is the Little Stream still well-stocked? I'll have to come down for a visit. You can't be giving up the Walton. I don't believe it."

"Give my wife a chance to spruce the place up, and you're most welcome. Uncle Parmenius rather ran it into the ground since you last saw it."

"Wife? That piece of news I hadn't heard. Congratulations! When was the wedding, you old dog?"

"It will be next month, in Worcester Cathedral," Dean admitted. "And of course you're invited. Did you not receive a card from Minerva yet?"

"Umm..." Peter obviously had no idea. "Perhaps I did. I'll be there, if I can stand to watch." He gave an exaggerated shiver. "You'll not be seeing me put my neck in the parson's mousetrap anytime soon. All the more reason to visit soon, before you're utterly henpecked. Just dust off a chair for me, and I'll sleep in that. Give me a week or two to clear this lot out, and we'll finish August sleeping it off on the bank of Little Stream while the fish ignore us. You're a fisherman yourself, right, Bio—er, Robbie?"

Rob laughed. "What friend of Dean's isn't?"

"Too true. Not that he admits so many into the elect few, does he? Quiet boy, but the river runs deep. The Walton! Let me see it." Dean handed Peter the small volume, and his friend fell silent for the space of several seconds while he examined it. "*The Compleat Angler*, signed by Izaak Walton himself. Why the devil are you letting me have it? It'll be found some morning with its spine cracked, lying in a puddle of Madeira."

Dean winced. While he was trying to put that image out of his mind and think of a good reason beyond the obvious, Rob jumped in to help. "You won't believe it, but there was a second copy among the former earl's things. It's in perfect condition, and signed as well. Having two was an embarrassment of riches, so of course Dean thought of you. I begged him to sell it to me instead, but he claimed you'd been friends longer."

"Well, goody for me." Peter turned to Dean. "Soak me for every farthing you can, or I'll still feel guilty. And you're staying for at least a few days."

"Thank you," Dean said, "but we really have to be off as soon as the horse is shod. I'm on my way to see my fiancée, and she doesn't like to be kept waiting. We won't make Tewkesbury tonight, but at least—"

"Tewkesbury? You won't make it back to Alcester." Peter drained his glass, and poured another. "My farrier's perfectly competent, but he wasn't shoeing today. The forge has to heat. Grant won't be finished much before sundown, so you're here for the night. And thank God for it, too. There'll be dancing over at Lady Newcomb's, and she's put out the call that she's dreadfully short of men. Why the whole Egglefield clan would go off to shoot in Scotland, when there's plenty of grouse here, I can't imagine. But even with my lot of bounders, there are more fillies than colts in the paddock."

Dean flushed. "But you know I don't dance, Peter. I'm as awkward at these affairs as a whore in church." Hearing his words aloud, he just managed to keep himself from shooting a self-conscious glance in Rob's direction.

"Don't be silly. Everyone dances. It's all just," Peter made a twirling motion with his hand. "You know. And such. You dance, don't you, Blobby?"

Rob, laughing, confirmed that he did.

"Besides," continued their host in his most persuasive tones, "you can't deprive the ladies of dancing with an honest-to-God earl. We only have Lord Colby, and he's eighty-five if he's a day."

"I couldn't." Dean shook his head.

Peter jumped to his feet, only slightly unsteady from drink. "The music room is just next door—come on, we'll show you the basic steps. Nothing to it."

A tousled head peered around the doorframe, belonging to a short young man with yellow hair. "Peter! We need you. Doesn't your house rule say that if blue ball hits blue ball, the turn is forfeited?"

"Absolutely!" Peter shouted. "I refuse to allow blue balls to clank together in this house." He allowed the suppliant to drag him toward the door to the hall, but dug his heels in before reaching it, looking back toward the music room instead. "Wait, Web. You play the pianoforte, don't you?"

"Yes," the fair-haired man replied, "but that's not important now. Come on, Harris is going to be out if you don't explain the bloody rule, and I've got all my money on him to win."

"I'll go, if you play so Rob can teach our Smithy to dance properly."

Web groaned. "But I'll miss the end of the tournament! Five hundred guineas, I've got on Harris."

"And you'll lose them all," Peter said, arms folded implacably, "if I refuse to go judge in his favor right this minute."

"All right! All right!" Web threw up his hands in surrender. "I'll play." He stood staring wistfully after Peter as he ran down the hall to the billiard room, then jerked his thumb toward the other door. "Come on, lads. Let's see if we can keep Smithy on his feet tonight."

Rob and Dean trailed behind the blond man into the music room, a cheerful, sun-flooded chamber boasting a marvelous rosewood pianoforte. Web sat himself down

and launched into the opening strains of a country dance. "What do you say, Smithy? Shall we begin with a Quadrille?"

"By all means," Rob said, taking a place on the floor facing Dean. "I'll be the girl, of course."

"Something I imagine you're quite used to," Dean murmured.

Rob, apparently refusing to be offended, flashed a smile of amusement. "Ready? Stand on this side of me. During the first eight bars, you bow to your partner, then the lady over there." He nodded to the left. "No, not so stiffly. Like this. Now, the first of the five figures is called Le Pantalon..."

Dean felt even more clumsy than usual, paired with his graceful companion. It made him uncomfortable, too, having to touch Rob's bare hand each time the intricacies of the dance required it. Someone had paid the prostitute to touch him with those long, fine-boned fingers; it was difficult to clasp them and not remember that. Picture them moving over his trembling flesh... Dean stumbled. Again.

Rob laughed and clapped him on the back. "You were doing so well, too!"

"I forgot which way we were supposed to circle," he said, red-faced. "Left or right?"

"This way." Rob demonstrated with his hand. "Web, pick it up about six bars back."

Somehow, Dean made it through the lesson, even with some confidence that he would not embarrass himself miserably in the Quadrille or a simple country dance. He balked, though, when Web began playing a waltz.

"Come on," Rob said. "One hand goes here, on my waist. Clasp my hand, out here, with the other."

Take this man into his arms and spin him around the room? Dean's breath grew short at the thought. He shook his head. "If I try to learn another step, my head will explode. I'll barely keep straight what I've learned already."

"Are you certain?" Rob's face was in high color from the dancing, his hair as disordered as it ever got, a single lock falling where it shouldn't upon his forehead. "It's all the mode."

Dean shook his head again, mutely.

"Doesn't matter," said Web, whose full name had turned out to be Alvin Webster. "Like as not Lady Newcomb won't allow waltzes danced in her ballroom anyway. Pity, though. I'm quite fond of them." His fingers rippled lightly over the keys, settling into a vaguely military-sounding tune in 3/4 time. "I've no doubt

that we'll soon have a 'Waterloo Waltz,' but in the meantime, we can make do with the good old-fashioned 'Lobster-Back Waltz' from last year. Have you heard it?"

"Yes, I have," Dean said, wincing. "That's not how it goes. First of all, it should be in A minor."

Web shrugged, changing the key. "Close enough. I've only heard it three or four

times."

Dean's temper was out of sorts from the dancing. "Oh, for Christ's sake, you've got the tune mixed up with 'Drink Little England Dry,' of all things. Get up and listen." He took Webster's seat on the piano bench and closed his eyes for a moment, calling the waltz up from memory, ordering the melody in his mind. Opening them, he glared at the hated ivory keys and began to play. Despite long years away from the piano, the notes came out the way they were supposed to sound. "There," he said, finishing with precision. "That's how it goes."

"Let me try." Web reclaimed the bench, and proved that he'd been paying attention.

Dean jumped at the feel of Rob's hand on his shoulder. "A favorite song of yours?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "Heard it once at a musicale with Minerva."

"Once? Good heavens, you are good. You play remarkably well," the other man told him, his voice warm with admiration. "I wouldn't have guessed it. Somehow, I pictured you more the outdoors type."

"I am," Dean said shortly. "That's why I hated being forced to sit inside and play scales when I'd rather be doing something."

"But with your kind of ear, I should think—"

"Smith!" Web had stopped playing. "This part here: I'm not sure I've got it. Help me out."

Dean was happy to oblige, not wanting to discuss his father's peculiar obsession with a man he barely knew. Even if it meant another few minutes at a bloody piano. By the time he finished demonstrating the passage to Web, Peter appeared breathless in the doorway between the music room and parlor, shouting that they'd best hurry if they wanted to eat something before the cursed ball. "Because Lady Newcomb's lemonade and bonbons aren't going to keep anyone alive, hey Web?"

Any worries Dean had entertained about whether Rob could conduct himself properly in polite society turned out to be groundless. The prostitute's manners proved faultless at Lady Newcomb's ball, and he certainly looked well in the evening clothes Erich had chosen for him from Dean's limited wardrobe. They were not of the highest fashion. The long-tailed coats of black and blue superfine he and his companion wore tonight were unexceptionable, he supposed, and Rob had tied both their cravats into elegant falls. But their shirt collars weren't as high as those the other gentlemen were now sporting, and their waistcoats were plain white, while the fashion gods were now allowing color. After they married, Minerva would probably insist he replace his knee breeches with the *au courant* long trousers some men were beginning to wear as evening dress, which would be a pity. Dean fancied his calves filled out a pair of silk stockings nicely, and it would be a shame to hide what was probably his only point of beauty. He stole a glance at Rob's legs, and was annoyed to find that he was outclassed even there.

Busy with estate business, Dean had seen little of his fiancée all summer, even

though Minerva preferred to stay close by in Worcester, and reign as queen of local society rather than compete with the belles of the London *ton*. Thus, he had not attended a social engagement since assuming his title in May. And what a difference it made. The young ladies in their colorful, high-waisted gowns might sigh at the handsome Mr. Black from behind their painted fans, but it was the Earl of Carwick they schemed to dance with. Only Minerva had ever entreated him to dance before, at the handful of balls to which she had been able to drag him, and he had always refused. Now, with the confidence bestowed by his title, and Rob's lessons of the afternoon, he had his pick of the prettiest girls in the room.

Rob, he noted after several dances, was taking a different tack. While he didn't neglect to admire the belles, he was also careful to seek out the plainer misses huddled in their chairs against the walls. Dean watched as one of them, a too-thin young lady in an ill-fitting dress, blossomed under Rob's attention. He felt shamed into making a similar choice for the next dance, only to find that his partner was just as awkward at making small talk as he was, and no lighter on her feet. Apparently, it was necessary that at least one of a couple knew how to flirt. After that experience, he slunk back to the belles.

At midnight, a light supper was set out on buffet tables. Peter sidled up to him. "What did I tell you? Lemonade and bonbons. Nothing more substantial than a sugared nut."

Dean, unaccustomed to long hours of being sociable, seized on the excuse. "How long before it's considered rude to leave? All this dancing has left me starving."

Peter glanced back at a bevy of young beauties, one of which had claimed a considerable amount of his attention during the evening. "I'm staying to the bitter end, but I've no objections if you want to call it a night. Take the coach, and send it back here when you get to Stonehurst." "You'll make my excuses?"

"Don't I always?" Peter grinned at him. "I know the effort you've made tonight, and it's been much appreciated. Back to your hole now, hermit. Will you be taking your friend with you?"

"He's not my—"*friend*, Dean started to say automatically, then stopped himself at the last moment. "—charge. Rob can look after himself."

"Certainly turned out well," Peter said, looking at Rob with admiration. "Look—even Lord Colby likes him, and he doesn't like anybody."

The elderly man Peter pointed to was indeed chuckling amiably at something Rob had said, and patting the young man's arm with a tremulous hand. Dean's lips tightened. "Yes, he's always enjoyed a rare popularity among the elderly."

"Among everyone, I'd say. Did you see Portia Henry's face after he led her through a second country dance? She'll be posting banns all night in her dreams. Just as well you're not dragging him away, hey? The girls would beat you to death with their dancing shoes." Peter clapped him on the back. "Have something to eat for me when

you get home. Bonbons." He shuddered theatrically.

Stonehurst was empty and silent when Dean arrived back at the house. He wasn't really hungry, and felt too restless to sleep. Perhaps he should check on Erich. The coachman might be at a loss in an unfamiliar place, among people who didn't speak his language. Peter's butler, who would remain on duty until his employer and friends arrived home in the small hours of the morning, gave directions to the servants' quarters where Erich was housed.

Erich was not in the tiny room allotted to him, nor was he enjoying a cup of tea in the kitchens with the handful of servants who were reveling in a quiet night with their master out. Dean, red-faced to have disturbed their rare luxury, backed quickly out of the kitchen and continued searching. He found Erich at last in the stables, brushing one of the horses.

"Ah, Erich," Dean said with relief. "Alles ist gut?"

He received a rare smile in return. "Ja, Herr Graf. Alles ist gut."

"The horses, you're very good with them," Dean said in German.

Erich tilted his head in response. "I suppose. I like horses," he offered in the same tongue. It was rare for him to volunteer information. Dean, who had been on the verge of leaving the stable, perched cautiously on a bale of hay instead. "Did you have a horse back home?"

The servant continued brushing, brow furrowed in concentration. "I remember.. I had a pony. When I was small."

"Do you remember its name?" Erich didn't answer, and Dean felt awkward, wondering if he should go now, or make one more try at getting the young man to open up a little. "I had a pony, too," he ventured. "Her name was..." Did one try to translate names? With a shrug, he gave it in English. "Milky." He waited a moment, but there was no response, and he rose, unaccountably downcast. "Gute Nacht, then."

"Blümchen."

"Sein Name?"

Erich nodded. "Ja. Gute Nacht, Herr Graf." He looked down at the brush in his hand. "Und. "Ja, Erich?" "Danke."

Erich seemed pleased that his employer had taken the trouble to speak to him, and that warmed Dean more than an entire evening full of empty compliments. He nodded again, and went to find his own bed, stopping only to look up the name of Erich's pony in his dictionary. Blümchen meant "little flower." Dean smiled to think of the sober young man giving his pony such a sweet name. But doubtless he'd been much different in his youth.

Dean awoke in the middle of the night, lying on his side, a masculine arm heavy across his shoulders. Someone was nuzzling the back of his neck. Rob, he thought, freezing, unable even to breathe. There were so many rooms at Stonehurst, but somehow his traveling companion had found him. No. More likely, stumbled upon

him by chance. If Rob were looking to seduce anyone, there were better-looking choices among Peter's guests. And, of course, he'd be more likely of success with someone drunker than Dean. If Rob had climbed into his bed, it could only be by accident.

The lips on his neck became more ardent, sparking an unwelcome glow somewhere to the south. He'd best put an end to this, now. Before he could speak, the arm moved, a hand groping his chest. "Sadie," moaned an unfamiliar voice in an exhalation of whisky fumes. "Oh, Sadie."

Dean spent the rest of the night on the floor.

Chapter Seven

Tewkesbury," Rob said, leaning out the coach window for a better view of the enormous Abbey tower looming over the town ahead. "I've never been here. Do you know it, my lord?"

My lord. Dean supposed it was his fault that Rob had dropped the easy familiarity of address appropriate to their visit with Peter at Stonehurst. Out of sorts from his uncomfortable night, Dean had been brusque enough this morning to induce Rob into treating him with careful formality. But there were long days to get through yet, he'd best make an effort to be pleasant. Especially since his companion had handled himself so well at Peter's. "I know it well enough, I suppose. Erich and I were here just last month on estate business. There was that battle in Tewkesbury, of course, back in...in..."

"1471, wasn't it? War of the Roses. Henry VI's son was killed, pretty much ending the Lancastrian cause until the Tudors came along."

Dean stared. "I thought you were thrown out of school. I couldn't remember half of that."

Rob laughed. "I lived with an...uncle who encouraged me to read books about things he was interested in, so we would have something to talk about. I ended up with a sort of education after all."

Dean, who'd been blessed with nine uncles of his own, rather thought Rob's was a very different sort of relation. "Oh? What sorts of things was your *uncle* interested in?"

"History, of course, and I rather enjoyed that. Poetry, as long as it was written before 1700—he had no patience for this 'modern nonsense.' Fishing, which became sort of a passion of mine. That book of yours, *The Compleat Angler*. I must have read it a dozen times—wonderful book."

Dean sat up straight. "You really are a fisherman, then? I thought that was just for Peter's benefit. You should see the trout streams at Carwick—" He broke off, appalled at himself. Absurd to think he would ever invite the prostitute to visit his home, even if Rob were a fellow angler. "What about your own interests? Were you encouraged to pursue those?"

"No. No, I wasn't." Rob was silent a moment. "My uncle liked art. Hired a tutor to give me drawing lessons, even though I had absolutely no aptitude for it. I begged him to let me take music lessons instead—he had this wonderful pianoforte which had belonged to his wife, just sitting there, unused—but he was tone-deaf himself, and wouldn't let me even try to play it. I envy you your skill."

"You didn't miss much." Remembering his resolution to be pleasant, Dean continued warily. "My father fancied himself a composer, you see, and was determined to bring up his own little Mozart. I was forced to practice constantly from the time I was in skirts, and I hated it. Playing those damned scales over and over,

when all I wanted was to be outside riding, or fishing." Dean frowned, feeling the need to change the subject. "About those art lessons. Is there any chance you could make a sketch of the man who hired you to accost me?"

"No. I told you I was no good at it."

"But even a rough sketch might give me enough of an idea—" "No," Rob said, folding his arms.

Dean narrowed his hazel eyes, losing his patience. "Sometimes I wonder if you really were trying to rob me. You've certainly been uncooperative in helping me so far."

"Oh, have I? I'm missing at least two appointments this week, and getting nothing from you in return, all on the *chance* that I might be able to identify someone who might or might not have gone to Bath to woo your fiancée. Is that so uncooperative, my lord?"

"Sorry," Dean muttered. "It's the temper that goes with this blasted hair. Let me make it up to you." He rapped on the roof of the coach and leaned out the window. "Erich! The Royal Arms, schnell." "The Royal Arms?"

"If you're interested in history, you'll adore it. It's the oldest inn in Tewkesbury, dates back to—oh, Christ, whenever. But it's very old, and not far from the Abbey. We can get a decent meal there."

Rob looked hopeful. "The Abbey. I don't suppose...?"

Dean sighed. He owed the man, if only for his success at Stonehurst. "Yes, if you're quick about it. We've been making good time today."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Dean. Remember?"

The barman at the Royal Arms was proud of the inn's history. "Oh, aye, she's an ancient one. Older than the Bear, no matter what they say. These walls were old when Shakespeare and his men played here. Oldest inn in all of England."

Dean put down his mug of bitter and wiped foam from his lip, frowning. "I thought the oldest inn in England is the Man and Scythe over in—"

Not politic, perhaps, but no real reason for Rob to nudge his foot under the table. Still, he shut up while his companion turned a considerable amount of charm on their host.

"Shakespeare performed here? How fascinating. Can you tell us anything else?"

The barman was only too pleased, drawing himself a pint and joining them at the table, regaling them with story after story. Some of them, to Dean's amusement, seemed borrowed from the inn's famous playwright guest.

"No one knew it, but Meg, the daughter of the Yorkist innkeeper, secretly pledged herself to a young Lancastrian lord. It would be death for both of them if they'd been discovered." The publican paused for effect.

"Nothing so sweet as forbidden fruit," Rob said encouragingly, aiming a wink at

Dean.

Their host nodded. "Aye. They met right here one last time, just before the Battle. He said when the Red Rose was triumphant, he would come back for Meg and make her his lady."

Dean suppressed a smile. "I'm guessing it didn't end well?"

The barman leaned forward. "And you'd be right. When Meg heard he'd been killed, she threw herself into the river and was drowned instantly. But you'll never guess what happened next."

"Try me," Dean muttered, and Rob nudged him again.

"The lad wasn't dead! He came back to steal her away into exile with him, and found them pulling her cold white corpse from the river. He snatched the dead girl away from her grieving father and

leapt with her into the water. And this time, they never recovered either body."

"Very romantic," Rob said with approval. "Which one is the ghost?"

"Oh, Meg, of course. It was here that she lived, and met her fine young lord in secret, and waited for news of the battle. About one guest out of five tells me they can still feel her waiting, but when she weeps we all hear that. I've heard her myself, and sober as a judge I was, too. Pathetic. Just pathetic." The barman shook his head mournfully.

"Too true," Dean said. "You know, if we're going to see the Abbey, we should—"

"Then there's Dick Turpin."

"The highwayman?" With a pointed glance at Rob, Dean settled back into his chair. "I have a soft spot for the breed. Don't tell me Turpin haunts you as well."

"Well, not that anyone's spoke of, no. But the Arms was his favorite pub, and many a night Black Bess was tied to that oak tree yonder while Dick wet his whistle. Wouldn't be surprised, though, if he came back now and again for a pint of the finest bitter in England."

"Now that, I'll give you," Dean said, draining the last of his brew. Mild and slightly sweet, it was a perfect thirst-quencher for a warm August day. "But two's my limit, and I'm afraid we really must be going. Rob?"

Tewkesbury Abbey. Dean wasn't much for old churches, but he tried to be polite for Rob's sake. "A big square tower like this is Norman, right?"

Rob nodded, then glanced deferentially at their guide, an elderly verger in mildewed black robes. "Norman Romanesque, to be precise. Isn't it, sir?"

The verger beamed. Rob did seem to have an effect on older men. Dean thought with sour amusement. "Very good. Yes, the Abbey was begun less than forty years after the Conquest, when Romanesque architecture was at its height in England. Note the arches in the nave, which are also characteristic..."

Dean let his attention wander. There was only so much interesting about stone and mortar, but the history of the place had its appeal. The great families of England had

worshiped here: Neville and Warwick, de Clare and Beauchamp and le Despenser, many of their number still lying beneath richly-carved effigies. The stained glass was nice, too, Dean thought, craning his neck to better see a particularly colorful window in the choir, depicting Old Testament

kings and prophets. Rob nudged him. "Don't step on the Prince of Wales." "What?"

"Look down. That plaque marks the grave of Henry VI's son."

"Right. The one killed in the Battle of Tewkesbury." Despite himself, Dean was impressed.

The verger shook his grizzled head. "Nasty business, the Battle. Lancastrian troops sought sanctuary here, and were pursued right up to the altar by the Yorkists. The Abbey had to be closed for a month to be cleansed and re-consecrated, due to the bloodshed." He sounded as if he remembered it personally.

Rob's eyes sparkled. "Men struck down on sacred ground. Do any of them haunt it still?"

"Oh, we have our share of hooded monks." The old man pursed his lips. "Benedictines always outstay their welcome, don't they? And we've a White Lady who screams in the courtyard from time to time. Not as well known as the White Lady of Bredon Hill, but there you have it, don't you?"

"Bredon Hill?" Rob looked interested. "Where's that?"

"No time," Dean reminded him sharply, then relented at the abashed look on his companion's face. "You were talking about the ghosts here in Tewkesbury, sir," he reminded the verger. They could spare another hour for ghost-hunting, if it didn't mean leaving the town.

"Aye. If you want soldiers, try the Bell Inn. Can't remember if they're from the Wars of the Roses or Civil War, but I'm sure the barman will tell you. Now the Black Bear's got a Lancastrian knight, doesn't it? And the Royal Arms—"

"That one we know," Dean said. "Is all of Tewkesbury haunted?"

"Bits and pieces, bits and pieces. When swords clash, the echoes ring through the ages. And this town has certainly seen some bloody days, hasn't it? Do you have an interest in the Wars of the Roses?"

Rob admitted he did.

"Well, then. I might be persuaded to show you something only rarely allowed to our most special visitors." He winked at Rob. "Perhaps a small donation?" His withered hand emerged discreetly, and Rob slipped a few coins into it.

"Now there's a change," Dean said under his breath.

Rob narrowed his eyes. "For that, you deserve a good quarter-hour with the Wakeman Cenotaph."

"The what?"

"Just wait."

The verger led them behind the main altar. His knees creaked as he lowered

himself stiffly to the floor, opening a wooden trapdoor set into the stone. "Below is the only underground area in the Abbey, the vault containing the Duke and Duchess of Clarence," he said proudly.

Dean raised his brows. "Richard III's brother George? That Duke of Clarence?"

Rob grinned. "See, you do know your history."

"No, just Shakespeare." Dean dredged it up from memory. "Convicted of treason, and drowned in Malmsey, wasn't he?"

"Aye," the verger said. "Fit end for a drunkard, to be drowned in a butt of wine." The sunken eyes held such satisfaction that Dean cringed. "The evils of drink—"

"I know all about them, thank you. Is it because Clarence was disgraced that there's nothing like that for him?" He gestured at some of the other ostentatious sarcophaguses near the altar.

"Nay, there was a tomb, with magnificent figures upon it, but it's long gone now. The coffins are below, though. Take some candles, 'tis dark down there."

The verger waited above while the two younger men descended into the vault. Dean expected the grave to be eerie, and it was, the flickering candlelight casting suggestive shadows on the walls. He hadn't expected the stone coffins to be open, though, and the bones exposed to their view.

Rob shuddered and stood nearer to him, staring down at the remains. "That was a real man, the brother of two kings even— foolish perhaps, but he paid for it with his life."

"False, fleeting, perjured Clarence," Dean quoted softly. He spread his fingers in the wavering light, picturing the bones beneath the freckled skin, and had to fight the urge to move even closer to his companion.

Rob let out a sigh, then crossed his arms. "Bones should be private, don't you think? Not something to be displayed for a couple of coins."

"Come on. Let's go," Dean said.

After that, Rob let him escape with only a brief stop to appreciate the horrors of the Wakeman Cenotaph.

"Oh, my," Rob said. "I was afraid it couldn't possibly live up to the lithograph in my uncle's book. I had nightmares for years."

They both surveyed the Cenotaph in awe. Bishop Wakeman had chosen to make his tribute less a memorial than a memento mori: his effigy was depicted as a rotting corpse, in the process of being devoured by lizards, mice and other unsavory creatures. Ghastly, but—

"I don't know," Dean said. "Somehow actual bones make the point even stronger."

It was later than they planned when they finally left the Abbey, and a light rain had begun to fall.

Dean glared at the sky with disapproval. "Look how dark it is—the rain's only

going to get worse." He hailed the coachman. "Erich! Schau dir den Himmel an."

Erich scowled. "Es ist nur Regen."

"Well, that's settled," Dean said. "I can't make Erich drive in this. We'll have to stay over and get an early start in the morning. Good thing the days are still long. With luck we'll make Dursley by sunset tomorrow."

"Will we go back to the Royal Arms?" Rob asked, as they climbed back into the coach.

"No, let's try the Black Bear. Didn't the verger at the Abbey say it's got a phantom soldier? Who knows? Maybe he's the sweetheart of the girl at the Royal Arms. What was her name, Meg?" He called the destination to Erich, who covered the short distance in a trice.

They pulled up outside the inn, whitewashed and half-timbered, its upper story jutting out over the High Street. Rob paused as he emerged from the coach, looking up at the hostelry's carved sign. "Ah, the bear and ragged staff—those were Warwick's arms. We won't find poor Meg's young lord in a Yorkist establishment."

Dean shrugged. "Signs aren't permanent. Easy enough to switch depending on who's in power at the moment."

Rob smiled. "Cynic."

Dean procured the one remaining room, saw Erich settled among the servants and ordered tea sent to a private parlor. The parlor was attractive for a public house, the furniture old and dark with age, but recently upholstered in a pretty flowered chintz.

Rob settled into a cushioned chair and brushed the rain from his dark hair. "Whatever the ghost is here, I don't see how it can beat the Royal Arms. I adored that story."

"It was utter tripe." Dean took a position on the sofa facing Rob, pouring them both tea from a sturdy blue and white pot. "Milk and sugar?"

"Yes, please. And yes, of course it was. But how can an inn that old not have a resident ghost?" He smiled, taking the cup from Dean with a nod of thanks. "I think I'd make some changes in the story. It would be better if the young lord were Yorkist instead of Lancastrian, because then he'd be coming back triumphant after the battle, certain that he'd find his barmaid waiting for him with her arms full of white roses...only to find the mourners covering her corpse with them instead."

Dean nodded with approval, sitting back with his own cup, which felt wonderfully warming to his chilled hands. "Not bad."

May is a little early for roses to be in full bloom, of course."

"No one will care, and you have to admit, it's very romantic."

"I wouldn't have thought someone like you would have much use for romance," Dean said without thinking.

Rob stiffened. "On the contrary, my lord." He looked away, and his voice was very soft. "Someday, I hope to.. I mean, it would be wonderful if..."

"Would you tell her—him?—about your past?" Dean shook his head. "I wouldn't."

Rob took his time replying, staring into his teacup as if the answer might be found in its depths. "I think I'd have to be honest."

"You'd be a fool, then. No one would want someone who—"

His companion's eyes blazed. "How many women have you been with?"

"That's hardly relevant."

"How many?"

"Oh, Christ, I don't know. There was a group of us who went brothel-crawling nearly every Saturday night when I was at Cambridge. There were only so many girls to go around, of course. Over the course of four years? Twenty-five or thirty, I suppose."

"And since then?"

Dean looked away. "Not so many."

"Can you guess how many men I've slept with? Can you?" He shrugged. "No."

"Thirteen, my lord. About half your total, or less. Is that really so horrible?"

"There is a difference," Dean said softly. "You know there is. Maybe it shouldn't matter so much, who was the buyer and who the seller, but it does. Virtually every unmarried man frequents prostitutes, but let a woman in the direst need accept money even once, and she is ruined forever. And for a *man*? Good God."

"Outcast. Unclean." Rob's lips twisted wryly. "I hope to prove you wrong someday, my lord." He tilted his chin and looked Dean in the eye. "I refuse to give up on myself."

"A man is what he makes of himself," Dean quoted. "One of the few things of use that my father ever told me. Find another job."

"That's not so easy."

"Why not?" Dean waved a hand in frustration. "Look, it's increasingly clear that you're not stupid. All that stuff you know about history and architecture—"

"So I'm lying?"

"Sometimes we lie to ourselves. And God knows you don't like getting up in the morning. Maybe it's just easier for you—" "Easier?" Rob folded his arms around himself. "Oh, bloody hell."

Dean didn't back down, for some reason increasingly angry. "Or is it just that you're making too much money now? Why find a respectable position you can toil at for the rest of your life, when servicing your older gentlemen will let you retire when you're still a young man?"

Rob leapt to his feet with such force that his teacup overturned, stalking over to stare out the window, fury and hurt emanating from him like a dark cloud.

With tight lips, Dean righted the cup and mopped up the liquid. It was clear that Rob really believed in his mental inferiority, despite growing evidence to the contrary. Now that was stupid. The man had a fine mind to match his glorious body, and by

rights Dean should hate him for having the luck to be born with both. He poured fresh tea and took the cup over to the window, offering it to Rob.

"I'm not entirely certain I should apologize, but I'm going to anyway—and since you don't know me, you can't appreciate the effort it's costing. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, all right?"

Rob accepted the tea, stiff shoulders relaxing by degrees. "Thank you, my lord."

"Try to call me Dean, will you? We're pretending to be friends."

Rob looked at him, dark eyes tired and wounded. "I didn't thank you for letting me see Tewkesbury Abbey either, or taking me to the Royal Arms. We lost some time from the journey for it, and I appreciate it."

"Ah, well. We had to eat somewhere. And...and..." Dean tried to think of why on earth he had taken time out from such an important quest to indulge a virtual stranger, even one who at times was proving to be a surprisingly pleasant companion. He gave up and shrugged. "Now come and sit down."

The prostitute turned back to stare out the window at the rain. "It's so close in here. Confining. Do you feel it?"

"It's just the weather. And the charwoman was too generous with the fire. It will be better soon."

"Will it?" Rob shook himself and smiled brightly, and for the first time Dean wondered how much of his easy good humor was genuine. "Do you play backgammon?"

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly, over the game board and a plain but appetizing dinner. Dean thought it best to avoid personal topics, and Rob responded with evident gratitude, putting himself out to be quietly charming. At last it was time to retire.

Dean hesitated. "The only private room they had left has just one bed. If that makes you uncomfortable—"

"Share a bed with someone I barely know?" Rob stretched, and smiled sleepily. "You think that would bother me?"

"If it does, you can sleep on the floor," Dean said shortly.

Rob sobered. "If it happens that you're the one who's uncomfortable, let me assure you, my lord. You're perfectly safe with me."

"I rather thought so," Dean said, and wondered why he felt just a little deflated.

Encouraged by their chat the night before, Dean sought out Erich again before retiring, reasoning that it also gave Rob a chance to wash and change into a nightshirt in private while he was gone. It made him uncomfortable enough to share a bed with the man, he had no wish to see him in a state of undress. Still, it would be unusual to travel for many days and not have to share at least half the time, so he'd best come to terms with the idea of sleeping next to the prostitute. Some inns jammed patrons three and four to a bed, and many a night Dean had spent traveling back and forth to

Cambridge curled up into as small a ball as possible, trying to avoid the ice-cold feet of a stranger. With his new rank and the money Peter had given him for the book, at least they should be able to bespeak private rooms, avoiding the worst of the public crush.

Once again, he found the coachman in the stable, with the animals. "Does it bother you," Dean asked in German, "sleeping in the...the...?" He had no idea what to call the attic room where the male servants were supposed to sleep, the females relegated to a similar chamber near the kitchen. Dormitory? What was the German for that? Life would be simpler if Erich could speak even a few words of English, but some things couldn't be mended. "... the room with many beds?"

"Nein, Herr Graf." Erich was sitting with his legs crossed on the ground, polishing the brass fittings of the horses' harness. "I don't mind other people. I just like animals better."

"Sometimes, me too." Dean struggled with the grammar of that, but Erich's cautious smile suggested he'd got his point across.

"But you are kind to me," Erich added quickly, seeming anxious that he might have hurt his employer's feelings. "I like your friend, too."

"Mein Freund? Who, Peter?"

Erich nodded toward the main building of the inn. "Nein. Hen-Black. He's not so bad."

Dean thought about the past few days, the unexpectedly entertaining time they'd had chasing ghosts around Tewkesbury today. "Nein," he said. "Not so bad, at all."

Despite the best efforts of the gruesome Wakeman Cenotaph, Dean dreamed about Rob instead. This time there was no narrative, only a series of sensory impressions. The slap of flesh on flesh. The smell of sweat and aroused male. A single gasp, cut off short. And then the dawning realization that maybe this wasn't a dream, but was really happening—

Dean awoke, sitting straight up in bed. Rob slumbered quietly beside him, and if you had drawn a line delineating the exact center of the mattress, no part of the other man would have been found on Dean's side of the bed. Even in sleep he was unfailingly courteous: he didn't hog the covers or even snore.

Just a dream. Dean ran his fingers through his wiry hair, taking a deep breath. Of course it was a dream. He wrapped his arms around his bent knees and watched Rob sleep. It was an unusual situation, that was all. Rob was gorgeous, for a man, and was proving to be an amusing companion. And, of course, he was rather uniquely available. It was only natural to be curious, to wonder if... He tried not to finish the thought, but three a.m. is a truthful time of night. If sex with Rob would be less disappointing than it had turned out to be with women. If Rob could rekindle the kind of excitement he hadn't known since his schooldays, huddling beneath the covers with another boy, caught up in the forbidden thrill of mutual exploration.

But of course, there was another consideration.

Minerva.

He could hardly go to her and plead that her father was wrong, that he wasn't a sodomite—if by the time Dean reached her it was true. His integrity wouldn't allow that.

No. Rob was out of reach. In another time, in another place— Dean's hand stretched out, to smooth one dark lock back from the sleeping man's forehead, and he snatched it back, appalled.

Keep your hands off him and go to sleep, he told himself. Oh, Christ, just go to sleep.

Chapter Eight

Rob was again quiet and heavy-eyed at breakfast, staring blankly out the window while nursing a cup of strong coffee. As usual, a roll lay untouched on his plate.

"We'll stop for luncheon at Gloucester, I think," Dean said, tracing a finger down his map, the remains of a heartier breakfast at his elbow. His companion grunted. "Nice cathedral there." This evoked no apparent interest at all. "Probably haunted."

Rob continued to stare silently at the busy street outside. Turning to look, Dean saw that the sun was up and shining mightily, causing steam to rise from puddles left over from last night's rain. A woman in grey was having to step cautiously as she crossed the street, heading for another hostelry.

"You're right. It is muddy. The road's a hasty pudding today. What's between here and Gloucester? Bishops Norton? We might get no farther than there by midday, and have to skip the cathedral entirely."

"As long as we're away from here." Rob picked up his roll, set it down again, and reburied his face in his coffee cup.

"What's wrong? Didn't you sleep?"

"Not well. The air was so heavy last night I could barely breathe. Like bands of iron around my chest." "I didn't notice."

The serving girl, Frances, reappeared just then. "Are you finished, my lord?" At his nod, she took Dean's plate, and hovered, hesitating over Rob's. "And you, sir?" Rob handed it to her. "But you didn't eat. How about I wrap up something to take with you? A leg of chicken, or a nice bit of ham pie?" Frances looked concerned, but of course it wasn't just old men who would react to Rob's looks.

Rob smiled, but the effort was apparent. "Thank you, I'm not hungry."

She shrugged and turned to go, but Dean called her back. "Wait. We haven't heard about the Bear's ghost yet. Is it true there is one?"

"Oh, yes indeed, my lord! Ever so frightful it is, too." Frances gave an exaggerated shiver. "Poor soldier, brought here after the Battle, and executed right outside." She didn't specify which battle: despite other bloody encounters, the Wars of the Roses were still supreme in Tewkesbury.

"Does he walk?" Dean glanced at Rob, who was showing faint signs of interest. "Waving his sword and shouting for vengeance?"

"Oh, no. Poor, pitiful thing. Wrapped all about in chains he is, and they say he doesn't even have a head to shout with. Not that I've seen him myself," the serving girl added. "I wouldn't stay the night here for all the tea in China."

Rob stood, almost knocking over his chair. "Let's go." Without waiting for a reply, he headed quickly for the door.

Dean couldn't follow immediately, having to stop to pay their reckoning and send

word for Erich to bring the coach around. Outside, he found Rob leaning against the corner of the building, breathing deeply of the rain-washed morning air. "Is that what you think? You somehow felt the constriction of the chains? Honestly!"

"Of course not." Rob didn't look at him. "What would I have in common with that valiant young soldier?"

There was an obvious answer. "Maybe you feel confined by circumstances," Dean said slowly. "But don't we all forge our own chains?"

Erich pulled the coach up smartly, forestalling an answer. Rob smiled up at him, giving the grey mare a pat, then pointing at the carriage. "Zwei Pferde. Kutsche. Ja?"

The coachman was surprised into a somber smile. "Ja, mein Herr. Eine Kutsche und zwei Pferde. Das ist richtig."

"*Und* is very like 'and,' isn't it?" Rob waved to Erich and followed Dean into the coach. "And if *das ist richtig* means what I think it does, it's nearly the same. I wonder if there are many English words that are similar to German. The Anglo-Saxons were a Germanic tribe, weren't they?"

Their baggage was already strapped to the back, and a small basket sat waiting on the seat. Dean flipped up the checked napkin covering it. Ham pie. Chicken. Cherry tart. Serving girls were never so thoughtful of him.

The coach lurched to a start. "Within a decade," Dean said wryly, "Erich will have achieved what a hundred years of Hanoverian kings have failed to accomplish: get all of England to speak German."

Rob smiled briefly, but still wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Your chains, Rob," Dean asked softly. "Were they of your own making? Did you truly choose to do what you do?"

The other man brushed the hair back from his face impatiently. "What? Do you suppose I was sold into a brothel?"

"Such things happen."

"No. Not to me. I suppose I had a choice. Of sorts." Rob was silent for a moment, drumming his hand on the leather seat. "When I was fifteen—"

Dean made a noise of dismay.

"Oh, stop that." Humor glimmered in Rob's eyes. "It's not what you expect. My mother and I lived in a cottage on a distant relative's estate—farm. By the time I was fifteen, I'd already been ejected from school, and she was despairing of what in heaven's name was to become of me. By sheer luck, my "uncle" caught me kissing a stable boy in the barn one afternoon. He sent for my mother and told her that he had no interest in children, but if I was willing to join him up at the—uh, farmhouse—when I turned eighteen, he would see to it that I was taken care of for the rest of my life."

Estate, Rob had almost said, and stumbled over *farmhouse*— in place of what? Manor? Castle? Slips of the tongue that for most people would indicate an attempt to conceal an upper-class background. But Rob was a storyteller, and very good with

words. Perhaps he wanted Dean to think they were closer in background than the evidence would suggest. Dean shook his head, focusing on the details of the tale. "You call that luck? That's appalling!"

Rob shrugged. "It's really not much different from an arranged marriage, is it?"

"Yes, it is. And besides, he lied to you. If he'd made some sort of settlement upon you—"

"Ah, but he did. About three years ago, he died and left me a sizable nest egg. Enough so that if it were invested wisely, I should have been able to live very comfortably off it forever." Rob paused. "He also left me his business manager, who was...very keen to comfort me, and equally keen to oversee my investments."

"And this business manager bilked you?"

"Not willingly. But the end result was the same. He let his emotions get in the way. Wanted to make us both rich instead of comfortable, so he put everything we had into a shipment of high-quality porcelain from the East—a can't fail venture, he called it. When it failed, he couldn't live with himself." Rob paused. "So, he didn't."

Dean winced. "What happened?"

"The ship went down with all hands in a storm, and took our future with it. And then I was alone, and I did face the prospect of starving. I almost just.. .followed him. Instead, I drank what was left of the wine cellar before the creditors could seize it, and when I sobered up, I realized two things. First, that getting drunk is stupid and doesn't help in the least."

Dean nodded in silent agreement.

"Second, that my two gentleman friends had at least left me with a marketable skill. And after a few disastrous attempts at other occupations, yes, I decided to sell myself to other men for money."

"I wouldn't know how to get started." Dean flushed. "I mean— not that I—"

Rob shrugged again. "Men of certain tastes tend to know each other. My first patron was a gentleman of my uncle's acquaintance, who then introduced me to one or two others. And one of them told me to watch carefully for the advertisements in the papers. It would be clear enough, once I went for an interview, exactly what sort of discreet young gentleman the man was looking for. And it is. Is your curiosity satisfied now?"

"Well..." It was none of his business, but this question had been shouting to be asked for days. "Aren't there lonely *women* who would pay for your services?"

Rob laughed. "You did notice, in my story, that it was a *boy* my uncle caught me kissing?"

"Then you've always been a...a...?"

"Sodomite? That's the classic term, but it's so biblical, isn't it? And the purely descriptive epithets are rather crude and boring. How about madge cull? Ganymede?" Rob crossed his long legs, propping his feet on the seat next to Dean and leaning back

comfortably. "Gentleman of the back door. Back-gammon player. Indorser. Bum-fiddler. Navigator of the windward passage. Miss Molly."

"Hardly that," Dean interrupted, his face flaming. "I've at least heard of mollies, and you're not effeminate in the least."

"Kind of you to say so." Rob grinned. "Nevertheless, it was always men for me, my lord."

"But *old* men."

Rob sobered, stared out the window at the passing scenery. The bright sunshine of the early morning had given way to drifting clouds, and the constant shift of light and shadow wrung fifty shades of green from the fields. "Let me tell you a story," he said slowly. "The first man I traveled abroad with was seventy years old."

"Ugh."

"No, *listen*. Henry was revisiting the most important places in his life, one last time before he died. He took me to Venice. Once, when he was a young man, he went to a masked ball there. It was beyond anything he had ever imagined. A swirl of color and music and laughter that blended into a mass from which only one detail stood out: another young man, in medieval parti-colored hose and a green feathered mask.

Rob's face softened, grew tender as he disappeared into the story. "The other man seemed to be watching him—*him*, from out of all the others there. Once, they brushed against each other in the crowded ballroom, and Henry felt his knees grow weak at the touch. After that, it seemed they were playing a game: advance, retreat. The man in the green mask would be lost in the crowd for a quarter-hour, or more, and then Henry would feel the merest touch of a hand on his back, on his arm, and the man in green would be smiling at him below the mask, just out of reach again.

"The night went on, and the revelers danced, and the wine continued to flow. And the surreptitious touches grew bolder, the pursuit more heated. Finally, Henry couldn't stand it any longer. He waited until he was sure the other man was looking at him, then turned and went out onto the veranda. He stood there and waited, steadying his trembling arms against the balustrade. At last he felt the warmth of another body pressing up against him, a kiss on the back of his neck. Just as he started to lean back into the embrace, it was gone.

"Henry turned and saw the green-masked man walking swiftly away—not back into the ballroom, but down the stairs from the veranda to the street. He followed, having to run at first to keep up, and he said he always remembered how loud his breathing sounded in the dark, quiet streets. His quarry stopped at last, on the Rialto Bridge over the Grand Canal, stopped, and turned, and held out his hand. And they kissed there, at last, and Henry said it was the fourth most romantic moment of his entire life."

Rob paused for a moment, his eyes wistful. "I stood there with him, while he told me about it. Henry said Venice had changed, but the bridge was just as he remembered

it. Anyway, that night—that night long ago, the stranger took Henry's hand, and they ran down the steps of the bridge together, and into the warren of streets. The streets twisted and turned about them, and then they went up some stairs to where the young Venetian had a room. They came together there, with their masks still on, explored and took and *ravished* each other for hours, until the dawn broke at last.

"And then, with the morning sun, they knew they had a choice. They could part, still anonymous, still masked, making what they'd shared a single instance of magic, a perfect moment to look back at their whole lives. Or they could take off their masks and see what they could build from it."

Rob was silent for a moment. "What would you have chosen?"

"The magic," Dean whispered, then cleared his throat. "It could only be disappointing. There could have been anything behind that mask. Crossed eyes, pimples, pockmarks." *Freckles*. "Maybe he snored, bit his nails, liked the wrong music. The magic was better."

"That's what they thought, too. They shared a last bittersweet kiss at the door to the room, and that was the third most romantic moment in Henry's life. And he walked down the stairs, and tried to find his way back through the tangle of streets to his lodging. He got lost, of course—everyone does in Venice, unless you live there, but at last found his way to a landmark he knew. The Rialto Bridge. He stood there, in the middle of the bridge, and dropped his mask down into the canal.

"And he almost cried, for the first time since he was a child, because he knew then he'd made a mistake. He would never be able to find the young man's room in the warren of streets, and they wouldn't recognize each other even if they did meet again. Men don't cry, Henry told me. Englishmen don't. But he was about to, when he heard footsteps behind him on the bridge.

"He turned, and standing there holding a green feathered mask was the most beautiful young man he had ever seen in his life. And the man said, *Il mio nome è Roberto*."

Dean looked out the window, at the grey waters of the Severn just to the west of the road. "Don't tell me: the first most romantic moment in your friend's life."

He could hear the smile in Rob's voice as he replied. "No, after much deliberation Henry ranked it second. He wouldn't tell me about the first, except that it happened shortly before Roberto died, some thirty years later."

"Thirty years." Dean shook his head. "Why did you tell me this?"

"Because you wanted to know how I could let someone like Henry touch me. Do you really think, after hearing his story, that I had difficulty going to bed with him?"

"Perhaps. But the others?"

"Everyone has a story. Whether they tell it to me or not, I know it's there. Henry gave me that gift, and it's in his honor that I named myself Robert, for his Roberto."

Dean looked at Rob at last. "That's not your name, either?"

The other man smiled. "Well, half of it is. But the point—"

"Half! Oh...Albert?"

"No."

"Herbert, then."

"Don't bother to guess," Rob said, his chin set resolutely. "I won't tell you."

"All right, then, tell me something else. Has it always been older men? Have you never been with anyone your own age?"

Rob relaxed, and was fully amused now. "Are you offering? I wouldn't say no to a fine-looking man like yourself."

"Oh, stop it," Dean said, wishing he could contain the color that suffused his face. "I suppose you feel obligated to keep your flirting skills in practice, but I'm fully aware of what I am."

"Are you?" Rob said softly. "We started this conversation by talking of chains. What of your own chains, my lord Carwick? You can't even see yourself through them."

He was six again, his mother painting his face with a sour-smelling buttermilk concoction. "If only you had your father's skin," she'd said, voice thick with distaste. "If only we were both like your Aunt Margaret."

But perhaps freckles did have their appeal. When compared to liver spots.

Chapter Nine

Dean sat in the coach with the Quarterly on his lap, flipping pages to find the first new entry. Struggling to focus on the words despite the jostles of the road, he found his own previous account, from near the end of May. *Such a shock to find out from the Quarterly that I'm an earl*, it began dryly. *Perhaps there are some occasions where a messenger could be put to good use— don 't you think, Uncle Jonas?* But Jonas Smith, who lived nearest to Carwick and had thus been present when the former earl, Uncle Parmenius, had passed away, was not one to waste coin. Not when he was due to send out the Quarterly within a week or two anyway. Dean smiled to himself. His uncles were an eccentric lot, and doubtless the rest of them approved Jonas's frugality. Except, perhaps, Uncle Godfredus, who rarely approved of anything. "My uncles," he said out loud, shaking his head. Rob let down the window shade, blocking the dust and the view of the gently undulating Cotswolds, and turned to face him. "Tell me about them."

"I'm not the storyteller you are," Dean said with a shrug. "I wouldn't know where to begin." "Well, first off: was the last earl really named Parmenius?" Dean grinned. "Oh, yes. My grandfather had ten sons, and—"

"Ran out of names?"

"Ha! Parmenius was second, after Aeneas. Then came my father, who was christened Erastus. He died first, before his older brothers, so he never held the title. It came to me because Uncles Parm and Aeneas never married. After Father come two sets of twins: Silenus and Silas, and Aloysius and Albertus. Then come Godfredus, Jonas, and Phineas. Except for the three eldest, they're all still alive."

"Silas and Jonas didn't get off so bad," Rob observed. "But what's wrong with other good English names like Francis, or Nicholas?"

"Chances are Grandfather knew men with those names. The man could keep a grudge. I never met him myself, but there's a reason my uncles ended up so reclusive."

"I'm sure your grandfather had a lot on his mind, with ten sons to provide for."

"There is that," Dean admitted, poking into the basket the serving girl at the Black Bear had provided them. Rob had eaten all the cherry tarts. He helped himself to a slice of ham pie before continuing. "Somehow, he managed to give them each a sufficient portion so they could live off the interest, if they were frugal. Which is why we end up with absurd economies like announcing the death of the head of the family in the Quarterly, instead of posting all those individual letters." He balanced the wide ledger on his knees, and, pie in one hand, flipped a page with the other. The coach wheel dipped into a rut, scattering crumbs over the Quarterly.

"Give it here," Rob ordered, hand outstretched. "I can read it to you while you eat, if you're not fearful of family secrets being revealed."

Dean, mouth full, waved his hand in approval.

"The first entry after yours is signed Silas," Rob said. "Does it always go in the same order?"

He nodded, swallowing. "Yes, it's meant to go by proximity, from one person to the next nearest. The order will change now that I've moved to Carwick, but I haven't stopped to figure it out yet."

"Makes sense. *June 3, 1815 Weather continues warm. Holly put up strawberry jam; bit tart for my tastes.* Didn't you mention Holly once?"

Dean nodded. "Uncle Silas's housekeeper. And bed warmer, if the rumors are true." "The one who can't tell green from red?" "That's the one."

"She features more in the entry. *Hollys demmed sister Ivy— ridiculous names—is visiting. Eaten her way steadily through half the potted shrimps we were saving for summer pic-nics. Nasty woman. Cat hates her—won't share the shrimps.*" Rob looked up, laughter twitching at his lips. "He's got a point, there. Any person disliked by cats is instantly suspect." He looked back down at the book. "Fine one to talk about names, too! Although Silas is certainly better than—" He bit off a word. "Er...Phineas, I suppose."

"You almost said your name, didn't you?" Dean leaned forward. "Come on, Bertie, spill. It can't be worse than my family's unfortunate nomenclature."

"How you got away so easily with 'Dean' amazes me."

Not a topic Dean wished to pursue. "What have I missed? Gilbert, Colbert, Lambert. Uh...Hubert."

"No to all four." Rob returned to the Quarterly. "*Crops off to a good start. Sorry to hear about Parm. Fox got after the chickens again, might need a dog after all.* Your Uncle Silas isn't what I'd call overly sentimental, is he?"

"None of them is. He's better than most of our family: at least he has Holly. Loners, the lot of us, who far prefer to keep in touch through that," Dean gestured at the Quarterly, "than get together in person. My father used to dump me from time to time on Silas when he went to buy music scores in Paris, but apart from that I mostly know my uncles only through their words."

"Hmm. One might imagine their wives would encourage them to be more social."

"Only two of them stirred themselves to marry, my father and Albertus. And for what it's worth, both wives left them." Dean flushed to realize what he'd just revealed. Family secrets, indeed. He hurried on, hoping Rob wouldn't linger on the information. "Aunt Emmeline managed six children while she was still with Uncle Albertus, including four boys, so should anything happen to me, my cousins have the title secure."

"I was so worried," Rob said dryly. "Not much more from Uncle Silas, unless you're interested in Holly's recipe for potted shrimps. Next is..." He turned the page. "Ah, Albertus himself, with several pages of his offspring's news. The doings of your cousins should take us comfortably to luncheon. Will we make Bishops Norton?"

Dean peeked out the window shade, considered the position of the sun. "Yes, we'll dine there, and later perhaps stop to rest the horses in Gloucester. But if we do—I'm sorry, we absolutely cannot make time for the Cathedral."

◆ ◆ ◆

Some time later, Dean lay on his back on the tower roof of Gloucester Cathedral, eyes closed, enervated by the comfortable weight of the late afternoon sun. Intellectually, he knew that he had an important mission to accomplish, and that he had damned well best get back to it. But an August day like this one wasn't designed for hurry, and if he couldn't be on the bank of Little Stream at Carwick with a fishing pole in his hand, then drowsing two hundred-odd feet above Gloucester was a damned fine second. The sun was probably burning him pink, and sowing a whole new crop of freckles, but just now it was hard to care.

A finger poked him in the ribs. "A mere two hundred and sixty-nine steps," Rob said, "and you're tired?"

Dean opened one eye and glowered at his companion, who was lounging propped on one elbow next to him. "That curate—the young one who let us up here—he was flirting with you."

Rob smiled up at the cloudless sky. "Yes, he was."

"But he's a priest!"

"Church of England, not Catholic."

"That's supposed to make a difference?"

"Mmm," Rob said. "They're not sworn to eternal celibacy."

"They're allowed to marry," Dean corrected. "But I'm sure they aren't supposed to have relations outside of marriage."

"For that matter, no one is. You're not a virgin yourself."

Dean stretched and resettled himself on his back. "Ah, but I'm Presbyterian. Since I'm not one of the Elect, I'm damned no matter what I do."

"Good," Rob said. "Get creative." He reached and re-tucked Dean's shirt, which had pulled free right above the hip, fingers lingering just a second too long.

Dean, skin tingling from the contact, reminded himself sternly that he had a fiancée, and a goal to accomplish. "Save it for your priest. And you know damned well that even if he can get married, he's not supposed to be looking at *you* that way."

"Ah, well. I imagine the religious life is a great temptation for men and women who enjoy their own sex. Close-knit communities of one's own kind, a certain amount of seclusion from the world—"

"Wait." Dean sat up straight. "Did you say 'men and women'? Women.. .with women?"

Rob laughed. "That's never occurred to you?"

"Well, no."

"Believe me, it happens. Easier to hide, too—no one turns a hair when two

spinsters set up house together to save expense. And then, of course—"

Dean groaned. "Don't tell me: *Discreet young gentlewoman sought as companion for mature widow*. You know, Rob, I've lost

a certain amount of innocence since making your acquaintance."

"Well, if you ever want to lose a little more..."

"Shut up. What on earth do they do together?"

"Women with women?" Rob again tilted his head skyward, shading his eyes with one hand as he watched a falcon circle above the cathedral. "How would I know? I'm not all that clear on what they do with men."

"You've never been with a woman? Not even once?"

"No."

"Then how do you know you wouldn't like it?"

Rob sat up and looked at him, dark eyes sparkling. "Well, you've never been with a man. How do you know you wouldn't like that?"

Dean could feel his shoulders tighten, and a betraying heat spread up from his neck. "I'm not—it's not that I ever—but—" He broke off, wrapping his arms around his knees.

"Oho," Rob crowed. "That's a rather guilty expression, my Lord Carwick."

His face got even hotter. "There was this boy at school." "There frequently is, from what I've heard. Go on—how far did it go?"

"Well, not very! We didn't—I mean, we... Oh, hell." Dean laughed. It was a relief to tell someone. "Just touched each other some, with a bit of rubbing together. We didn't even like each other that much. He'd torment me mercilessly all day: calling me names, kicking me, stealing my sweets, stomping my books into the mud. That sort of thing. But almost every night, as soon as the lights were out, there he'd be, crawling under the covers again."

"So I'd have better luck with you if I kicked you more?" Rob leaned toward him, grinning.

Dean put up a hand, palm out. "I'm sure it's good for business to keep your flirting skills in practice," he said primly. "But I do wish you wouldn't waste them on me. I do have a fiancée, you know. Or I will as soon as we get to Bath and clear this whole mess up."

"Miss Lewis. Will you tell me about her? I like romantic stories." Rob sounded wistful, and Dean shifted uncomfortably.

"Maybe later. Come on, we should get back on the road. We've wasted enough time as it is."

Rob got to his feet with grace and extended a long-fingered hand to help Dean up. His grasp was warm, and strong. "The weather's beautiful, and the days are still long. We'll make it up."

Dean hesitated. "Then we have time for a quick bite to eat before we go. Climbing

up here made me hungry, and we can hardly leave Gloucester without seeing the New Inn."

"A new inn? And I thought you were showing me all the historical sites."

Dean smiled. "Not that new. Lady Jane Grey was staying there when she was proclaimed queen. And...you'll never guess."

Rob grinned. "She haunts the place still?"

"Of course she does."

The New Inn was impressively old, built around a central medieval courtyard that had seen a century's use before Queen Jane began her nine-days reign there in 1553. Located in Northgate Street, the establishment bustled with trade from the London-Gloucester coach route. Still, the landlady, Mrs. Austin, took the time to show them around the inn. A hearty older woman with carefully-arranged white curls, she must have told her stories a thousand times, but her voice was colored with the enjoyment of a good tale.

"This here is the Queen's Suite," she said, her voice low and thrilling, as she opened a door on one of the upstairs galleries surrounding the courtyard. "Many a guest has seen the young lass herself, passing through the bed chamber all in her robes and crown, her head bent with the weight of it."

The room's wooden panels were dark with age and had been snacked upon by worms in the not too recent past, but it was easy to imagine their former grandeur. "I wish we could stay," Dean said, looking up at the ceiling. Or maybe he didn't wish it. The roof was low for modern tastes—Dean could have reached up and easily touched one of the heavy beams framing it—and it was all too easy to imagine Lady Jane's panic as her world closed in on her. He shifted his attention to a portrait of the young queen hanging on the wall, a poor reproduction of one he'd seen in London. "How old was she?"

Rob stretched out a finger, gently brushing the painted face. "Fifteen when she became queen, sixteen when they executed her."

"Good lord." Dean shivered. "Imagine your fate sealed at such a young age."

"Yes." The other man's voice sounded flat, and Dean remembered that Rob had been just fifteen when his uncle had caught him kissing another boy, and set his own future in motion.

"Rob..." But his companion was already deep in discussion with Mrs. Austin, her white curls bobbing as she threw herself into another tale.

They took a meal downstairs in the public room, part of a wing that had been added since the dawn of the current century. The larger scale of the room and profusion of windows were refreshing

after the medieval closeness of the Queen's Suite in the gallery upstairs, and the food well prepared. Dean nibbled on his second drumstick while the landlady, who had taken a shine to Rob, told him about other hauntings in the vicinity.

"Oh, and don't forget the Amberley Inn, down on Minchinhampton Common." Mrs. Austin refilled their pewter mugs with a sound local ale. "They hanged young Tom Long there at the Cross, and his sweetheart waiting for him back at the inn all unknowing. On moonlit nights he comes back there to see her, the landlord's daughter."

"Hanged him?" No gentle nudge this time; Rob kicked Dean sharply under the table to forestall an incipient snicker. "And what did poor Tom do to deserve that?"

"A highwayman he was, but his Bess would have reformed him, if he'd lived long enough," the woman said comfortably.

"A highwayman," Dean muttered. "Hell and damnation, I suppose we'll have to. Erich's been heading down the Bristol road, and was then going to cut back east for Bath, but if we head a bit southeast instead and go down through Tetbury and Chippenham it'll be about the same in the end. It's a shorter route but the roads aren't as good. Madam? Could we make Minchinhampton Common tonight?"

"Oh, aye. It's not more than ten—well, twelve, say—miles. Certainly no more than fifteen."

"Fifteen is pushing it," Rob said. "Never mind, we should just stick to the better roads anyway."

"Nay, twelve is more like it," Mrs. Austin said. "It's just a mile or two south of Stroud. Even if you walked you'd likely make that before full dark."

Rob didn't say anything, but his face radiated hope. It really wasn't such a hard decision to make.

"All right," Dean said. "We'll drop in on young Tom tonight, and stay over at the Amberley. But tomorrow, I swear—we'll be on the road at dawn and won't stop until the horses drop dead from exhaustion."

Chapter Ten

The ginger-hackled gent?" Frances, the serving girl at the Black Bear in Tewkesbury, widened her eyes at the proffered sovereign. "That's his lordship the Earl of Carwick, miss—ma'am." It was hard to tell the woman's age beneath her grey veil. Odd, that. Not that it didn't make sense for a woman to go about veiled, especially if she were traveling alone, but this lady took her privacy especially seriously. Perhaps she was dreadfully scarred, or marked by the Devil with a harelip. She peered intently, but to her disappointment couldn't make out any noticeable deformity beneath the veil.

"What can you tell me about them?" Not many clues in her careful speech.

"Oh, a fine gentleman he is, and Mr. Black as well—not so high in the instep that they can't spare a kind word, either of them." She grinned. "Lookers, too, if you ask me."

The woman's stillness was uncanny. "I need to know where they're going. Can you help me?"

Frances wrinkled her brow. "Gloucester? Yes, they said they would stop in Gloucester for lunch, ma'am, so they must be going well beyond that. Or they'd wait, and eat when they got there, see?"

The grey lady nodded. "That makes sense."

"It's just a coach-and-pair they've got, though, so I wouldn't think they'd get beyond Cambridge or Dursley tonight. If they stick to the Bristol road, that is."

"Thank you." The woman in grey bowed, a loosening in her frame indicating relief. "That's the first solid lead I've had all day." She rubbed discreetly at her back. "You're certain? The verger at the cathedral sent me on a wild goose chase to Bredon Hill."

Frances smiled in sympathy. "Aye, ma'am. I'm sure of it." But why was this woman looking for an earl? Her clothes didn't seem to place her in such high company, but a lady traveling alone might try to disguise her rank. Maybe it was that nice Mr. Black she was after—a face like that you'd follow to the ends of the earth. It was none of her business, but she had to ask. "Pardon me, ma'am, but why would you be interested in them?"

At first Frances thought the woman wasn't going to answer, but after a moment a sigh stirred the grey veil. "It's a family matter, and not one I care to share with strangers. But thank you for your help. I do appreciate it."

After the woman in grey had left the Black Bear, Frances turned the gold coin over and over in her palm, thoughtfully. Whose family, and what matter?

Chapter Eleven

Erich!" Dean started to lean out the coach window, pulling back abruptly to avoid banging his head on a branch. He

raised his voice instead. "*Wo the hell* sind wir?" "Fast da, fast da," the coachman yelled back. "He says we're almost there," Dean translated. Rob yawned. "Good."

Dean leaned cautiously out the window again. "Hell and damnation. These blasted country roads. You'd think we could see better with the full moon, but these lanes are so narrow and overgrown it's almost pitch—" The sentence ended in a cry as the carriage jolted heavily to the left with a sickening snap, almost overturning. Rob slid into him with bruising force, and it took a minute for them to untangle themselves and ascertain there was no serious injury before they could begin to see what had happened.

"Erich! Are you all—hell!—bist du—?" The uppermost door of the crazily-tilting coach opened, and a figure appeared in silhouette.

"Straßenräuber!" the coachman hissed.

"The highwayman?" Dean looked at Rob—what he could see of him, anyway. "Er ist gut, and so am I, but—" "Nein! Es sind zwei—"

"Oh, blast," Rob said, his voice unsteady. "My lord, I think we're being robbed."

"That's right, lads!" came a voice from behind Erich. "Out of the coach, now."

With Erich's help, they climbed from the disabled carriage, its rear axle snapped by the deep hole dug into the road at its darkest turn. The highwaymen—there were two of them—herded the other three men into the moonlight. They didn't look a thing like Rob's rather more romantic interpretation, being much dirtier and more disreputable in looks, with only ragged kerchiefs tied over the lower parts of their faces for disguise.

"All right, Coachie. You fetch the luggage from the coach. Anything funny and your passengers here get it."

Erich just stared, frozen, horrified gaze fastened on the highwayman's pistol.

"He doesn't speak English," Dean said quickly. "Let me tell him what you just said."

"Think I'm stupid? No secret messages, now." He turned to Erich. "You.. .fetch.. .luggage. Trunks? Bags?" The second man's gun was steady on them while the first pantomimed what he wanted. Erich, trembling hands raised, nodded comprehension.

The coachman's terror was the last straw. "This is not happening," Dean said under his breath. He assessed their relative position: the gunman was standing in front of the coach facing them, but keeping half his attention on his assistant, who was overseeing Erich's effort with the luggage. It was a fairly tight grouping, no more than eight feet separating any of them. A quick step, a flying tackle... "Rob," he whispered. "We can take them. I'll go for the one on the right, you get the other one. On the count of—"

"Are you mad?"

"We can do it," Dean insisted, keeping his tone low. "I overcame you, after all."

"Dean." Rob's voice sounded on the veriest edge of inappropriate laughter. "I think *their* guns are loaded."

"That's right." They had caught the attention of the taller of the two robbers, who now cocked his pistol for emphasis. He moved close enough to press the barrel to the center of Dean's chest. "Care to take your chances now?"

"Don't. Please." Rob said softly. "He won't try anything, I swear it."

Just beyond them, the second miscreant had retrieved their valises from the shaking coachman and was busy transferring the contents into his own saddle bags. They took everything, except for the Quarterly and the small English/German dictionary Dean used for communicating with Erich. "Books?" one of the highwaymen snorted, flinging them aside. "What's the use of those?"

Among the items of clothing the robbers were stuffing, willy-nilly, into their bags, a length of ribbon shone pale in the moonlight. Dean stiffened, paralyzed with misery. Rob followed his glance and was quick to step forward.

"That piece of ribbon—it's no good to you. Please?"

The highwayman scowled. "We're taking the lot, and you just shut up about it."

"Please," Rob said again. "It's a token. Haven't you ever had a sweetheart?"

"She'll give you another. Now, let's have the watch and ring, Romeo."

Rob stood his ground. "Her father changed his mind—there's to be no wedding now. That ribbon is all that's left."

"Oh for Christ's sake—take the fucking ribbon." The highwayman shook it free of the shirt it was tangled in, and dropped it. "Now Ginger, I'll have your watch, too." While Dean handed over his valuables, Rob scooped up the faded blue ribbon from the road and tucked it into his sleeve.

The robbers finished with their luggage, then looked around, apparently searching for something else to take. "Nice satin," the heavysset man said, fingering the fabric of Dean's waistcoat and shooting a glance at Rob's. "Take 'em off, gents."

Funny, but getting undressed at gunpoint was much different in reality than in one's dreams. Dean's hands shook as he unbuttoned the desired garment and handed it over. He held his breath, but the miscreants were uninterested in the rest of their clothes.

"Now get the horses," the man with the gun called to his associate.

"No!" The protest burst out of Dean before he could think. "You can't strand us here!"

"Shut up!" The highwayman swirled and backhanded Dean across the face with the hand not holding the gun. Against every instinct, Dean managed not to respond in kind, although his hands clenched into fists in helpless fury. "You think you're too good to walk? Ha! You've got good boots—" The robber peered closer in the bright moonlight, and grinned. "Damned good boots. I'll have those too. And your friend's as

well."

The highwaymen were kind enough to leave their own shoes, rather worse for wear, in exchange. Left alone on the road with the disabled, horseless carriage, Dean and his two companions stared after their assailants until the sound of the hoof beats faded into nothingness.

Dean sat on the hard-packed road and put his face in his hands. "Shit. Shit!" he said, adding helpfully for Erich, "Scheisse! What are we going to do?"

Rob sat down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Here. Here's your ribbon."

Erich sat on the other side, silently offering the books.

He nodded to the coachman, placing the ledger and dictionary on his lap, then wrapped the scrap of blue satin around his wrist and tied it. "Thank you. It was my mother's, not Minerva's."

"See?" Rob squeezed his shoulder. "Not all's lost."

"But we have no money, no horses, no...boots." Dean kicked at the highwayman's shoe, sending the malodorous item skidding down the road. "The coach is wrecked, and if we leave it here unattended it will be stripped of the wheels, tack, cushions, and anything else removable by the time we get someone to fetch it. Assuming we even could, without money."

"A bank might—"

"It's Saturday night," Dean said miserably. "The banks won't open until Monday. How are we even going to eat until then?"

Rob's hand dropped off Dean's shoulder. "I can get us money," he said.

"You can? How?" Dean shook his head as he realized what Rob was offering. "No," he said. "Oh, no. Besides, even if you wanted to, this is the Cotswolds, not London. Opportunities would be rather limited, don't you think?"

Rob didn't look at him. "Do you remember that pub we passed a few miles back? The Rose and Thistle, I think it was called."

"A country pub? That would hardly—"

"Please. Listen. I recognized it. I've—I met a patron there, once. There's a private club upstairs." Rob kept his gaze firmly focused on the road in front of him. "People come from miles away to visit it—Gloucester, Bristol, Bath. It's for men only. Do you understand me?"

A molly house, he meant. Here, in the heart of the English countryside. "No," Dean said, mind groping for alternatives. "I mean, yes, I understand, but...no. You *cannot*. We'll try...I don't know, a farmhouse or something. Someone will take us in until the banks open. Or...one of my uncles lives here in Gloucester. Somewhere."

"Do you know where he lives? Could we find it tonight, on foot?"

"Rob. I don't want you to do this."

Rob looked at him at last, eyes were dark in the moonlight. "Thank you, Dean."

But you know, it's what I do." "Not like this."

"No. But we'll be damned hungry by Monday morning if I don't." He smiled. "And that's assuming you can talk the bank manager into believing you're really the Earl of Carwick, with shoes like those."

Dean was silent, staring into the shadows, while Rob stood, brushing himself off. "Dean. Why don't you and Erich stay with the coach? I'll be back by morning." He looked back down the road the way they had come. "Or, if you prefer that I don't come back, I'll send someone with enough money to get you on to Bath, or home to Carwick."

"No." Dean got up and retrieved the shoe he'd kicked earlier. "I'll come with you. What if there's trouble?" It's the least I can do, he thought, knot clenching in his belly. He put on the highwayman's shoes and explained to Erich that they were going for help, and would return or send someone for the coach in the morning.

Two hours later, Dean stared into his beer in the upstairs room of the pub. "I've lost a certain amount of innocence since making your acquaintance," he had jested to Rob this morning. Well, Rob was the one losing his innocence now. "I don't take on a dozen strangers a night," he'd said at the first.

But maybe that was a lie. Anger roiled in Dean's gut. The man had been arrested, hadn't he? Appeared before Magistrate Lewis. That argued against Rob's claim of servicing a select clientèle through appointments alone. And he certainly knew what to do tonight. When they'd arrived at the Rose and Thistle, Rob had put his hand briefly on Dean's arm.

"I need to talk to the barman. The upstairs club is kept very secure, so I'll have to convince him I'm not trouble."

Dean looked around the taproom, which looked like a hundred other pubs he'd frequented: the same dark beams, plain wooden tables, handsome oak bar. There must have been a local festival or fair pulling in patrons from the surrounding towns, a raucous crowd of farmers and tradesmen, mostly, but with a sprinkling of women among them. Cheerful serving girls, bold-eyed fancy women, even a few easy-going wives. Incredible to imagine the second, secret world of the molly house upstairs. He looked at the barman overseeing the establishment, a tall, thick man with a full head of greying blond hair. "He'll want a cut."

"Yes, of course. But if upstairs is anywhere near as busy as down here, I should still have enough for us within a few hours." Rob hesitated just for a second. "How do I look?"

Dean reached and brushed at a small spot of dust on Rob's cheek. How did he look? Handsome. Gorgeous. Like something far too precious to be sold to anyone with an itch and a few spare coppers. "Fine." He dropped his hand, and Rob caught it.

"Don't be angry. Please."

Dean pulled his hand free. "Should I go upstairs with you? Suppose you need

help."

Rob hesitated, then nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

He watched as Rob joined the throng at the bar and waited patiently for a word with the barman. Before long, he'd caught the man's attention, and Dean could see the barman's face spark with interest. What was Rob offering? A cut of the profits, a free sample? A little of both?

The barman called for one of his assistants to mind the taps, and disappeared into the back with Rob. In less than ten minutes he and Rob were back, a smug smile on the barman's broad face. Maybe they had just been discussing terms. Was that enough time for more? But Dean's own perfunctory encounters with prostitutes had frequently been as brief.

Rob crooked a finger at him and Dean rose, following the two others up the stairs to the secret men's club. At first, it looked like a smaller, quieter version of the pub downstairs, with perhaps half as many tables. It took a second glance to realize that most of the clientèle were better dressed than the crowd below, which fit Rob's description of this as a place men traveled some distance to find. These weren't locals out for a casual mug of ale, they were here for the companionship of those of their own kind. Some, Dean supposed, might just want breathing space, a place where they could relax and talk to others who shared their interests.

Others clearly wanted more. The tinkle of piano music covered the hum of conversation, but the amorous postures of several of the couples seated at tables made overhearing their words unnecessary. Just as he was wondering where they went for more intimate encounters, a pair of young men rose and disappeared through a dimly-lit archway at the back of the room. Dean peered through the gloom, seeing a short corridor with perhaps three or four doors on each side, and one at the end. Private rooms. He swallowed.

"Find a place to sit." Dean jumped as Rob spoke into his ear. "If I need help, I'll find a way to get word to you."

Dean nodded shortly, finding an empty table in the corner of the room, and watching as the downstairs barman handed off Rob to the man in charge of the upstairs bar. This employee, a younger, thinner man with a devilish smile, guided Rob back toward the archway and the corridor beyond. Dean expected they would stop and talk to patrons along the way, but apparently it wasn't necessary. When a man who looks like Rob enters a room, everyone notices. And everyone seemed to know what it meant that he was being led, alone, to one of the private rooms. It didn't take long before a middle-aged gentleman excused himself from the friends he'd been playing cards with, and disappeared through the archway. Dean's hands clenched beneath the table.

The young barman came by almost immediately with a brimming mug of bitter. "On the house," he said with a wink. "Just wave me down when you want more."

Dean forced the beer past the lump in his throat, unable to stop imagining what was going on in the back room. Damn him. That bloody whore. If Dean had been blessed with half Rob's looks, one-third of his charm, he would never let just anyone have the use of them. Rob had been given such gifts—how dare he pervert them like this?

For you, the answer came back. For you, and Erich, and the blasted coach. Rob on his own could charm his way home without having to resort to this.

The first of Rob's clients reappeared from the back, looking damnably content, and two other men rose at once, hurrying to beat each other to the archway. There was a brief, heated discussion when they reached it at the same time. Then, one of them tossed a coin, and the winner proceeded into the corridor, while the loser stamped his foot and stalked back to a table near Dean, glowering. The barman approached him, close enough for Dean to overhear that there was another young man for sale in the back tonight, if he wished. The loser of the coin toss shook his head stubbornly. He would wait for Rob.

Dean didn't want to think about what Rob was doing, but watching the other patrons made him uncomfortable, and unaccountably nervous. Some of them were obvious mollies, effeminate, even painted—one pretty young man was even wearing a woman's dress, for heaven's sake. But others looked like men one would tip one's hat to in the street, respectable, prosperous. Men like his uncles. Like himself.

The barman came back with his pitcher and refilled his mug. Dean stared at it. It would be an easy antidote to the bitter feelings coursing through him, drinking himself senseless. Something he'd managed to avoid since the disastrous night he'd come into the title. If only Rob would come back, so they could leave this dreadful place, which was filling up quickly as the evening lengthened.

Two tables away, a couple began kissing, oblivious to the now-crowded room, and Dean's hand tightened painfully on his mug as an unwelcome heat rose in his groin. Someone was playing the piano, badly, and all at once that was more than he could bear. He stood up with such vehemence that he nearly knocked his chair over, and shoved his way through the crowd until he reached the group thronged around the piano. He laid an ungentle hand on the shoulder of the man playing, causing a startled crash of keys as the pianist jumped in surprise. "Stop that bloody noise!" Dean's shout was loud in the absence of the music.

The pianist assessed Dean's youth, breadth, and obvious temper, and wisely decided it wasn't worth fighting over. He raised his hands in supplication. "Didn't like that song, sir? I can play another."

"I sincerely doubt it."

A much bigger man pushed through the others, face belligerent. "I suppose you can do better?" Dean narrowed his eyes. "I suppose I can." "Prove it."

The current player hurried to give up the stool. For the second time in a week, Dean found himself seated in front of a piano, scowling down at the keys. He could

play better than that idiot any day of the week. Blindfolded. As he frequently had been, the better to be forced to learn the keyboard by heart. Just for a second, he was seven years old again, tears escaping the cloth tied painfully tight around his eyes, dreading the sharp rap of a ruler across his knuckles every time he missed a note.

Dean blinked. It was just a bloody piano, and the crowd was getting restless. The thought crossed his mind, out of nowhere, that Rob liked music. Hearing it well-played might make whatever he was going through right now just that much easier.

He ran his fingers lightly over the keys, calling forth a little trill from one of his father's favorite Mozart pieces. "What do you want to hear?"

Competing voices called out the names of old ballads, and new popular songs. He seized on one, recently familiar. "All right, then: 'The Lobster-Back Waltz.'" Dean launched into the tune.

Someone at his shoulder hummed along, then began singing. "Across Iberia we will go, Chasing Boney to and fro..." Dean hadn't even known there were words to the song. Others joined in, so that by the time they reached, "And the regiments of dead, will learn to fear a coat of red!," there was quite a chorus of voices caterwauling along.

"Well done!" someone cried out. "How about 'Barbry Allen'?"

After that, the barman placed an empty mug on the piano, and appreciative patrons dropped pennies into it from time to time. Dean eyed the growing collection with bemusement. "At last, Father," he muttered to himself, "your son's a professional musician." Playing in a molly house. Funny, how the thought of his father's imagined horror made playing the despised instrument almost agreeable. Certainly better than thinking about what was happening in the back room. "Come on," he shouted. "What's next?"

It was at least midnight before, despite entreaties to continue, Dean excused himself from the pianoforte and cashed in his pennies with the barman. Almost five shillings. He stowed them in his pocket and accepted another free pint of ale. Why wasn't Rob back yet? Damn him. Oh, damn him. Exhausted, he found his old seat in the corner of the pub and closed his eyes, just to rest them for a moment.

He was lying with his head down on the table some time later when a hand shook him roughly by the shoulder. Dean started, poised for a fight.

"Come on," Rob said. "Let's get out of here." He looked absolutely the same, which was, curiously, both a relief and a source of aggravation. In his hand he clutched a long-necked brown bottle.

Dean rubbed his bleary eyes. "The barman won't put us up for the night?"

"He would," Rob said. "I'd just as soon not stay here, if you don't mind." He took a swig from the bottle as they hurried down the stairs and left the pub, door closing on the still-rowdy crowd within.

"I thought you said drinking doesn't solve anything," Dean jeered.

"Yes," Rob said. "But it does kill the taste." He began walking, as quickly as he

could, down the road away from the pub.

"Oh, Christ." He put out his hand, and Rob passed over the bottle. Gin. Dean hoped the heat of the alcohol might help dissolve the knot of anger in his gut, but it remained. "Where are we going?" he said after a time, wincing at the sullen tone of his own voice.

Rob took a breath. "Anywhere. If we don't come to the town soon, let's look for a barn. I'm sorry, I know you must be tired. But I just couldn't stay there."

"What about Erich—did you forget about him?"

"It's taken care of. Someone will come to tow the coach in the morning, and Erich can stay with the carriage-wright in Minchinhampton until the repairs are finished. We can too, or if you prefer not to wait, we have enough to go on to Bath by some public transport."

"Busy, weren't you?"

"Wasn't I supposed to be?"

"I didn't ask you to do this."

"I know." Rob handed him the gin. "What do you want to do?" Dean looked at Rob's profile, clean and pure in the moonlight, and only one thing leapt to mind. Chest tightening, he looked away. "I still have to get to Bath."

"Go home, Dean. You won't get Miss Lewis back if her father doesn't wish it."

"All I have to do is prove that I'm not what he thinks I am." Dean took a long pull of gin. And not actually *be* it, of course. But he wasn't. Damn it, he wasn't. He might be curious, especially after tonight, but—

"And if you can't prove it?" Rob put his hand out for the liquor, breaking into Dean's thoughts.

"Then I'll see Minerva. She'll believe me, and if we have to marry without her father's consent we'll do it. She's of age."

"Fly off to Gretna Green?" The bottle tipped skyward, and Rob's adam's apple bobbed in the light of the full moon. "You'd wish a scandal like that on a respectable young woman?"

"I need her."

"Yes, your esteem for her shows. In three days you've barely spoken her name, and grabbed at every excuse to delay our journey."

"How could you understand esteem, when you have so little of it for yourself?" Dean snatched the bottle back and drank. "How the hell could you debase yourself like that tonight?"

"Because I'm too stupid to have come up with a better plan, I suppose. But at least," Rob said, eyes glittering darkly, "I came up with one."

"Oh, Christ." Dean pointed across the rolling fields. "There's a barn. Let's get some sleep."

They made their way to the small hay barn and settled themselves into makeshift

beds of straw for the night. Despite the exhaustion, despite the drink, Dean couldn't sleep. He lay there in the darkness burning with anger, and gin. And yes, desire. The sexually-charged atmosphere of the molly house would have affected anyone, he told himself. And here was a whore, lying next to him. Just a whore. Everyone else had used Rob tonight—why shouldn't he?

Pictures of the things Rob must have done tonight swirled with the alcohol in his brain. At last he couldn't stand it anymore, and reached out an arm, pulling Rob roughly to face him. "Damn you," he muttered. "Why not me?"

Rob didn't push him away, or struggle, or any of the things Dean had imagined. Instead, with a little cry he pressed himself against Dean, mouth warm and seeking. Rob's kiss was tender and filled with longing. Just for a moment Dean surrendered to it, holding the other man tightly, stroking his back. He felt Rob's fingers on his trouser flap, working the buttons free until he could stroke Dean's erection.

Oh Jesus Christ. Dean wasn't prepared for the sheer pleasure of Rob's hand on him, and especially for the intimacy of the kiss. He pulled his mouth away. "No," he said hoarsely. "Not like this."

He could hear Rob breathing, almost panting, in the darkness, but couldn't see his face. Rob's hand remained where it was, stroked him again. "Do you want me to stop?"

Dean couldn't answer, but he ground his hips forward, against Rob's hand. The straw rustled as Rob shifted himself down, and Dean closed his eyes tightly at the first brush of Rob's lips on his throbbing shaft.

Rob's mouth was clever and efficient, and soon achieved the desired result. Dean had a quick moment of panic afterwards— Dear God, what if he wants me to reciprocate?—but Rob rolled away and got to his feet, the gin bottle clinking on the dirt floor as he picked it up. He was silhouetted against the door for a brief instance, and then gone into the night.

Dean groped in his shirt for the ribbon he'd tucked away earlier, twisting it around his wrist. What have I done? Oh Rob, what have I done?

Chapter Twelve

Rob was there in the straw beside him when he woke up, keeping a discreet distance even in sleep. The gin bottle lay on its side next to him, empty. Even with morning stubble and a good deal of straw in his hair, he looked angelic, untouchable. Last night... But he'd been drunk. Lord, had he been drunk. He should have learned his lesson last May—things always went dreadfully wrong when he drank to excess. Dean scowled and staggered to his feet, head aching like a demon had taken up residence within. His stomach lurched as he pulled himself upright.

Well, if Rob felt anywhere near as bad as he did, at least they didn't need to worry about breakfast. He slipped the highwayman's shoes back onto his blistered feet and made his way carefully outside for a piss. It was later than he'd thought. The sun, intermittently visible through a haze of clouds, was approaching its zenith. Dean found a likely tree and accomplished his business, then sat against the barn wall, face turned to the uncertain sun. Not letting himself think about last night, not letting himself think about anything. Before long, he heard the door open and soon Rob joined him against the wall. "Where are we?" Dean said, without opening his eyes. "Blast. I don't know."

"Oh, hell." Dean thought. "We had been traveling south, more or less, when we were stopped by the highwaymen. Right? Since we went back to a pub we'd already passed, it must have been north of where we were robbed. But which direction did we go when we left the pub?"

"Don't you know? I'm sure I was following you."

"No, I was following you. You took off from there like a bat out of hell—I could barely keep up. So which way did we go?"

Rob was silent for a long moment. "I was drunk," he said at last. "I don't remember."

"Hell and damnation! On top of everything else, we're lost too!" Dean climbed to his feet with an effort, looking around at the rolling landscape of the Cotswolds about them. "That tower looks vaguely familiar. It might be a church we used to pass on the way to my uncle's. In any event, it's a town."

Rob shaded his eyes with one hand and looked. "And it's miles from here. Oh, blast. Let's get going. If we're lucky the rain will hold off for awhile."

They eschewed conversation after that, limping along the road in their ill-fitting shoes. Dean avoided even looking at Rob. The going was slow, the road hilly and taking unpredictable turns, so that by the time an hour had passed, they were barely halfway to their goal. Dean's stomach had settled, and was now starting to rumble with hunger. He looked at the sky. It was midday. Their last meal at the New Inn seemed decades ago, and their next could be still hours distant.

"Bloody hell!" Dean stopped in the middle of the road and set his hands on his hips. "Here we are, both lifelong anglers, and streams full of fish all around us. We can

catch our own luncheon."

Rob stood on one foot, taking the opportunity to remove a rock from his other shoe. "Without any gear?"

"Let's improvise." There was a young yew tree at the side of the road. Dean examined it for a moment, then reached up and tugged at the spot where a slim branch met the trunk. With a little effort, it came away in his hand. He stripped off the leaves and twigs. "Here's our pole. Strong, flexible." He demonstrated, bending it between his hands.

Rob's eyes kindled with excitement. "Now we need some line." They tested the threads of their various garments, deciding on Rob's silk stockings as the best bet. They unraveled the thread and plaited it into a thin, strong line.

"Good," Dean said. "If we can find a hook, we'll be all set."

Rob thought, wriggling his bare toes. "Hawthorn? When I was a boy, I remember making hooks from the thorns."

"Did they work?"

"No. Well, not usually. I had better luck whittling hooks from twigs, but we don't have a knife."

Dean looked around. "Stones. If we can find a stone sharp enough to hone the point, a strong forked twig will work fine."

It took some time to put their makeshift tackle together, but absorbed in the task, the minutes sped by.

"Ha," Dean said at last, standing up and giving the fishing pole a practiced flick. "Will you look at that?"

A smile flickered on his companion's face. "Shall we try it out? May-flies are out of season, and we don't have time to tie a proper fly, but I wager we'll be able to dig up a lobworm or two."

Dean looked at the sky. "We're in luck with the weather, too. Trout always bite better when it's overcast."

The stream ran very close beside the road, three or four feet deep at most but quick and nicely cool on blistered feet. They sat on the bank with their legs dangling into the water and waited. After a time, Rob lay back and was soon asleep. The pole was beginning to droop in Dean's hand when at last he felt a tug on the line.

"Rob," he whispered. Carefully, he eased the line toward him with his fingers. "Rob, I think I have a bite."

The other man's eyes flew open, and he sat up. "Gently, now. You'll lose him if you—"

"I know." A little closer, and—Dean jerked on the line, hooking the trout neatly through its lip. "It's holding! The hook is holding!" He knelt on the bank and leaned forward to look at the fish thrashing in the water. "He's enormous! Rob, take the pole—I'm going to try to net him before the line breaks."

Rob took over playing the fish, attempting to tire him out so he could more easily be landed, while Dean stripped off his shirt and waded into the water.

"Pull him in a little!" Dean called. "I'll get behind him and catch him in the shirt."

"Hurry! The line's not holding!" Rob grabbed the braided silk thread and twisted it around his hand. "Hold, sweetheart, hold," he muttered under his breath.

"Got him! No, wait..." Dean snapped the water out of his sodden shirt and dove again for the struggling fish. He came up gasping, arms wrapped around a wriggling bundle of cloth and trout. "Jesus, he must weigh ten pounds. Help me up."

Rob grasped him under one arm and hauled him onto the bank. "Oh, well done!"

Dean knew he must be beaming like a proud father. "Look at you," he crooned at the fish. "I bet the locals call you 'Old Bill' and have been trying to catch you for ten years. Ha! Gotcha, Bill!" With practiced fingers he pulled the hook free and laid the trout, still flopping weakly, on the grass. "Now, all we have to do is start the fire, and this will be a breakfast we'll remember for years." Rob made a strange coughing sound. "Um...Dean?" "Where's our whittling stone? If I clean him, will you—" "Dean? You wouldn't happen to have a tinder box, would you?"

"Of course. In my.. .purse. Oh," Dean said, remembering where his purse wasn't.

"Me too," Rob agreed. "Not even a bit of flint?"

"Of course not," Dean said flatly, staring at their magnificent fish. "The highwaymen took the lot. What the hell are we going to do?"

"Well," and Rob's voice sounded a little funny, "in the Far East, raw fish are a great delicacy. Or so I'm told."

"Ugh." Dean shuddered. "No Englishman could ever be that hungry. Oh, damn. Damn. There must be some way..."

Something that sounded suspiciously like a strangled chuckle escaped Rob, but by the time Dean looked up, his face was solemn. "You know," Rob said, "if we had a magnifying lens, we could concentrate the sun's rays and start a fire that way."

"If we had a lens," Dean agreed. He looked up at the sky. "Or any sun."

That did it. Rob collapsed in a great burst of laughter, and against his will Dean joined in. Soon he was on the ground, laughing so hard his empty belly hurt all the more, and Rob was no better off, both of them streaming with tears and gasping like—

"Shit!" Dean scrambled to his knees and crawled, sides still heaving, to the abandoned trout. It twitched when he picked it up and set it gently in the water, where it lay motionless for a moment on its side before righting itself and streaking off into the depths of the stream.

"Good bye, Old Bill," Dean shouted, shaking out his soaking shirt and putting it back on. "I will be back for you!"

"Bring a tinder box next time," Rob sputtered, wiping his eyes. "Oh, God. Oh God, I needed that." He grinned at Dean, and Dean grinned back, the tension of the morning gone.

"Rob," Dean said, before he could lose his nerve. "Last night. Why did you let me use you like that?"

Rob sobered. "Is that what happened? I rather thought I took advantage of you."

"Of me?"

"You were stinking drunk. Or you never would have let me touch you." "But I...but why would you want to?"

Rob looked down at his bare feet. "I guess it seemed important to me, to touch someone I really fancied."

"Someone like you fancy someone like me?"

Now Rob's head snapped up, chin set, and too late Dean realized that the incredulity in his voice must have sounded a lot like scorn. "A cat may look at a king, my lord. I know you're quite out of reach of the likes of me."

"No. Rob, that's not what I meant." Dean felt himself flush. Rob's eyes were brilliant with hurt, and he made himself meet their gaze. "It's just—just that you're so very handsome. And I'm so very not."

Rob studied him for a moment before answering. "I can't imagine what it is you see when you look in the mirror. There's nothing wrong with you, and so much right."

Dean shook his head. "All my life I've heard differently. Ginger. Carrots. Leopard. Spotty. Even my mother.. one of the last things she ever said to me was, 'Such a pity you didn't get your father's skin.'"

"She had freckles too, then?" "They ruined her life." "Urn. Is that possible?"

"Well, her sister Margaret didn't have them, and she married the finest man in Scotland. My mother..." Dean paused. "The best she could do was Father, who was twenty years older, and obsessed with his music. Life in England was exile for her."

"It sounds like she was homesick."

"Oh, very. When I was six, she went back to Aberdeenshire to help settle her aunt's estate. It was just supposed to take a few weeks, but she wrote us that things were more complicated than she thought, and it would be a little longer. And then a little longer. Then, when she wrote and asked if Father would send me up for a visit, he realized she never meant to come back."

Rob touched his arm. "Did you go?"

"He wouldn't let me. And then, a few weeks later, we heard she was dead."

Warm fingers squeezed his wrist. "Oh, Jesus, Dean. I'm so sorry."

Dean nodded his thanks, awkward. "I always wondered...if she'd been proud of the way I looked, maybe she would have taken me with her. Shown me off to her family. I'd at least have been with her when she..." He cleared his throat.

"How?"

"Typhus."

Rob winced. "If it helps any...I was close to my mother. And, like you, I inherited her greatest flaw. It was hard on her when the schoolmaster finally realized he couldn't

beat intelligence into

me and told me not to come back—she felt guilty at herself, and angry with me that I couldn't overcome it either. But in the end, the problem we shared made us closer, and if you were too young to feel that before your mother died—oh, Dean, you would have. Sooner or later, it would have brought you together. I know it."

"Thank you," Dean whispered. He managed a smile, wishing he could believe Rob's well-meant words. After all, he'd had more than a decade with his father after his mother's death, and time had done nothing to bring the two of them closer. "I just hated the way I looked after that, you know? And I suppose that just made it worse—if anyone teased me about the freckles, I would over-react so entertainingly—"

"—that the other boys would keep it up. Mob mentality." They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, and then Rob said, "Do you think you could stand another one of my stories?"

"I like your stories," Dean admitted. "You have a knack for them, Rob. You should be a writer."

"Ha. Anyway, remember that stable boy I told you about? The one I was caught kissing?"

Dean nodded, and Rob settled himself on one elbow and plucked a blade of grass to chew on before beginning.

"He had hair the color of a sunset. Glorious, in the true sense— when the sun lit it up, I swear one could hear hosannas sung. It was very much like yours." He discarded his blade of grass, and carefully chose another, giving Dean a moment to digest the fact that some people might favor the shade of hair he had always despised.

"And his mother adored his freckles," Rob continued. "She told him each one was a kiss from the sun. I was.. .obsessed with them. He had constellations of them, galaxies. I wanted to map them so badly, trace them with my fingers and my tongue. Kiss him everywhere the sun had kissed him. Find out if there were any secret places where it hadn't. I wanted to be with him long enough to find out if the same ones came back every summer after they'd faded in the winter, or if a new crop took their place.

Rob pointed his bit of grass at the stream, where Old Bill was still master. "It's the ones that get away that haunt you, isn't it?" His eyes traveled over Dean's face, intent. "And he—his nose was a little crooked, and his eyes were just ordinary blue, not a warm green-brown hazel with those little gold flecks. Christ! Even your eyes have freckles..."

Dean's clothes were wet. He was sitting on at least one rock, and the hand he was resting his weight upon had fallen asleep. The air smelled like rain, and Rob was going to kiss him.

It didn't happen. Before their lips met, Rob shook himself, his

head whipping to look down the road, and Dean became aware that he had been hearing the same thing for several seconds: the tlot-tlot of horses' hooves trotting

toward them.

"Come on," Rob said. "Let's see if we can find out where we are." He smoothed his hand over his hair, and for the first time Dean realized how disreputable the pair of them must look. Barefoot, unshaven, in their shirtsleeves. Rob hadn't been as thoroughly soaked as he, but had been splashed with mud during their adventure with Old Bill, and there were green stains on his elbows from where he'd been lounging in the grass.

It was little surprise then, that the farmer they hailed looked at them with suspicion and pulled his horse up at a careful distance. "We don't get many strangers in these parts," he said. "Mind if I ask your business?"

Just for an instant, Dean considered telling him the truth. Well, you see, I'm an earl in search of my missing bride, and my companion here is a he-strumpet, who's taking some time off to help me... Maybe it was the lack of food and adequate sleep that made Dean want to giggle.

Luckily, Rob had better control of himself. "Please, sir," he said, holding up his hands and smiling. "My friend and I were passing through last night, when our coach was robbed. Could you tell us which village that is over there?"

"Cherington," the man said. "Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Wait," Dean said. "Cherington—this is it, Rob. We're very close to my uncle. Sir, which way is it to Silas Smith's place?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm his nephew, Dean Smith."

The farmer squinted at him. "You don't have the look of the Smiths. Who's your father?"

"Erastus Smith. My mother was Agnes Forsyte, of Aberdeenshire. I'm afraid I take after her."

"And you?"

Rob smiled cheerily. "Robert Allardyce, sir. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"You haven't. But if the two of you cause any problems at old Silas's place, you damned well will." The man gave a grudging nod to the left. "Two miles, over the bridge."

"Thank you, sir," Rob said with a bow. "Good day."

Belatedly, Dean added his bow as well, but the farmer had already kicked his horse into motion. "Friendly lot around here, aren't they?"

"Well, if they've been troubled by robbers of late, it's no wonder. Come on, find your shoes—just two miles to breakfast." "Be almost dinner by the time we get there," Dean grumbled.

"I wish I'd known we were so close to my uncle's last night." He looked at Rob. "Ha. At least I found out your last name."

"No, you didn't. I just forgot which alias I was using." Rob regarded his feet,

considering. "Blast. Wet shoes or hard road?"

"Hard road for me. I can't bear these another minute." Dean flung the highwayman's hand-me-downs as far as he could, one of them landing with a loud splash in the stream. "I don't even know your first name, do I? Except it's got 'bert' in it. Delbert?"

Rob kept his second-hand shoes, tying them together and swinging them by the strings while they walked, keeping when possible to the long grass by the side of the road. "I don't like my first name. You would recognize my last."

"Would I? I wouldn't tell."

"Some gossip is too good not to share."

"A prominent family, then? If so..." Dean hesitated. "Wasn't... isn't there someone you could turn to for help? Instead of—"

"Selling my body like a Covent Garden trull?" Rob seemed unperturbed, but by now Dean suspected that much of his equanimity was the result of long practice. "I'm from a cadet branch, and the family didn't exactly jump to help us when my father died. Except my 'uncle' of course, and he was something of a black sheep himself. When he left me so much money, the rest of them came to exactly the correct conclusion as to why, and that destroyed any sense of responsibility they might otherwise have felt for me."

"Hang them all, then. Elbert."

"I wouldn't tell you if you guessed."

"Won't stop me. Cuthbert. Or maybe I'm thinking in the wrong direction...Bertram. Bertrand. Burton. Bertley." "Is Bertley even a name?"

"Bently, Berkeley—why not Bertley? What happened to your stable boy? Was he sacked?"

"My uncle would hardly hold kissing another boy to be offensive. But he did send him to work on another of his properties."

"The better to keep you fresh for himself?" Dean shuddered. "Ugh."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." The corner of Rob's lips twitched with wry amusement. "He was in his forties at the time—hardly a drooling old man. And he didn't care what I did while he still considered me too young for him, as long as I was discreet. But he did tell me that when I joined him at the big house, he would prefer it if I hadn't been sampled by half his own servants."

"So romantic," Dean muttered.

"No," Rob said softly. "It wasn't romantic. But it wasn't dreadful, either. When I was ready, I went to him. I was eighteen, and hadn't

even kissed anyone since the stable boy. Having an experienced older man teach me the ropes was really quite exciting. I was not unhappy with my lot."

"You seem to find the best in everything," Dean observed, shaking his head. "I can't be so cheerful."

"Must be your Scots blood," Rob said. "Stop eating oats and you might yet overcome it."

Dean was startled into laughter.

"See?" Rob said with approval. "There's hope for you still."

Chapter Thirteen

Walking barefoot was not a good idea after all. Dean sat on a drystone wall, foot extended, while Rob eased a shard of glass from his sole.

"There," Rob said. "It's not too deep, but you should still soak it when we get to your uncle's. Let me find you a stick to lean on."

Dean flexed his foot. "Don't bother, I think I can walk just fine. But it's still bleeding some. I wish we had something to use as a bandage."

"This shirt's ruined anyway." Rob lifted his shirt, exposing an expanse of flat belly, and used his teeth to tear away a strip of cloth from the hem. He wrapped the makeshift bandage around Dean's foot, knotting it firmly. "I hope that will hold." He grinned. "At least we should have an entertaining story for Uncle Silas."

Dean frowned in consideration. "We should be careful about how much we tell him, shouldn't we?"

"I suppose. Is he easily shocked?"

"Shocked? Perhaps not. He's not a prude. I understand he's been living in sin with his housekeeper for the past fifteen years, but that doesn't mean he'd be sympathetic to...to..."

"Mollies like me." Rob shrugged. "We don't have to tell him how your engagement was broken, or even that it was."

"Right, just as much of the truth as he needs to know. I'm on my way to Bath to see Minerva, and you're a friend who's accompanying me." He was surprised to see Rob color slightly. "What did I say?"

"Nothing." Rob shook his head. "Just...a few days ago, you were appalled at the idea of claiming me for a friend."

"Oh." Dean thought about it. It was surprising, but true: the tenuous connection formed by their shared travel had, in the course of recent events, strengthened into a real bond. "A few days ago, you weren't."

"Thank you."

The threatened rain decided to make its appearance at last, falling in bucketfuls from the sky. The last mile to Uncle Silas's was spent trudging through ankle-deep mud. At last, the Smith house loomed before them, an old stone and brick farmhouse with tacked-on wings sprawling in all directions. By this time they were bone-weary, chilled, and achingly hungry. None of this quenched the familiar gleam of amusement in Rob's eyes as he grinned at Dean, while they stood shivering on the doorstep awaiting an answer to their knock.

"If we'd known your uncle was this close, we could have brought the fish."

Dean was still laughing when the door opened, revealing a hearty man of about sixty, whose hair yet remained thick and nearly all brown. "Uncle Silas?" He stood up straight and tried to look dignified. "Sorry to barge in on you like this, but—"

"Good heavens!" Silas Smith peered at his visitors. "Aberdeen, is it? Come in out of the rain."

"*Aberdeen?*" Rob collapsed into fresh laughter, and for the first time in his life Dean found his own name amusing. "That's never your full name?"

"I told you Mother was homesick," he gasped, fighting for control. "Uncle Silas, we had, um, a spot of trouble on the road. There were these highwaymen—real highwaymen, that is, and then today we caught a big fish. Oh, God—Rob can tell it, he's so much better at stories than I am—but is there any chance we could have something to eat?"

"Please," Rob added helpfully. "Dean—Aberdeen—keeps forgetting to say 'please.'"

"If you think my first name is so funny, let's hear *yours*" Dean said, while his uncle shepherded them down a long hall toward the kitchen. "I'm sorry, Uncle Silas. This is my friend Rob, and we haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon."

"You do seem a little light-headed," Uncle Silas admitted, looking only slightly taken aback. "Perhaps some hot soup would help."

"Oh, bless you, sir!" Rob said. "But first, is there somewhere I could, uh...?"

"Piss? Without even going back out into the rain. We've an indoor convenience over in the east wing—all you have to do is go down that hallway there, take your first left, and then keep turning right until you see the door with the blue trim. Go on, then."

Rob hesitated just a second, then smiled and left to find the privy.

Uncle Silas turned towards the hearth, a good old-fashioned open fireplace, complete with simmering kettle hanging from a hook. "Bowls—cupboard. Spoons—box on window shelf. Damn it, where does Holly keep the ladle?"

Dean joined in the search. The kitchen was arranged in a way that probably made perfect sense to the woman who used it daily, but seemed to defy logic to the casual observer. "Is your housekeeper away?"

Silas nodded. "Holly's in town with Alice. Our serving girl. Holed up out of the rain, I'm sure. You won't see them tonight. Ah, here it is." He pulled the ladle from a hook over the fire and dished up a generous serving of soup into one of the bowls Dean brought him. "Now, let's see if I can conjure up some bread."

Dean, his stomach rumbling audibly, found a fresh loaf wrapped in a cloth on the window shelf by the silverware box. "Is this it?"

"It's bread, isn't it? Butter's in the pantry."

"Thank you. Oh, God. I should wait for Rob, but this smells so good."

Uncle Silas poured them each a measure of ale out of a brown stone bottle, put the kettle on the fire for tea, and joined Dean at the table. "Who's this Rob, anyway? And what's all this about highwaymen?"

Dean chewed his bread slowly, trying for once to get his thoughts in order before replying. "He's called Robert Black, and is an acquaintance of Mr. Lewis, my future

father-in-law. I'm on my way to Bath to visit Minerva, and was giving him a lift there when we were robbed." He smiled, proud of his story. While the whole thing was in a sense a prevarication, there was not a single actual lie in the lot.

"Highwaymen." Silas snorted. "Been some trouble lately in these parts. Take your coach, did they?"

"No, just dug a pit in the road to stop us. Snapped the axle right in two. And they did get the horses." He grimaced, remembering Erich's face as he watched the animals under his care trot away with the highwaymen.

"Where?"

Dean described the general location, and explained that they had left his coachman to deal with repairs while he and Rob tried to find Silas's house. "I'll be sorry to miss seeing Holly, but we'll have to leave at first light if we're to make up for lost time."

"Hmph. Coach is in Minchinhampton? Sounds like you came a roundabout way. There's a quicker route back, but you'll have to hoof it, since my horse and cart are in town. Remind me to tell you both the way when your friend is back—it's complicated. And feel free to dip into the household cash jar in the library, if I don't wake up in time to see you off. It's behind the Cleland."

"Thank you, Uncle Silas." Dean could hardly explain that Rob had already procured funds for the coach's repair—and especially not how. "I'll pay you back."

"Ha. It'll all be yours one day anyway. Holly and I won't miss a few pounds, lad. Now, tell me about your friend. Where's he from? What's his family?"

Dean took some time buttering another hunk of bread. This was trickier ground. "Um. He lives in Hereford, I think. I wonder what's keeping him?" His sleeve dripped water onto the table, and Uncle Silas, seeing it, rose and began poking into cupboards.

"Looking for a towel, if he's smart. Towels. Where the bloody hell are the towels?" Silas gave up on the cupboards and wandered into the pantry, emerging a few seconds later with his arms piled high. "At sixes and sevens without Holly here. If you need more, the linen press is through there. I'd best go and find you some dry clothing as well." He disappeared through another door.

Alone, Dean sopped the worst of the wet from his clothes and hair, then hung the towel to dry on the fire screen and resumed his supper. He was finishing his first bowl of soup when Rob reappeared at last. "There you are. Towel off and have some soup—it's good and hot."

"Thank you." Rob seemed subdued, perhaps the exhaustion of the past twenty-four hours catching up with him at last. They ate in concentrated silence until approaching footsteps reminded Dean of his uncle's questions.

"Uncle Silas was asking about your family."

"Well, he would, wouldn't he? A man wants to know what sort of stranger he's allowing into his home." Rob's words were reasonable, but the tone was flat and tired. By the time the kitchen door swung open, however, he was sitting up straight, his

customary warm smile lighting his face. It made Dean uneasy, the facility with which Rob turned his good humor on and off.

Uncle Silas was bearing an armful of clothing and more fresh towels. "Here you go, lads. They'll be a bit large in the waist and short in the cuff for you, but at least they're dry. There's hot water on the hearth if you want a wash before you change." He refilled their bowls and cut more bread while they took him up on his offer, stripping down to their linen and washing quickly by the fire.

Dean tried not to look at Rob, nearly naked in the rosy light cast by the kitchen fire, his damp linen drawers leaving little to the imagination. Tried, and failed, the furtive glances renewing his confusion over what had happened last night in the barn. He'd been disappointed in his experiences with prostitutes in his university days, and had shunned such encounters since. But he'd always half-assumed that it might be different with a woman who wasn't touching him because he'd paid her to do so, and had hoped that the marriage bed might prove more to his taste.

Yes, if he were honest, he sometimes felt a flutter of attraction at meeting a handsome man, dismissing such feelings as a relic of his schoolboy experimentation, an echo of a juvenile phase that should have been long put behind him. But then Rob had touched him, brought him such incredible, shameful pleasure. Those feelings had reawakened in earnest, if they'd ever truly gone away.

Rob was stirring a hunger in him that couldn't be dismissed, so it had to be fought and overcome. Not just because of his physical perfection, although—Dean stole another furtive glance. Oh, God. The planes and curves of him were put together in such proportion that Michelangelo would have wept. In Dean's admittedly hazy knowledge of poetry, no sonnets had ever been addressed to the beauty of a man's shoulders, but then again, most poets hadn't met Rob. No, the man was gorgeous, but Dean felt he would have been safe from the attraction if it weren't for the growing friendship between them. If only Rob were half the idiot he claimed to be. Dean had little patience for fools.

He was vaguely aware that someone had spoken, and looked up to find his uncle staring at him expectantly. "I'm sorry, Uncle." Dean blushed, turning his attention to the buttoning of his borrowed shirt. "What did you say?"

"I said, if you're in such a hurry to get to Bath, how did you end up over here? Surely the Bristol road is faster."

"We got sidetracked by a ghost," Rob said with a grin. Now fully dressed, he took his seat at the table, smoothing his damp hair with his hand. "Somehow, we got visiting haunted places along the way, and when we heard about the highwayman and his sweetheart on Minchinhampton Common, we decided to make a detour."

"Only to run into a real highwayman," Dean added, suppressing a shudder.

"Yes," Rob agreed. "Ghosts and highwaymen—they've rather been the theme of this trip."

"Too bad you can't take your time, then," Uncle Silas said. "You can hardly throw a stone in the Cotswalds without hitting a spook. Black dogs, white ladies, hooded monks. And right near Tetbury, not five miles from here, is Chavenage House. One of the owners voted for King Charles's execution back in 1649, and the family's been cursed ever since. Each time an owner dies, a carriage driven by a headless coachman comes to take his soul to Hell."

"We don't have time," Dean said, not even looking at Rob. The side trip sounded delightful, but this attraction of his had to be curtailed before it got out of hand, the memory of last night locked firmly away before he could be tempted to repeat it. Winning Minerva had to regain his full attention. Everything depended on it.

"It would be nice, though, wouldn't it?" Rob said, digging into his soup with relish. "A ghost tour of England. Or, I always fancied a *Compleat Angler* tour. You know, go to Monmouthshire and follow the route Piscator and his friends took. Even after two hundred years, some of the inns may yet be there."

"Why not both?" Uncle Silas said, grinning. "Monmouthshire's sure to have plenty of ghosts, given the Monmouth Rebellion."

"Yes," Dean said flatly. "I suppose I can convince Minerva it will be a fine honeymoon trip."

Rob looked down at his bowl, but Uncle Silas leaned forward. "Tell me about this paragon of yours. Minerva who?"

"Minerva Lewis. I wrote about her two Quarterlies back, don't you remember? We met at a concert in Worcester last winter, and have been engaged since April."

"I remember a line or two saying you were engaged, but precious few in the way of details. High-born filly, is she?"

"I think her mother's father was a baron." Dean paused. "Maybe a baronet."

"Toast of the Season?"

"She may have had a Season in London a few years back. I didn't know her then."

Uncle Silas nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "She must have an excellent character."

Dean folded his arms. "Minerva," he said, "is everything a wife should be."

"Modest, pious, and hard-working?" Uncle Silas asked sweetly.

"Of course," Dean said, voice rising. "And you know, she's held to be the prettiest girl in Worcester." "Ah," Uncle Silas said. "What color are her eyes?" Dean stared for a moment. Well, they certainly were not black as sloes, and lit from within with merriment and curiosity... "I, um...blue," he said at last, nearly certain he was correct.

"I see." Uncle Silas nodded at Rob. "That door over there leads to the cellar. We have a nice ham hanging down there, just near the bottom of the steps—would you be a dear and cut us a few slices from it?"

"Yes, of course." Rob rose, collected a knife from Holly's clutter, and disappeared behind the door.

When he was gone, Uncle Silas sat back in his chair and regarded Dean steadily. "People get married for all kinds of reasons, and among our set a match based strictly on mutual affection is a rare thing. Why pretend otherwise?"

Dean stared at the table. "It's stupid to marry for money. Not to mention embarrassing."

"Then don't do it. Oh, Parm had no head for business, and wouldn't listen to any of us, so there's no denying Carwick will take a pile of blunt to set it right. But there's no hurry, especially if you don't have feelings for the chit. Harvest should be good this year, and you'll collect rents at Christmas. I might be able to help tide you over until then."

"Thank you, Uncle Silas," Dean said softly. "I'll be all right." He forced his lips to turn upwards at the corners, wishing he could be as convincingly cheerful as Rob. "Have to marry sometime."

"Hmph," his uncle replied. "Maybe it's none of my business. I suppose it isn't, except..." He sighed. "You were such a serious child, at least after your mother died. I blame it on my brother, of course—he was a prosy old bore, and cared for nothing but his music. The only times I ever saw you look happy, were when you'd visit and I'd take you out fishing." He paused for a moment. "When I opened the door today, I almost didn't recognize you. Not because you've changed so much over the past few years, but because I've never seen you laugh like that. Ever. I didn't know you had such mirth in you."

Dean shrugged. "Rob makes me laugh."

"Then you should be gadding about the country with him on your ghost tour, or take him and your friend Peter up fishing in the Highlands. Life's too short to go out of your way to avoid pleasures like that. And Aberdeen.. .remember your parents. They married without a drop of affection between them."

Dean set down his spoon, appetite gone. "I'm not my father."

"Your mother was hardly blameless. She thought lowly of herself, and less still of Erastus for marrying her."

"And not so much of me, at that," Dean muttered.

"You're wrong, there." Silas looked at him curiously. "The sun rose and set in you, as far as Agnes was concerned."

"Then why didn't she take me with her when she left?" Dean was surprised at the bitterness in his own voice.

"Likely Erastus was watching her like a hawk, after the earlier attempts. She knew he'd never let her take you away."

Dean shook his head. "Earlier attempts?"

"Twice before, she'd tried to return to Scotland with you. Got as far as York once, before your father caught up with the pair of you. Do you not remember?"

"I think..." Something long-forgotten rose in his memory. "There was a coach trip

with my mother, and my parents fighting in an inn. They always fought, if they bothered to speak to each other at all, but I suppose that might have been it."

Uncle Silas nodded. "Probably. I daresay it broke her heart to leave you behind, the last time. She had her faults, and was as dour a Scotswoman as ever was born. A different person entirely when she smiled—you certainly share that with her. Being a woman, she was totally irrational about her looks, had some bee in her bonnet about her skin, I think." He shrugged. "Not the sort of thing you'd be likely to remember. But she was a good mother. Believe that. And believe that marriage can wait."

If only it could. Dean was still thinking of a less honest reply when Rob returned from the cellar. "Oh, there you are. That ham looks terrific."

Silas rose. "Here, let me fry it up for you, with a mess of eggs. Young men need something heartier than soup for their dinner. No, sit down, Rob. The tea's hot."

"The rain's still fierce," Rob said, with a look out the window. "I wonder if your housekeeper will make it back." He poured tea, preparing Dean's cup the way he preferred it without needing to ask. But of course, such small courtesies must be second nature to one who caters to other men's needs on a regular basis.

"No, I wager they won't come back tonight," Uncle Silas agreed. "But never mind, I can make up some rooms for you." He looked back at them over his shoulder. "Or I can put you both in our haunted chamber, if you've a mind for more ghost-hunting."

Dean's brows rose. "Haunted chamber? I don't remember a haunted chamber here."

"Ah." Uncle Silas grinned. "But you haven't stayed here since you were a child. Holly wouldn't let me scare you with the tale back in those days. I'd say you're well old enough to encounter a ghost now."

Tempting, but... "Maybe next time," Dean said. Considering his recent thoughts about Minerva and marriage and Rob, it was better he not spend the night in the same room as the other man. The desire to explore what had barely been started last night had to be crushed before it consumed him. "We need our sleep tonight if we're going to get any distance behind us tomorrow."

"Think about it." Uncle Silas turned back to his cooking. "Eastern exposure. Sun will wake you early."

"I want the haunted room," Rob said with amusement. "Do you really have a ghost?"

"It's an old house. Bound to be at least one. In our case, it's a phantom cat. She prowls all over the west wing, but is mostly seen in the one room. Sits in the window on stormy nights, and if things get really wild, she's said to jump onto the bed and curl up on your stomach for comfort. Her comfort, of course. Doesn't do much for the fella she lands on."

Rob laughed. "I like cats. I wouldn't mind."

"Ha. If you scream, don't expect me to come running. I'll be in the other wing and won't hear a thing."

Dean stood up. "I'll go make up the beds, Uncle Silas. Where?"

"West wing, first floor. Go right at the top of the stairs, it's the two connecting rooms on the north end." He nodded. "Right."

By the time he returned from his chore, Uncle Silas and Rob were laughing over something, Rob's handsome face lit up with merriment.

"Hi, Dean," he gasped. "I was telling your uncle about our fish."

"You can't have caught Old Nick *and let him go?*" Uncle Silas waved at the platter of ham and eggs on the table, and Dean slid into his chair and helped himself.

"I told you that fish had a name," he said. "We whittled the hook with a sharp rock and baited it with the first worm we found, too."

Uncle Silas shook his head. "I've been tying special flies to tempt that sly bastard for six years. Six years!"

Rob pushed his empty plate away and rose, stretching. "I'm done in. Do you mind if I go on up to bed?"

"Suit yourself," Dean said, through a mouthful of ham. He didn't look at the other man, but was acutely aware of him standing beside his chair, hesitating. "First floor west, weren't you listening? We've got the two rooms on the north end: I'll take the one facing east so the sun will wake me."

"Isn't that the haunted chamber?"

"I'd let you have it, but you wake up too hard."

"Right. I'll...I'll find it. Good night, then." Rob squared his shoulders, looking unaccountably lost.

"Lad?" Uncle Silas called to him before he could reach the door.

"Go that way to the stairs, then like this." He made a motion with his hand: up, right, left. Rob nodded and slipped quickly away.

"He could try to pay attention," Dean said, forking up more eggs. "That man can be very annoying at times." "Seems all right to me."

He concentrated on eating. "It'll be a blessing when this trip is over and done with."

Uncle Silas rose and fetched his tobacco pouch, making a business of filling and lighting his white clay pipe, whimsically molded in the shape of a man's head. "Have you got the Quarterly yet?"

Dean nodded. "Yes, it's with the coach. I haven't had the chance to read much of it, though. So far the big news is that Cousin Joseph's wife Cathy was safely delivered of another son. I'll send it on to you once I'm finished."

"No, now that you're at Carwick, it should go to Phineas next. Be a long while before I get it. Do something for me, will you?" The elderly man drew in a lungful of smoke and let it seep slowly from his nose. "Speaking of marriage, some years back I made Holly an honest woman."

"You did? Congratulations, Uncle." Dean rose and began collecting dirty plates. "Why didn't you put it in the Quarterly?"

"I'm a damned fool, that's why. And it's been my little joke on the world, to let them think me worse than I am. Now, telling everyone myself would be a bit awkward."

"I suppose." Dean stacked the plates in the sink, fetched some hot water from the hearth. "I'll be happy to get the word out, if you're embarrassed. When were you married?"

"January 9, 1806. The marriage lines are there at St. Nicholas's in the village if anyone doubts it." He waved his pipe in the vague direction of Cherington, bottom lip sticking out belligerently.

Dean grinned. "Your word is proof enough for the family. I'll make sure all the details are in the next Quarterly."

"Thank you, my boy. In return, I'm going to offer you some advice." Uncle Silas drew on his pipe again. "Aberdeen, listen to me. It's the adventures you don't have that you end up regretting."

"Uncle?"

"Take my word on it."

Dean thought for a long moment before answering. Yes, there would always be a sense of something missing, something lost when he remembered Rob. It would be worse, though, to act on the attraction, and start something that could never be fully explored. Wouldn't he regret that much more in the end? "It's not that simple, Uncle Silas." "Sometimes, it is."

Dean finished the dishes and went up to bed.

Chapter Fourteen

Dean tugged at the buttons of his borrowed trousers, frowning down at the nightshirt on his pillow. Where had it come from? Surely Uncle Silas had never left the kitchen since they'd decided which rooms to take. He shrugged. Perhaps Rob had dug the garment up from somewhere. And bless him, he'd started a fire against the damp night, and left a razor and a bowl of water as well.

Dean took his time shaving, examining himself critically in the mirror while he performed the task. Apart from the despised freckles and too-transparent skin beneath them, he supposed he was passable. There was nothing wrong with the shape of his bones, nothing displeasing in the proportion of his features. But could someone like Rob really find him attractive? It was a difficult concept to wrap his mind around. All his life he'd been tormented for his looks, and when even one's mother thinks one is ugly, it's hard to accept that someone else might think differently. He mulled over Uncle Silas's words, and Rob's earlier.

"She had a bee in her bonnet about her looks..."

"The sun rose and set in you..."

"I shared my mother's greatest flaw.. .in the end, it would have brought you closer together."

He shook his head. Even Minerva had never pretended she found him handsome.

But the eyes that stared back at him from the mirror, it turned out, weren't an indistinct color that failed to be clear enough to be called green, yet weren't anything like a deep, rich brown. Hazel, Rob had called them, and admired their gold flecks. That he could almost grasp. But the hated freckles, kisses from the sun? He tried it out in his mind: *sun-kissed*. Rob had given him a gift, to be able to see himself from a new angle.

Dean finished shaving, then undressed and slipped the undershirt over his head. Such bliss, to be clean, dry and in order again. He looked at the connecting door between the bedchambers. Rob had been so thoughtful of him, the least he could do was check to see that his companion was comfortable, in return. Unless he was already asleep? He tiptoed over to the door and cracked it. Rob was curled up on his side, breathing deep and even. A smile twitched the corners of Dean's mouth. Rob was damned good at sleeping. He left the door ajar, obeying some instinct he was too tired to examine. Suppose Rob needed him. That was enough.

"Aaah!" The cry, waking him some time later, was faint, but the hissed words that followed were unmistakable. "Dean! Please!" No doubting, either, the fear distorting Rob's voice. He sounded as if he could barely squeeze sound from a clenched throat.

Dean was out of bed immediately, running before his feet hit the floor. Rain still lashed at the windows, and the fire in Rob's hearth had subsided to a few glowing

embers. In their dim light he could see nothing wrong in the chamber, no menacing figure, nothing to incite the panic in Rob's voice. "What is it?"

"C-C-C..." He couldn't get the word out, and Dean approached closer, dropping to his knees beside Rob's bed and grasping the other man by the shoulders. They were bare, and stiff with fright.

"What's wrong? Are you ill? Should I fetch—?"

"Cat!" It was barely a squeak.

Dean stretched out one hand in the darkness, almost immediately poking his fingers into the side of a large furry object, which hissed and swiped a sharp-taloned paw at him. He burst out laughing, raising his scratched hand to his lips. The other, of its own volition, slid around Rob in a reassuring hug. "That's a real cat on your stomach, not a phantom. Damn you, Uncle Silas!"

"Real cat?" Rob leaned against Dean, his naked skin warm and smooth, and stroked a hand tentatively down the animal's back. He laughed, a breathy sound that gathered strength as it went. The cat, black as the pit of Hell, growled at the jostling this merriment produced. "Sorry, puss," Rob gasped, scratching behind one twitching ear. She stopped her feline grumbling, and deigned to resettle herself more comfortably on her abdominal perch. "Oh, my. Your uncle does have a peculiar sense of humor."

"And who's the one that said 'Oh, I like cats. I won't be afraid.'" Dean squeezed Rob's shoulder lightly, his voice teasing.

"I do like cats. And I never said I wouldn't be afraid." Rob snuggled against him, radiating heat in the cool night.

It was difficult to concentrate on the conversation. "Urn. Wasn't it supposed to be *my* room that's haunted?"

"All over the east wing, your uncle said." Rob's voice was husky with sleep, or something else.

Dean's breath was short in his chest. "West wing."

"Whichever. It was good of you to come to my rescue." Rob reached up a hand and stroked his finger along Dean's cheek. "My hero."

Dean felt his face grow hot at the touch, and the admiration in Rob's tone. If you're all right, I should go. He opened his mouth, but the words refused to be said. What was the harm of it? Just one more moment, here in the dark, with his arm around Rob, the cat's purr a soothing hum in the night. He reached his other hand to pet the smooth fur as well, his fingers brushing Rob's along the animal's back. The additional contact made him tingle, and he knew he'd best leave while he still could. He cleared his throat. Twice. "If...if you're all right.

"Stay. Please? Just for a little." Rob removed Dean's hand from the cat, placing it flat against his bare chest. "See? My heart's still galloping like a racehorse."

Dean couldn't breathe, feeling himself harden shamefully beneath his nightshirt at

the simple touch. Nightshirt. Rob wasn't wearing one, was he? If his torso was bare, it followed that the rest of him was too, nude beneath cat, blanket and sheet. The thought broke him into a cold sweat. "Rob. I should go."

But he didn't want to go, and Rob didn't want him to. "Wait, please. Tell me just one thing." He turned and slid his arms around Dean, pulling him closer. Rob's heart was thumping wildly beneath Dean's palm, and his own thrashed against his ribs like a trout on a line. "Was that you, playing the piano at the Rose and Thistle while I was.. .last night?"

He licked his dry lips. "Yes."

"I thought maybe..." A hand slipped up the back of his neck, warm fingers cradled the back of his skull. "Dean. Were you playing for me?"

Dean nodded, wordlessly. And then Rob's mouth found his in the darkness, found and clung and opened in a hard, wet kiss.

Dean shuddered. The whores of his schooldays had never kissed him like this, at best they'd bestowed a few perfunctory caresses before getting down to work. Nothing like this urgent meeting of lip and tongue and even teeth, as Rob nibbled and sucked at his mouth like a starving gourmand at a feast. But unlike the trulls of his youth, Rob wanted him. Somehow, Rob wanted him.

But did he? Rob was a whore, too.

Dean pushed the thought away, but it nagged at him like a fishwife.

Rob was just better at it, wasn't he? More convincing. As if anyone could want *him*.

But the stable boy with the freckles. Surely that meant...

He shook himself. Now he was just being stupid. Rob had made it up. That was what he did.

Now unaccountably sure of it, Dean broke the kiss with a cry, rearing back so quickly he crashed onto his backside on the bedside rug.

"What? What is it?" The cat gave a mew of complaint as Rob threw the covers back and slid onto the floor next to him. Dean's eyes were fully adjusted now, and he raked them once over the other man's naked body before forcing himself to look away. Rob's body. Rob's wares.

"This is what you do." Dean's words were low, and harsh. "This is your secret, isn't it? Why they come back to you. It's not so much the sex, or the way you look—it's this, isn't it? You make them feel wanted. Attractive."

"Not with you." Rob's hands reached for him, and he flinched backwards, scuttling on the floor like a crab.

"But that's why they come back to you," Dean repeated. "Isn't it? It's what you do. Admit it."

Dark eyes flashed in the faint light of the dying fire. "Yes. It's what I do," he said flatly. "But not with you. How can you think that?"

Dean was already on his feet, halfway to the connecting door between their rooms. "You lying whore."

"Dean!" For the first time since they'd met, Rob sounded really, truly, unmistakably furious. "Dean, listen!" Dean slammed the door on the words.

The breakfast table was bound to be rather awkward. But Rob didn't come down to eat, leaving Dean to grunt the occasional response to Uncle Silas's attempts at conversation. "Not with you," Rob had said. "How can you think that?" Because you're a liar, Rob. A liar and a whore, and captivating someone of Dean's

position could only be lucrative in the end, despite Carwick's current financial straits.

Looking back, it was so easy to trace the lies, the careful web of enticement. I don't walk the streets, Rob had claimed from the start. Just a handful of loyal patrons, carefully fewer than the number of sexual partners Dean had admitted to first. Then how had he ended up before Magistrate Lewis in the first place? Appointments made clandestinely through referral or coded newspaper advertisements are not subject to the scrutiny of the law. And for someone who'd never traded his wares thus in the past, he'd certainly known what to do that night in the Rose and Thistle after they'd been robbed.

The history Rob had provided himself was equally suspect. Barely a dozen clients, conveniently of an age not to be too demanding. The sly suggestion of a good family background, in case Dean were snobbish enough to disdain touching a child of the streets, as Rob was far more likely to be in reality. How could he have accepted so easily that someone of good family could end up a common whore? And then there was the pretense, less and less convincing as time went on, that Rob had some mental deficiency that kept him from honest employment.

The oh-so-convenient freckled stable boy. Dean cringed at how expertly he'd been played there. But Rob was so very, very good at telling stories. So quick on his feet with lies, convincing his friend Peter, within mere seconds, that they'd been acquainted before.

All the clues fell together neatly. How would the transaction have been effected? Rob was too subtle to ask for cash, at least at first. Gifts, now. Gifts would be appropriate. Dean was obviously short of blunt, but his watch was solid gold, his cufflinks antique jade. To a careful eye, Carwick was full of small delights: the leaded crystal glasses they'd drunk their wine out of the night they'd met, the translucent bone-china dishes upon which they'd dined, the delicate miniature portraits of forgotten ancestors displayed in the parlor. Not enough, all told, to extricate their owner from his current difficulties, so not worth selling. But what desirable tokens of affection they would make.

And later, of course, once the hook was firmly planted; then, then Rob could become bolder. A few pounds to cover a gambling debt. A tailor's reckoning he

couldn't quite meet. A fishing holiday abroad. Perhaps then, once it had become commonplace for Dean to provide for his expenses, Rob would progress to the convenience of cold, hard cash.

And yet—couldn't it be just possible that Rob really liked him, a little? Deep inside, Dean craved that this was true. They'd had such fun with their absurd ghost-hunting, and yesterday, at the river, when they'd caught Old Bill—surely that moment of intimacy hadn't been all pretense? And, oh God, Rob was attractive. Compellingly so. Eyes that glinted merriment and promised affection. A mobile, oh-so-skillful mouth. Rob's body, half-glimpsed nude several times: the long line of his back, strength of his shoulders, alluring curve of his buttocks. Strong, graceful legs. Naked last night on the floor, Rob's arousal had most certainly not been faked.

Dean stared at his plate, unable to swallow the toast he'd just placed in his mouth.

"Just might be worth it, eh?" His uncle's voice was knowing.

He choked on the morsel of bread. It was touch and go for a moment, but a gulp of coffee washed his throat clear at last. "What did you say?"

Uncle Silas gave his back a final thump. "Where are you this morning, boy? I was telling you about Avery Hall. It's a few miles out of your way, but if you're serious about your ghost hunting, it just might be worth it." He launched into a long description of the haunting, while Dean relaxed back into his ruminations, answering the question he'd imagined he heard.

No. It wouldn't be worth it, becoming one of Rob's gentlemen patrons. Lying to Minerva, sneaking behind her back. Rob kissing him goodbye, then leaving for the bed of another man. He couldn't stand the thought of sharing Rob with anyone. He barely knew the man: if he stopped this mad flirtation right now, Dean could escape with his feelings barely scathed. He would make it clear, if it hadn't been last night, that any idea of a connection between them was impossible.

Rob was necessary to trace the person who had disrupted his engagement, prove that he'd been set up. He'd allowed himself to be sidetracked, but from today on, they would be focused on that goal. The quicker to get the alluring prostitute out of his life forever.

He pasted a smile on his face. "No, Uncle. We don't have time for that. We've got to get back to Erich and the coach as soon as possible."

Dean's foot was on the bottom-most stair heading up to their rooms when Rob finally appeared, eyes heavy and sullen, at the top of the flight. "About time," Dean said roughly.

Rob didn't look at him as he descended, slowly. "I was debating whether I should go on with you, or not. Considering my company offends you so."

It hadn't occurred to him, that Rob might bow out of their little adventure. "But I need you," he said. Rob winced at the unfortunate choice of words, and Dean flushed. "I need you to identify whoever set me up, so that I have a chance of Magistrate Lewis

believing me. You know that's the right thing to do. And as for...the other..." He bit his lip until it hurt. "Suppose we just agree that it shouldn't have happened? Believe me, your efforts are better spent on someone else."

Rob tried to smile. "Someone else. Right."

"Look," Dean added in a softer tone. "You do remember that I'm going to be married? Minerva's important to me, and losing her would mean losing..." But he couldn't talk about that. "Oh, hell. I'm sorry if I was harsh last night." It seemed important to add something else, and he pulled words up from the bottom of his soul. "I...I learned to fight from my parents, and it's not a subtle technique: grab the biggest rock you can find and bash hard."

"Our families have a lot to answer for, don't they?" Rob took a breath. "Listen..."

A door to their right banged open, and Uncle Silas appeared, juggling a number of items. "Umbrellas for each of you—it's still raining. Coats, hats. Boots, with some extra socks to help keep them on. Now, you'll need proper clothes if you're going to Bath: you can hardly go into Society in my old castoffs. No tailor to speak of in Minchinhampton, but these'll tide you over until you can bespeak something respectable in Chippenham."

Dean frowned, trying to fix distances in his head. "Will we get so far as Chippenham today?"

His uncle shook his head. "Not if the day doesn't dry out. Twenty miles in this would take a miracle. But the road is well-traveled, so you'll find an inn along the way." He reached into the final item he carried, a brightly-painted china jar, emerging with a wad of banknotes. "Over a hundred pounds here. That'll see you through."

Rob stared unblinkingly at the money, and Dean winced to follow his thoughts. If they'd known Silas Smith was so near by, Rob would never have had to debase himself in the tavern two nights ago. He swallowed against a lump in his throat before speaking. "Thank you, Uncle Silas. That's very generous."

Uncle Silas was still speaking, giving the quickest route to Minchinhampton, but Dean couldn't keep his attention on the words. I'm so sorry, Rob, he thought.

"Be there in half an hour if you don't get off track," Silas concluded.

"Did you get that?" Rob's voice was subdued. Dean shrugged a response.

"Hmph. Perhaps I should write it down." Silas was peering straight into Rob's eyes, as if looking for something in their depths. "Easy to get on the wrong path, isn't it?" There was a pencil stub and scraps of paper in the household jar, the better for writing down shopping lists. Uncle Silas drew a few lines carefully, handing the makeshift map to Rob. "There you go. You'll find your way now, I'm sure of it."

They made their goodbyes, and set off into the rain. Soon, Dean found reason to be grateful for his uncle's boots. The rough country roads were swimming in mud, and he and Rob made their plodding way slowly. After the prescribed half an hour, there was no village in sight, nothing but gentle hills, stone fences, sheep, and rain.

"Damn," Dean muttered, looking about. "The weather's slowing us down, and you haven't had so much as a cup of coffee this morning. We'll stop at the next inn to warm up."

"The next inn?" Rob stared down at the bit of paper in his hand. "We haven't passed the last one yet."

Dean lifted his umbrella above Rob's, the better to peer over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"We should have reached this crossroads, here, some time ago." Rob's voice was flat. "Your uncle said to look for a place called the Eagle's Nest there."

"Let me see." Dean took the paper, turning it in his hand. "Hell and damnation. He might have labeled this chicken-scratch. Oh, bloody hell." He pointed. "Isn't that little mark Uncle Silas's house? If so, you were holding this the wrong way round. What a stupid thing to—" Dean bit off the remark, but the damage was done.

"Oh?" Rob snatched the paper out of his hand. "If you'd been paying attention yourself, my lord—"

"Don't!" Dean held up his hand. "You're right. It's my fault. Mine. I didn't mean to call you names."

"You certainly meant to last night." There was a throb of misery in Rob's voice. "A lying whore, you called me."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"But you thought it. Why don't you trust me? Maybe I haven't told you everything about myself—I can't, Dean—but I've never lied to you. Never."

Dean chose his words with unaccustomed care. "Perhaps not. But it's natural for someone in your position to try to show things in a certain light."

"To what gain? What have I ever asked of you?" Rob reached into his pocket and displayed a cupped hand, filled with coins. Guineas, sovereigns, half-crowns... Dean's throat tightened, the wad of notes in his own pocket burning him. Sixpences. "I've been more than willing to pay my own way on this journey, my lord."

"I know. Look, we'll need some of Uncle Silas's blunt for the coach repairs, and to deck us out in proper clothes. But that won't take half of it, and the rest is yours, I swear it."

Another mistake. Rob's eyes snapped like coals. "As payment for the night in the barn? No thank you, my lord."

"Rob, I..." Dean blinked at his own outstretched hand, the wrist beyond it bare in the grey morning light. "Hell. I've lost my ribbon."

"What?"

"I had it on my wrist earlier. I remember seeing it in the mirror when I shaved."

"Oh." Rob's tone was calmer, subdued. "Oh. Your mother's ribbon. I'll help you look for it." He turned at once and began retracing their steps.

Dean stared at the receding umbrella for several seconds, discombobulated at the

abrupt change. "We shouldn't take the time," he called.

One shoulder lifted in a shrug. "We may as well go back as forward. We're lost either way."

Within ten minutes, Dean found the ribbon, its light blue showing stark contrast to the dark mud beneath. "Here it is!" he called to Rob. "I found it." He slipped as he reached for the ribbon, catching himself awkwardly on one hand. "Ow!"

"Are you all right?" Rob hurried over to him, helping him rise.

"I'm fine." Dean flexed his right hand. "Couple of mashed fingers, but nothing sprained or broken. Might be stiff for a bit." He looked down at the ribbon in his other hand. "I need to secure this better—it must have come untied somehow."

"Let me." Rob took the tattered blue token and wrapped it twice around Dean's wrist, his fingers gentle. He finished it off with a tight knot. "There. That should hold."

"Thank you." They stood silent beneath their umbrellas, rain pattering rhythmically on the cloth. At last, Dean spoke. "Rob. There can't be anything between us."

"I know you're getting married, and you're a man to keep to his vows. But you haven't taken them yet, and you seem...last night when I kissed you, I thought... Oh, blast, don't you think you're entitled to some wild oats? And," Rob swallowed, "if you can't be in my future, I'd at least want to have you in my past."

Dean's laugh was bitter. "Bed you and walk away, like the others?"

"Not like the others." Rob took a breath. "You asked a question once, and here's the answer: no. I've never slept with a man my own age, or with anyone out of sheer passion. You're the first man I've so much as kissed, of my own volition, since that stable boy. When I was fifteen."

"But I..."

"Don't start that. How many times do I have to tell you I want you, before you'll believe me? Yes, I'm mad for your hair, and those delightful freckles, but there's so much more. You—you've been kind to me, Dean, and we've had fun together. You've indulged me on this trip, when it would have made more sense to just fly straight to Bath." Rob closed his hand over Dean's, their chilled flesh warming together at the touch. "Just give me one night, to show my appreciation, and prove to you once and for all how blasted desirable you really are. Please."

To hold Rob in his arms, to kiss him, touch and be touched... Dean thought of Rob's hands on him that night in the barn, the sweet disbelieving tension as Rob's lips had trailed down across his stomach, and his head spun from hunger.

At first, it had mattered that he not become exactly what Magistrate Lewis had branded him. Later, he couldn't trust that Rob wasn't trying to hook himself an earl, a whopper of a catch. Now, there was another, overarching reason why he couldn't have Rob: Dean felt that it would destroy him. A single morsel to torture a starving witch, the full meal denied for eternity. One night to haunt his memory, torment him endlessly for the rest of his cold and dutiful existence. Every night, knowing that Rob

was in another man's bed, another man's arms.

"I can't," Dean said, shaking his hand free.

"I won't ask again, then." Rob looked down at the mud. "Just tell me this. Is it because of what I am?"

"Yes," Dean's voice rang with utter truth. "It's exactly because of what you are."

Chapter Fifteen

The proprietor of the Ram's Head in Dursley, a Mr. Archibald Hume, frowned at the woman in the grey veil. "Madam? I'm afraid this establishment does not serve unaccompanied females."

"I won't trouble your patrons," she replied, opening a gloved hand to reveal a gleaming sovereign. "I'm just looking for information."

"Hmm." He considered the offering. "Perhaps a pot of tea in a private parlor? We have our reputation to preserve."

"That will be fine." The woman, whoever or whatever she was, did carry herself with dignity. Mr. Hume brought the tea to her with his own hands, availing himself of the gold coin at the first opportunity.

"The Earl of Carwick? I'm afraid he hasn't been here." Damnation. Was he going to have to give the bribe back?

There was a vexed sigh from beneath the veil. "Are you certain? His coach should have passed through yesterday, at the latest, and I've inquired at every hostelry on the way."

"Perhaps they took a different route?"

A small, booted foot tapped in frustration. "Why would they do that? They told a curate at Gloucester Cathedral that they're going to Bath, and this is by far the easiest road."

Hume shrugged. "A friend, a side errand, a pint of ale at a favorite pub. Since you know he's going to Bath, why not lay in wait for him there? Surely your business can wait another day or two."

The tone he used for females traveling unaccompanied was not shaded toward the soothing and solicitous, and the woman in grey stiffened. "I'm no lightskirt, if that's what you're thinking, nor a creditor nor anything else unsavory. I'm a respectable female, who has simply...misplaced...someone very dear to me, and am seeking to rejoin him again."

"I see." He didn't. Who was this woman, and what connection could she have to the Earl of Carwick? Perhaps a poor relation— since the title had only recently changed hands, this was the time for distant connections to creep from the woodwork with their hands out. "You're a member of the family, are you?"

The woman's laugh seemed genuine, and surprised. "It's not Carwick himself I'm looking for, but someone I believe to be with him."

"Ah." Hume nodded. Well, since they don't seem to be on the Bristol highway, you might catch them on the Chippenham road."

She stood. "You're right. I'll cut over, and if I don't find them there, I'll go on to Bath."

Chapter Sixteen

Asking at a farmhouse did the trick, and with clear, labeled \ U directions Dean and Rob made it to Minchinhampton before luncheon. Dean had been concerned about how Erich had got on, for over a full day among those who didn't speak his language. He needn't have worried.

"Erich!" A man paused from replacing the wheel of a fashionable landau. "Das Graf ist, uh, kommen."

The coachman emerged from the carriage-wright's shop, and slapped the laborer on the shoulder. "*Der* Graf," he corrected solemnly. "Der Graf ist angekommen."

"Danke." The man grinned at Dean. "Welcome, my lord Carwick. I knew it was you. 'Rotes Haar,' Erich said." He touched his own hair. "And that's easy enough to figure."

"Yes, Mr.—"

"Hutchins, the name is, and this is my shop."

"Thank you for looking after my coachman, Mr. Hutchins. Is the carriage ready?"

"Aye, and I've sent to Cirencester for hired horses. You'll be on your way within the hour, my lord. In the meantime, the Amberley does a nice luncheon. Tell 'em Frank sent you, and they'll treat you right."

"Thank you. Erich? Kommst du? Herr Black und ich essen gerade zu Mittag."

Erich shook his head. "Ich habe schon mit Frank gegessen."

"All right, then," Dean said. "Which way to the Amberley, Mr. Hutchins?" The carriage-wright pointed the way, and soon they were ensconced by the inn's fire.

Rob had spoken little since this morning, and was no more talkative now. "I think the rain's stopping," Dean offered, when they'd been warming their hands in silence for a while.

"If you say so, my lord."

"Be nice if it gets pleasant again."

"Yes, my lord."

Rob, I miss you, Dean wanted to say. Talk to me. Tell me stories. Make me laugh. But he had been intentionally cruel to his companion, the better to keep him at a distance, and would have to pay the price for it. "It's exactly because of what you are," he'd said. Dean hadn't meant prostitute, although he'd deliberately allowed Rob to think so. What you are is beautiful. Warm. Unbearably precious. One night with you, and I'd do anything to keep you. Tear Carwick apart, stone by stone, with my bare hands. If it were only me... But it wasn't. The burden of the earldom lay heavy on his shoulders. The estate, the title, the family. His tenants. Rob was a dream.

Just a few more days, and then he could begin the long business of putting his dreams behind him, and forgetting that he'd ever met this man. In the meantime, he ached for Rob's former easy companionship. Couldn't he at least have that? If only he

were better with words he could think of the right thing to say, to preserve their friendship these next few days, without giving false hopes for more.

They ate in silence. At another table, the barmaid was regaling her customers with the tale of the highwayman's ghost. "I've heard them myself, late at night when the inn is quiet. Hoof beats, coming fast, with never a horse to be seen. Nothing can keep them apart, not even death."

Dean stood. "Let's go."

"Yes, my lord."

The borrowed horses were harnessed, and the coach ready to go when they returned to the carriage-wright. "If you don't mind," Rob said, not looking at Dean, "I'll sit up next to Erich."

Dean nodded brusquely, then realized his response was invisible to one so studiously avoiding his gaze. "Fine."

"May I borrow your German dictionary?"

"Oh. Right." Dean took it from his pocket and handed it to Rob, then climbed into the coach. Alone in the jouncing carriage, he closed his eyes, hoping sleep would bring a respite from his misery. Rob's laughter floated back to him from the coachman's perch up front, and Dean felt a stab of jealousy. Shortly thereafter, an unfamiliar sound followed: another man's laugh, unpracticed and hesitant. Dean sat up. Erich was laughing? He never did. The event, which should have been cause for wonder, merely tightened his throat the more. Rob charmed everyone, didn't he? Oh, God. Dean doubled over from the pain. Why couldn't they have met three months ago?

Due to the late start and wet conditions, they were barely halfway to Chippenham when they stopped for the night in Malmesbury. The first inn they happened upon, the Old Bell, was small but virtually empty of other patrons. Dean was relieved to be able to procure separate rooms for himself and Rob, and even a small private chamber for Erich.

"Sign the ledger for me, will you?" he asked Rob, flexing his hand. "My fingers are swollen from that fall in the mud."

"Please," Rob muttered, dipping the quill into ink. "Name or title?"

"Just the name. Please."

Dean watched as Rob carefully wrote out the required information, admiring the graceful calligraphy taking shape on the page. "List," he said, reminded. "We should make a list of the things we need to buy in Chippenham. It will save time when we go to shop for them."

Rob finished writing and set down the quill. "As you wish. My lord."

They shared a quiet meal, neither man displaying much appetite. The quality of the stew didn't help. "God," Dean said, pushing his bowl away. "That sheep never baaed. It barked."

A glimmer of a smile appeared on Rob's face. "Bow-wow mutton, they call it in

Town."

Dean, frantic to keep the conversation going now that Rob had finally responded, seized on the topic. "Do you know London well?"

"Not as well as I'd like. My uncle hated it, and most of my..." Rob paused.

Patrons, Dean thought. But Rob seemed to be avoiding any direct reference to his trade tonight. As if either one of them could forget it.

"Most of my time is spent in the country. Or on the Continent."

Right. Rob's gentlemen would hardly take him to London, where everyone knew everyone else's business. Safer to invite him privately to their country homes, or go anonymously abroad.

"For someone who fancies both ghosts and history," Dean offered, "I would imagine the Tower of London would be a veritable paradise."

"I imagine so. I've never been." Rob's shoulder raised in a shrug. "Perhaps when I've—perhaps someday I can spend more time in London. What about you, my lord? Do you care for the city?"

Dean was silent for a moment. "I suppose I do. I've had the Carwick townhouse in Worcester for several years, since it became clear I'd inherit the estate. But I spent most of my time in rented rooms in Hampstead, just outside London. Away from the hustle-bustle, yet convenient to Town. I've been so busy since inheriting the title, I haven't been back."

"Oh? What did you do in Hampstead?"

Dean colored. "Rode. Fished. Went into Town. In other words, not much."

"Ah." Rob's tone was faintly mocking. "A gentleman of leisure. Much devoted to the social whirl of the *ton*, I suppose. Morning rides in Rotten Row, afternoons in the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall, dancing the evenings away at Almack's."

In spite of himself, Dean laughed. "God, no. I hate that sort of thing. Although I suppose Minerva will— No, I stayed near London for the music."

"The music?" Rob cocked his head. "I thought you hated music."

Dean's flush grew deeper. "It's in my blood, whether despite or because of my upbringing. London is an excellent place if one needs to hear music regularly, with a concert or musicale almost every night. I only hate playing it myself because I was forced to."

"I see. Just as someone forced to bake bread might still enjoy eating it." His companion's smile took on a bitter cast. "I rather feel that way about sex."

Dean's heart twisted. "Rob, about this morning. I am so—"

"Don't." Rob lifted a hand. "Don't apologize. I was out of order to approach you, and it was wrong of me to be so sulky when you very naturally refused me."

"But I—"

"Don't, Dean. Let's leave it at that, shall we?" Rob's smile approximated its usual sunniness. "How about some cards, or a game of backgammon?"

Dean nodded. "Let's make that list of things we need first." He nodded at a table near the wall. "There's some writing paper there, and a pencil."

For some reason, Rob's smile grew tight. "I'll bring them to you."

"No, you'll need to write. My hand, remember?"

The other man made no move toward the table. "I have a very good memory. I'll keep it here." He tapped his head.

"Good for you," Dean said. "But I don't, and if we split up we'll get the shopping done twice as fast."

"Perhaps in the morning your hand will be better."

Dean was growing confused, and exasperated. "Rob, what is it? Your handwriting is fine. It's absolutely gorgeous. I just saw you sign the ledger, remember?"

Rob looked at him for a moment, then rose and sat at the table, placing a sheet of paper in front of him and choosing a pencil from the jar. "All right. But please, go slow."

"I will. Clothes." Dean pointed his toe and looked at it. "Let's start with the feet and work up. Shoes. No, cross that out. Boots will be better, if we can get decent enough ones in a hurry. Stockings. Breeches. Undergarments. Shirts, waistcoats, and jackets."

"Will you please slow down?"

"All right." He thought for a moment. "Neck-cloths. Handkerchiefs, for that matter. Gloves, cufflinks, hats."

Rob's voice emerged from between gritted teeth. "You're going too fast for me."

"Are you caught up yet? Personal items. Razors, soap, toothbrushes and tooth-powder."

The pencil snapped in Rob's hand.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Give me that." Dean reached and snatched the paper from the table, then frowned at it in puzzlement. "'Preeches'? 'Soad'? You've got your words all mixed up, and some of your letters are backwards."

"I told you I was stupid." Without a trace of his customary grace, Rob pushed his chair back from the writing table and rose, his face as white as the paper in Dean's hand. "If you'll excuse me, my lord, I'd prefer to retire now." His attempt at a smile was crooked and unconvincing. "This has not been one of my better days. Good night."

Rob was gone from the room before Dean could wish him a good night in return. Alone, he stared at the mixed-up words, trying to make sense of their existence. Rob could read, and quite well, too. He'd proved that by reading the Quarterly aloud, with never a stumble or hesitation. And while it was certainly possible to be literate without being able to write as well, Rob also had demonstrated that he could form his letters perfectly, even beautifully.

If he had enough time.

Dean shook his head, unenlightened. How could someone have practiced writing enough to have the calligraphical skills Rob had displayed, and still be awkward enough with letters to make such mistakes if going quickly? He read through the list again, this time seeing a pattern emerge. The tailed letters, b and d and p and g, were interchanged randomly, resulting in not just 'preeches' but 'dloves.' Was this why Rob considered himself stupid? An unfortunate quirk, perhaps, but surely not one to drive a man to prostitution. There must be plenty of jobs where the ability to write quickly was not a requirement.

And yet...Dean studied a backwards 'S,' thinking back. If letters look the same, backwards or forwards, do other things as well? Suppose one's mind swapped other similar items. Numbers. A shop clerk wouldn't last long if a customer paid for an item that cost nine-and-six, and received change for six-and-nine instead. What else?

The valises, that first morning at Carwick. Yours is the one on the right, he'd told Rob. Who had thought about it, then picked up the wrong one. Not enough sleep, he'd put it down to.

The morning after that dreadful night in the tavern, they'd woke up lost. That time, Rob had claimed he'd been too drunk to remember which way they'd gone.

Today, getting them lost again despite Uncle Silas's crudely-drawn map. Up, down. East, west. Left, right. Somehow, despite his obvious intelligence in other areas, Rob couldn't tell the difference. And that might matter to an employer. On a farm: 'Plow the north pasture, Rob, and make sure you harness Daisy on the left so she doesn't keep pulling right.' In the city: 'Take this note round to Lady Fine.' If Rob could get lost so easily, it might take him hours to find his way back from a simple errand. Even setting a table properly would be beyond his command, or following a recipe. Six cups of flour wouldn't suffice if nine were called for.

Uncle Silas had shrugged and laughed when Holly mixed the table linens garishly, or served the wrong wine at dinner because she couldn't distinguish between the dark red bottles of hock and the dark green bottles of claret. Then he adapted, ordering new table settings in blue, and tying bits of string around select bottles so Holly could tell them apart.

Rob's schoolmaster had beaten him for his faults. The other children would have laughed at him, mocked him mercilessly. Dean had thought it humiliating to be teased for his looks: Hip, Michael, your hair's on fire! Rob would have suffered worse. You stupid idiot. Lazy sod. Look, he can't even make his letters right. And his mother, similarly afflicted, had despaired, allowing that devil's bargain with Rob's "uncle" in hopes of securing her son's future. From something Rob had said, Dean gathered she was dead now, and he wondered if she'd lived long enough to see how the arrangement had turned out.

How many other occupations Rob had attempted before giving up? Before relying on the one area he had experience in, had confidence that he could perform to

satisfaction. He smiled grimly: Rob's disability would have few consequences in his profession. 'A little to the right, sweetheart,' might be commanded on occasion, but with someone like Rob in one's bed, there would be minimal dismay should he go a little to the left instead.

If only Rob could find an employer who knew about his problem, and was willing to work around it, as Uncle Silas had with Holly. As he himself did with Erich. Peter? But no, Stonehurst was too close to Carwick, the visits between the two too frequent. Best to keep temptation as far away from him as possible. For the first time in his life, Dean rued his small circle of intimates. One of his uncles, perhaps. He visited them only rarely, and although they were in general an unsocial lot, they had a strong sense of family and could be counted on in a pinch.

Uncle Silas had liked Rob, and he and Holly were getting on in years. Perhaps his uncle could use a strong back and good pair of hands around the farm. It would be hard on Dean, knowing Rob was just a few days' drive away, but it would be much harder to know he was still selling himself into the arms of strangers. His own discomfort was negligible, if he could somehow find a way to free Rob from prostitution.

And it was about time he put Rob first.

Chapter Seventeen

The serving girl tells me there's a Grey Lady here," Dean said the next morning, over breakfast in the inn's dining room. "I didn't notice it in the dark and the rain last night, but it turns out there's an abbey just next door. The Old Bell is built on what used to be part of the churchyard."

Rob, heavy-eyed, nodded over his cup of coffee but didn't speak.

"But the Grey Lady wasn't buried there. The story is, she was married at Malmesbury Abbey, and unhappily so." He paused for a response that didn't come, then continued. "Why, you ask, would she haunt the inn, then? It's a good question, and here comes Polly with the coffeepot. Polly," Dean asked the serving girl, "why does the Lady haunt the inn, if it's the Abbey she's upset with?"

Polly, a colorless young girl with rabbity front teeth, giggled. "Mayhap she's just passing through. Or," she lowered her voice and glanced around. "Had to spend her wedding night somewhere, didn't she? Doesn't always go as planned, or so I hear." She hid a snicker behind her hand. "I suppose that could be why she was so unhappy." Polly glanced at Rob adoringly, obviously imagining a much more satisfactory consummation. "Can I get you anything else, Mr. Black?"

"No, thank you." Rob managed a sweet smile, and Dean doubted the girl saw the effort behind it.

"I'd like more coffee, miss." Dean held up his cup, and Polly dragged her eyes away from Rob, giggling again.

"Of course, Mr.. .uh.. .sir." She poured and retreated, with a last smile for Rob.

"Smith is such a hard name to remember," Dean muttered. "Don't you think?" He added sugar to his cup and stirred. "Polly was telling me before you came down—while I still existed, in other words—that Malmesbury is the oldest borough in England, with a charter given by Alfred the Great himself. There's also been a church on Abbey lands since Saxon times, and King Athelstan's tomb is over there. Care for a look?"

"I doubt we should take the time," Rob said.

"I wouldn't, except we're only going as far as Chippenham today, since we need to rig ourselves in respectable clothes before we reach Bath. Uncle Silas was right: I can't visit Minerva dressed in his castoffs. So there's plenty of time. I mean, if you want to see the Abbey ruins."

Rob blinked, looking more awake. "Athelstan. Alfred the Great's grandson?"

"If you say so. Do you know anything about him?" Dean leaned back in his chair, unaccountably pleased to have sparked Rob's interest at last.

"He reigned in the 900s. Had some trouble with the Danes—I think he's the one who took York away from them. And he subjugated the petty kings of the north and west, becoming the first king of all England."

"And to think, he's lying next door." A half-memory nagged at Dean, from his own school days. "I thought the first king of England was..." A beatific smile spread over his face. "*Egbert*. That's it, isn't it? Your name's Egbert."

"No, and no." But Rob laughed, which this morning was victory enough for Dean. "Egbert was a king of Wessex. He may have held sway over large tracts of England at various times, but he didn't rule all. And I'm not named for him." His eyes regained some of their sparkle. "Think saints, not kings."

"Saints...hmm." Dean tipped his chair back on two legs and regarded the ceiling beams. "I've already guessed Cuthbert and Lambert, but of course you said you wouldn't tell me if I hit upon it."

"And so I won't." Rob drained his coffee cup. "Leave me *some* secrets." His tone was light, but Dean fancied he heard a note of real pain within it. He thought of his idea of the night before, that perhaps Rob could work for one of his uncles, and brought his chair to the ground with a thump. He had been going to wait for the privacy of the coach, but this was as good an opening as he was likely to get.

Dean leaned forward. "Rob. About secrets and such."

Rob's face grew guarded. "Yes?"

"I was thinking... wondering... if perhaps..." It was harder going than he'd hoped, and he pushed the words out in a rush. "If one of my uncles could use you—oh, God, not *use* you, I mean, not like that—if I could find you employment with one of my uncles, would you consider it? Not...doing what you do."

"I'm sure you mean well, Dean." Rob rose, buttoning his jacket against the light rain that was still falling outside. "But it's not just the writing I have difficulty with. There's little practical use for me. Besides the obvious."

"That's not true, Rob. Listen. My uncles aren't young men, and they aren't getting any younger. Uncle Phineas was complaining, a few Quarterlies back, that he has trouble reading, even with his new spectacles. You could read to him, keep him company. Or help at Uncle Silas's farm—he makes allowances for Holly, he'd do it for you. Oh, God. It wouldn't be glamorous, and it wouldn't pay well. But Rob, it would get you out of what you're doing now."

"There are other considerations. Would any of your uncles want me in his house, if he knew what I am?"

Dean flushed. "You wouldn't have to tell—"

"Wouldn't I? Think about it. Suppose it were discovered." Rob looked down at his hands, perhaps picturing the men they'd touched. "I wouldn't be the only one humiliated. How would your uncle feel if the world knew he'd been keeping a male whore? Could you do that to him?"

"Rob, listen."

Just then, the dining room door swung open, and Polly trotted over to their table. It looked like she had pinched some color into her cheeks, and between that and the

warm glow in her eyes as she simpered at Rob, she looked almost pretty. "You're not leaving already, are you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Rob smiled at Polly. "We're going to have a quick peek at the Abbey before we leave town, so we'd best hurry." He took her hand and squeezed it. "But thank you so very much for all your efforts."

"Oh." The serving girl blinked at the coin Rob had deftly left behind in her palm. "Thank you, Mr. Black."

They took their leave of Polly and the Old Bell, and collected Erich from the stable. Dean asked the coachman if he'd like to accompany them to the Abbey, and was surprised when Erich agreed. Rob, however, seemed to seize the servant's presence as an excuse to avoid further discussion with Dean.

"Wie heifit das?" On the short walk to the Abbey, Rob pointed to his hat, coat, shoes, apparently enthralled to learn the German equivalents. To be fair, given his curiosity and interest in words, Rob probably was enthralled. If not, he gave a good show of it.

"Did you hear that?" Rob turned to Dean, laughing. "The word for 'glove' is *der Handschuh*. 'Hand-shoe.' Isn't that wonderfully practical of the Germans? I suppose it's also evidence that they borrowed the idea of gloves from somewhere else," he added, "since there's not a unique word for them. Can't you picture it? 'What the hell is that on his hand?' 'Why, it's a hand-shoe, obviously.'"

Dean grinned at his exuberance. "You can make a story up about anything, can't you? You should write a book."

Rob's smile tightened. "I should dictate a book, you mean. So hard to find a good secretary these days, and I doubt a publisher would supply one." He turned back to Erich. "Eine handshuh. Zwei...?"

Dean let himself lag behind, deflated. There had to be a way to get Rob out of his current profession. Unless he didn't want to? But that was absurd, and contrary to Rob's own words. He might, though, be afraid to try something else, in case he should fail. Again. Rob might not enjoy prostituting himself, but he'd made terms with it, and could see a not-too-distant future when he'd be comfortably out of it. Perhaps it was cruel to suggest other avenues, when they might so easily be blocked from travel.

And yet, he had to keep trying, because the thought of Rob in another man's bed was loathsome. Dean shook himself. In a client's bed, he meant. Surely he wouldn't want to keep his friend from enjoying pleasure with someone he desired. But that thought, too, made his gorge rise. He should get Rob out of prostitution because it was the right thing to do, then leave the man to his own devices. Because Dean couldn't have him.

Ahead of him, Erich's unfamiliar laugh burst forth, sounding more like a grating cough. Dean quickened his gait to catch up, calling "Warte auf mich! Wait for me!" If Rob wanted to lob words around like tennis balls, he would play, too.

The bilingual badinage continued until they stood at the sarcophagus of Athelstan, in the nave of Malmesbury Abbey. "Konig Athelstan von England," Dean told Erich, pointing at the effigy. "Anglo-Saxon. Angel-Sachsen, ja?"

Erich thought about it. "Athelstan, er war ein angelsächsischer König?"

"Ja." Rob tilted his head. "I wonder where Erich comes from. Can you ask if he's from Saxony?"

Dean shrugged. "I doubt it, but I'll ask. Erich, kommst du aus Sachsen?"

A shy smile spread over the coachman's face. "Nein. Ich komme aus Hannover."

Rob grinned back. "I got that one. I come from Hanover." He bowed to Erich. "Ich komme auf—aus Cheshire."

Erich nodded and smiled, then turned back to Athelstan's effigy, his fingers tracing the bearded stone face lightly. "Wann?"

Dean, stumped, searched his pockets for his German/English dictionary, not finding it. "Bloody hell," he said to Rob. "He wants to know when, but my numbers don't go that high."

"Let me try. Most of the other numbers are very similar." Rob held up nine fingers. "Neun, ja? Hundred?" When the coachman looked puzzled, Rob flashed ten fingers, ten times.

Erich cocked his head. "Ah, neunhundert. Im Jahr neunhundert?"

Rob's face lit up. "Ja! Dean, what's 'he died'?"

"I'm not sure, and I can't find the dictionary. Do you still have it?" asked Dean.

"Maybe." Rob felt around in his pockets, locating the desired item. "Ah, Here it is. Starb. Er starb im Jahr neunhundert— hundert und..." Rob flashed all ten fingers again, four times. "Neunhundert und das."

"Vierzig," the coachman said, nodding and turning to Dean. "Er ist sehr schlau."

"Ja, ist er," Dean replied. "He thinks you're very smart, Rob."

"Not in any way that counts," Rob said softly.

"Stop that. Listen, I've been thinking. If you'll permit me, I'll write about your situation in the Quarterly. Tell my uncles everything, right out, and ask if one of them—"

Rob glanced swiftly at Erich. "Do you think we should talk about this here? He's no dummy himself."

"I told you, he can't learn English."

"It's hard to believe that's possible. So many of the words are almost exactly alike. He must pick things up here and there."

"Rob," Dean said patiently, if a trifle louder, "Did you notice? You said 'hundred,' and it meant nothing, even though the German equivalent is 'hundert.'"

"But..."

"He can't learn English the same way some people can't learn the difference between east and west." Rob stiffened. "You figured that out."

"Come on." Dean took him by the arm. "We'll talk in the coach. Erich, die Kutsche, bitte."

Dean waited until they were under way before resuming the conversation. "That's it, isn't it? You lack some sort of inner compass."

Rob sighed. "Something like that. It's more like living in a hall of mirrors: I have no instinct for whether something is forward or reverse. With letters, at least, if I have enough time, I can write them correctly."

"Like with the ledger at the inn last night."

"Yes. It also helps, as in that case, to have other writing in front of me. If I can look at another 'D,' I can make one just fine."

"If you take your time, can you figure out direction, as well?"

Rob smiled wryly. "If I really put my mind to it, and concentrate very hard, I might get it right.. .oh, half of the time."

"But you can dance."

"I can memorize movements. I can't tell you whether to go left or right on a certain step, though—if you remember our lesson, I had to show you."

"I see." Dean was silent for a moment, thinking. "I can't tell stories like you can, but this is one I think you should know."

"Oh?"

"Erich's not German. He's English."

Rob stared at him in confusion. "What? You've insisted he can't understand English."

Dean blew out a breath. "He can't, or won't. No, he *can't*. Because if he did...oh, hell. Let me start earlier—I told you I'm no good at this. Erich's real name isn't even Erich, it's Jim, and he's not from Hanover, he's from Sussex, I think. Or Somerset. He and his brother Michael enlisted in the army. They were twins, did everything together. Close as God's curse to a whore's arse." Dean shot Rob a quick look. "Uh, sorry. No offense meant."

Rob smiled. "None taken. It's just a saying."

"Well, anyway, a man named Jacob Franklin was their captain. He was my best friend in the world, next to Peter. But his company—hell, his whole regiment—was devastated in the storming of Badajoz. The regiment was re-formed from bits and pieces of other surviving units, including a few companies of Hessians."

"Hessians. That's where Jim learned to speak German?"

"Yes, from Erich. The real Erich, I mean. There was one, and Jacob told me he became a very close friend to both Jim and his brother."

Rob's eyes darted back and forth as his quick mind filled in the story himself. "Jim and Michael had a German friend. Let me guess...he died?"

"Yes. The real Erich had just died of illness, and then Michael fell at Vittoria."

Rob winced. "Don't tell me. Michael died in his brother's arms?"

"Well," Dean said apologetically. "All over him, really. Grapeshot is—" "Ouch."

"Yes." Dean lifted his shoulders. "Jim was wounded in the same battle. He couldn't, or wouldn't speak at all at first, and when he did, he insisted, in German, that his name was Erich, and he belonged with the Hessian troops."

"Why didn't they send him home?"

"They needed the soldiers. And apart from that one quirk, Jim was a damned fine one." "I thought he hated guns?"

"He won't touch them now the war's over, but while it persisted he did his duty, and quite well, from all accounts. The Hessians hardly minded keeping him, especially since over time his German improved to the point where they could almost believe he was one of them. But my friend Jacob managed to keep an eye on him for the rest of the war. Then, after Waterloo, Jacob wrote to me, and asked if I could possibly take Erich on."

"So you did. That was very generous of you."

"He could hardly go *back* to Hanover, when he didn't really come from there. There was no one in England, either, no wife, no family. And...Jacob was dying. Shot through the lung, or he would have kept Erich himself. I could hardly refuse."

"I'm sorry about your friend." Rob thought for a moment. "Then, if Erich speaks English, that's too close to an admission that he's really Jim? Because if he tried it would soon be all too apparent, especially to himself, that he did know the language. So he can't speak it, can't even begin to understand it."

"I think so. Jim's brother exploded all over him at Vittoria. If Jim is Jim, then his twin brother is dead. But Erich never had a brother."

"And the real Erich, he's still alive too, so long as Jim continues to impersonate him." Rob spoke softly. "Poor Jim."

"That's how I see it, anyway," Dean said. "If he speaks English, his brother and best friend are dead. Maybe someday he can face that."

Rob looked down at the coach floor, somber. "Why did you tell me?"

"I thought...I thought you should know. Hell, I know it isn't quite the same, but you're—you're not stupid, Rob. And neither is Holly, or Erich. You're all good, smart, worthy people, each with

a single flaw. I don't know exactly how it works with any of you, but I do know that much. And there are people who will work around it, like Uncle Silas, and Jacob Franklin—" "And you."

Dean flushed at the emotion in Rob's tone. "I can't take any credit. I inherited Erich from Jacob, and he's been a blessing to me. As long as I don't try to force him to speak English, he'll do anything, work round the clock if I ask him to. Well, except handle a gun—he won't touch one these days. But he's terrific with the horses, and he learned to cook and sew on buttons in the Army. Learning a few words of German is a small price to pay for such service."

A smile curved Rob's lips. "No, no credit to you at all."

"None," Dean said firmly. "Rob. Think about it. About letting me tell my uncles your story, and asking them for help."

"I'll think about it. And Dean?" Rob shifted in his seat, uncharacteristically awkward. "Thank you. No one's ever tried to make me feel.. Just, thank you."

Chapter Eighteen

By late morning, they reached Chippenham, a market town of about 3,500 souls nestled in a loop of the River Avon. The coach moved slowly across the bridge and through the town, slowed by a profusion of horses picking their way cautiously through three days' worth of mud.

"It's changed since I last was here," Dean said, rolling the window shade back down against the incessant rain. "Canal linked up to London a few years back; that's probably why it's so much busier."

They stopped first at a barber for a quick shave, then went in search of a tailor. Polly had given them the addresses of a handful of candidates, and they soon found one who could be bribed to make them each a set of day and evening clothes as soon as possible.

"But can they be ready by tomorrow?" asked Dean.

Monsieur Au Sable, tall and lugubrious and unconvincingly French, gave a mournful sigh at the Herculean task requested of him. "*Bien sur my lord Carwick*. Of course, moi and my staff will be forced to work around the clock to have them ready so soon. Only for a lord of your stature would we even fait le attempt. But if we ignore all other custom, neglect our meals and forget that such a pleasure as sleep even exists..."

Dean, taken aback, looked at Rob for support, only to find him and the tailor's assistant exchanging sidelong glances. Did Rob have to flirt with everyone? He pursed his lips, annoyed. "We need the clothes as soon as possible. My coachman can sew a little. I'll tell him to—"

"My lord!" Au Sable unstooped his shoulders and straightened to his full cadaverous height. "Je vous promis, my staff will finish on time, and with out l'assistance of your coachman. Should it force us into early graves."

Rob nudged him, nodding his head toward Au Sable's assistant, who seemed to be holding back laughter. The young man winked at him, and Dean, confused, bowed stiffly to the tailor. "We, uh, are very grateful, I'm sure. Thank you, Monsieur Au Sable."

The tailor nodded glumly at his assistant. "Mon fils Aloysius will take your measurements." He swept a curtain aside, revealing a hallway with workrooms and closets opening off of it. "If you please, mon comte et monsieur. The fitting room is to the back."

"It's all right," Rob said to the tailor's son, once his father's sonorous footsteps had retreated to the front of the shop. He put a hand on the young man's shoulder and squeezed it warmly. "You can laugh now. His lordship has an uncle named Aloysius, so we're practically family. Tell us what's so amusing, will you?"

"Oh, sir!" the tailor's son gasped between chuckles, his tones pure Gloucestershire.

He looked up at Rob with something approaching adoration. "Au Sable! Good French name, ain't it? Sands, we used to be called, before all the tailors had to be French to get any business."

"Well," Dean said, "you'll be busy enough tonight. Let's get this over with so we can leave them to it."

The tailor's son laughed again and shook his head. "We had a patron go bankrupt three or four months back, see? Bespoke a whole wardrobe, then couldn't afford to pick it up. Expensive stuff it is, too. Father's been frantic trying to think of how to recoup the loss."

Rob grinned. "And you think it will fit us?"

"Haven't taken your exact measurements yet, sir, but you'll both be near enough." Aloysius regarded them with a practiced eye, lingering longer over Rob's form. "Oh, we'll have a few hours of adjustments to do, take in some seams here and there. And the hems, of course. But I'll have plenty of time for a few drinks at the Ram's Head tonight." He waved a hand at the ill-fitting garments they'd borrowed from Uncle Silas. "If you were thinking you might want to go out as well," he added with another glance at Rob, "I can even give you something respectable to wear today.

Won't fit perfectly, but.

"Better than my uncle's clothes," Dean said. "Much appreciated. We'll take them with us and change once we get to the inn—no sense in spattering them with mud. Can you recommend a place to stay?"

Once their business there was completed, they exited the tailor's shop into a drizzling day. "Damnation," Dean said, putting up his umbrella. "Isn't it ever going to stop raining?"

Rob shivered, handing over to Erich the two bundles of clothing Aloysius had provided them to wear until they could pick up their new garments in the morning. "Hard to believe it's still summer. Let's get the shopping over with, and find an inn with a nice fire."

Dean gave him a sideways glance. "And then go out for a drink?"

Rob laughed. "Aloysius was sweet, but he's far too young for me."

"You didn't give him that impression."

"Should I have? Tell me, does being gruff with people get better treatment than a few harmless pleasantries?"

Dean sighed. "I suppose you're right. I just don't think it would work for me."

"Try it some time. What's next—cobbler?"

No boot maker could produce a proper-fitting set of Hessians overnight, but ready-made items of passable quality were procured. After that, some hours were spent acquiring the other odds and ends a gentleman needs to groom himself and appear respectable in society. At the apothecary, Dean's hand hesitated over a bottle of Mrs. Brown's Cucumber Extract, which according to the label was guaranteed to reduce

freckles and other unsightly blemishes.

"Don't you dare," Rob said firmly, moving the bottle out of his reach. "You're gorgeous just as you are."

Dean felt himself color. "They never work, anyway. Believe me." He nodded at a small tin in Rob's hand. "What's that?"

His companion smiled brightly. "Hand cream. You never know when a nice slippery balm will come in handy." And when Dean looked puzzled, "Oh, blast. Figure it out. I'll be going straight on from Bath to visit one of my gentlemen friends."

The coach was loaded with parcels by the time they finished shopping, but it was a short drive to the hotel the tailor's son had recommended. By now, the rain had increased from a drizzle to a downpour. "I'll go ahead and procure rooms," Dean said, looking out into the falling rain. "Will you help Erich bring the parcels in?"

"Yes, of course," Rob replied.

Dean opened his umbrella and ran through the deluge, but the whipping wind ensured that he was thoroughly soaked by the time he made it up the stairs and entered the vestibule of the Hotel Grande. The establishment lived up to its name. The foyer, which opened into a gentleman's bar at the back, was tastefully furnished in the French style, with gilt-edged scrolling on the furniture and upholstery embroidered with delicate floral scenes. He could see himself reflected perfectly in the polished surface of the reception desk, and stood back a little, the better not to drip vulgarly on it.

"Beautiful place," Dean said to the receptionist, painfully aware of the figure he must make in his wet, ill-fitting clothing. Perhaps, despite the rain, it would have been better to have changed into something more presentable at the tailor's. "Do you have two rooms available, and lodging for my coachman?"

The man at the desk looked him up and down. "I'm sorry, sir," he said coolly. "We are unable to accommodate you at present. Perhaps the Pig and Whistle?"

Dean started to turn away, embarrassed, but then drew himself up to his not-inconsiderable height and did his best to look down his nose at the receptionist. "I am Dean Smith, Earl of Carwick," he said quietly. "I apologize for my disarray, but I was robbed on the road and my valises stolen. If there is any chance you can indulge me with a room, I assure you I will be much more appropriate to your dining room by dinner time. Are you absolutely certain you are full?"

The man blinked. "Allow me to consult with the manager, my lord. Perhaps something can be done."

While he was waiting, the door opened, and Erich and Rob hurried in with the first load of packages. At the same time, a gentleman of late middle years emerged from the bar, and with a start, Dean recognized him as the father of one of his Cambridge classmates. But the man didn't seem to notice him, instead making a beeline for the dripping figure of Rob.

"Rob? Good heavens, what brings you to Chippenham?"

"Mr. Parker!" Rob's face glowed as he pushed wet hair away from his forehead. "How wonderful to see you again, sir."

"Here, let me." Richard Parker's father pulled out a handkerchief and mopped Rob's face tenderly. "Ghastly weather we're having. I'm so looking forward to our trip to Italy next month, aren't you?"

Dean stopped breathing. Not a chance acquaintance, no friend of the family. Parker was one of Rob's patrons.

"My lord?" The receptionist was back. Dean turned back to the desk, while the laughter and easy conversation went on behind him. Rob didn't have the grace to act ashamed, but had leaned into

the older man's touch as he'd dried his face. Smiled and flirted, his manner promising pleasures to come. Which for Parker, were available anytime he wished, as long as his money was good.

The receptionist was still talking, apologizing, offering a room. "It's the only one we have, my lord, but it's spacious and comfortable, I assure you. Our servant quarters can easily accommodate your coachman, and..."

The voices behind him ceased, and the door opened again. Dean glanced over, to see Rob and Erich just disappearing, presumably to fetch another load of parcels. Mr. Parker stood, staring after Rob with a slight smile on his face. "I don't want to inconvenience you," Dean said abruptly. "Perhaps another hostelry can provide us with the two rooms I require."

"Oh, no, my lord!" The receptionist, who had almost certainly been set right by his manager about the inadvisability of refusing service to a peer of the realm, looked very alarmed at the thought of losing his aristocratic guest. "You don't want to go back out into that storm. I assure you, my lord, you'll be quite comfortable here. And with the fair going on, it's doubtful you'll find other lodging at all. Everyone's in town for the horse race tomorrow."

Better to sleep again in a barn, than under the same roof as one of Rob's gentlemen. Parker turned and noticed Dean for the first time, his brow creasing as if trying to place him. Dean's hand clenched into a fist on the reception desk.

The clerk, noticing the involuntary gesture, swallowed audibly. "Give me just a moment, my lord. Perhaps...perhaps we can persuade two of our guests to share, so as to free up a second chamber for your lordship. Please, just give me a moment."

Dean shook himself, ashamed of terrorizing the young man, inadvertent as it had been. "No. One room will be acceptable." Besides, with Rob beside him, he could at least be sure that Parker wasn't slipping into the young man's room for a taste of their upcoming trip abroad. Dean couldn't control a shudder, and the receptionist, mistaking it for a shiver caused by his wet clothes, blathered on about fires and hot drinks. He hardly heard, lost in his misery.

Rob's patrons were supposed to be old, not just older. Not hale, hearty men in their

fifties, still lusty enough to give him a serious working-over. Like Mr. Parker, who was approaching him now. "Dean Smith, isn't it? Or no, it's Lord Carwick now. Sorry to hear about your Uncle Silas."

"Uncle Parmenius," Dean corrected automatically. "Was it? Hard to keep all your uncles straight." Parker's eyes flicked to the jumble of parcels Rob and Erich had brought in, and his lips pursed in speculation. "Are you traveling with anyone?"

"No, I'm quite alone." Pray God that Rob, should he return before he could get rid of his friend's father, would have the sense not to acknowledge him in public.

"Well, then." Parker nodded toward the bar. "I'm here for the horse race tomorrow, with a young friend of mine. Perhaps you'll join our table for dinner?"

Parker's "young friend," who couldn't be above twenty, curved his cherub's mouth into a smile and waved.

Dean wrapped his arms around himself, his wet clothing chilling him. "Perhaps, if I can warm up sufficiently." An empty courtesy; Dean and Rob would dine in their room tonight, safe from curious eyes. He could trust the staff in an establishment like this to be silent about whom he was traveling with, and if they could get up and leave for Bath early enough in the morning, Parker need never know Dean had been in the company of a male prostitute. Especially one he was all too familiar with himself.

"I'll let you finish checking in, then." Parker slapped him on the back with a strong, meaty hand and took his leave, returning to his bronze-haired cupid at the bar.

Dean was signing his name and address in the hotel ledger when Rob and Erich returned with a second load of packages. From what he could remember, there were only a few valises left, bought to hold their clothing and gear. Empty, they wouldn't need two men to carry. "Do me a favor, Mr...?"

"Jennings, my lord. Anything, my lord."

"The dark-haired gentleman behind me is my companion, Mr. Black. Could you show him to our room now, and have someone bring our parcels up? Tell him I'm going to have a quick whisky before joining him, and would appreciate it if he'd have the room settled before I arrive." Dean wasn't yet used to acting the aristocrat, and hoped the receptionist wouldn't find anything untoward in his request.

He must have passed muster, because the man didn't bat an eye. "Gladly, my lord." The receptionist caught up with Rob at the door, as he and the coachman were venturing out for the bags, and probably to check for any odds and ends missed in their earlier trips. Dean watched out of the corner of his eye as Rob listened to the clerk's words, nodding and saying something to Erich before following the hotel employee up the elegantly curving staircase. Erich continued alone out into the rain. Satisfied that the endeavor had been accomplished without linking Rob and Erich to himself, Dean finished signing in, and, bracing himself, turned to the bar to kill some time before joining Rob in their room.

There was a blessed fire roaring in the bar, and soon Dean was toasting himself in

front of it, clothes steaming, a hot toddy on order from the barman. As he'd expected, Mr. Parker and his friend were quick to join him, and he and the former spent a few minutes chatting about the doings of Dean's school friend Richard. Parker's young companion, introduced merely as Cedric, didn't have the grace not to show his boredom, but fiddled annoyingly with an absurd intricately-carved walking stick.

Cedric's eyes narrowed as he beheld, out in the reception area, Erich's return with the valises. "Parks," he announced, interrupting Mr. Parker's soliloquy on his son, "I'm going to get that manservant to fetch my other bag from the coach."

Parker smiled tightly. "Don't be silly, Ceddie. You have all you need upstairs."

The little cupid's full bottom lip jutted out. "But I want to wear my green waistcoat for dinner tonight. I will tell him to fetch it, he's already wet." Without another word he jumped to his feet and stalked into the foyer.

The barman brought Dean's hot toddy, and he took it with a distracted murmur of thanks. In the foyer, Erich was shrugging and shaking his head in negation. Of course he was, he couldn't understand a word the boy was saying. Cedric's voice, now raised in anger, could be heard clear back in the bar. Dean's hand tightened on his glass. Why wouldn't the young idiot drop the issue? "I'm sure one of the hotel staff will be happy to fetch your Cedric's valise, Mr. Parker. Perhaps you might suggest it."

Parker lifted a brow. "Ceddie's right—why get some other poor bastard soaked to his skin when that one can just as easily do it?"

"He doesn't seem to want to." Dean prayed Parker's companion would get the message that Erich didn't understand him, or give up and ask at the desk for help. Mr. Parker had seen Erich and Rob together. If he had to intervene on his coachman's behalf, it would be clear that Dean was the third member of that same party.

"Rather insolent, don't you think?" huffed Parker, meaning Erich.

"Yes, he is," Dean replied, meaning Cedric.

Erich, still shaking his head doggedly, made the mistake of turning his back on his young harasser. Cedric, clearly furious at the imagined affront, raised his stick.

Dean bolted from his chair, hot drink scorching his leg as the glass tumbled to the ground. Cedric, startled at the rush of motion, paused long enough in mid-blow for Dean to reach him and snatch the walking stick from his hand. "Leave him alone. He doesn't speak English, don't you see that?"

Parker's voice sounded from behind him, soft and with a hint of smirk. "And how do you know that?"

Dean didn't turn around, putting a reassuring hand on Erich's shoulder. "He's my coachman," he said shortly. "Es ist in Ordnung, Erich. Geh dich abtrocknen."

Erich looked at Cedric for a moment, studying him coolly, and Dean remembered that the coachman had not so long ago been a soldier of renown. If he wanted to, he could snap the young fool's neck like a toothpick. Cedric, seeing something of this in Erich's eyes, took a step closer to Parker. Erich gave his head a contemptuous shake.

"Gute Nacht, Herr Graf," he said to Dean with a bow.

"Gute Nacht." Dean watched as his coachman strode off toward the servants' quarters, not looking at Parker and his companion. "And now, if you'll excuse me..."

Mr. Parker, a knowing smile curving his lips, put a hand on Dean's arm. "No, I insist I replace your drink. Cedric, go tell the barman to prepare a fresh toddy. Quickly, now!" The youth scurried off to do his bidding, and Dean flinched to think that the man might order Rob about in such a fashion. He might as well have the drink, if there were any chance he could convince Parker that his association with the prostitute was innocent. And if not, he wouldn't be any worse off, and at least would have had his hot drink. Numbly, he allowed Parker to guide him back to their table by the fire.

"So," Parker said when they were seated, "you are traveling with Rob Carter after all."

Allardyce, Black, Carter...did Rob work his way through the alphabet to select aliases? Why not choose one, and stick with it? Perhaps it made it more difficult for a patron to locate him again, should Rob decide he didn't wish to renew the acquaintance.

"Rob's just a friend," Dean said stiffly. Over at the bar, young Cedric was chatting desultorily with the bartender. "A...a fishing crony."

Parker smirked. "I've cast line in those waters myself. The man knows his way around a pole, doesn't he?"

Dean flushed hot. "Mr. Parker, I'm sure I don't—"

"Come now," Parker said with a pat on his hand, leaning forward with a conspiratorial grin. "No need to be coy with me. You know, I remember wondering about you, that time you came to visit Dickie. Imagine the fun we could have had, if I'd known for sure that you were a..."

Sodomite. Dean chanted Rob's list of epithets in his mind. Indorser, bum-fiddler. Madge cull. Molly.

"Tradesman like myself," Parker finished with a wink.

That one he hadn't heard, and his friend's father laughed at his blank look.

"You know, always going 'round to the back door."

"I don't think I'll stay for that drink after all." Dean started to rise, but was restrained by Parker's grasp on his forearm.

"No, no. Men like us should stick together. Good heavens, you're red in the face! I can't blame you for being uncomfortable, at your age I was still boxing the Jesuit to a book of engravings of classical statues. You're luckier than I was, I didn't even dream the like of Rob and Cedric existed." He nodded proudly toward Cedric, still at the bar waiting for Dean's toddy. "How do you like him?"

Dean sat back down with a thump, feeling helplessly out of his depth. "I'm sure he's very sweet."

"Oh, sweet indeed." Parker all but licked his lips. "I won him off Clair in a game of faro just last week."

"Clair?" Dean blinked.

"The Honorable Stephen Clair—you know, Lord St. Joseph's younger brother. You must have heard of him, he's rather a legend among our sort. Bold as brass about liking the boys, he is, always has some pretty little molly on his arm." Parker's eyes gleamed as he looked at his companion. "Few prettier than my Ceddie, though. Do you like him?"

Dean did not, but took refuge in a diplomatic truth. "He is indeed handsome."

Parker leaned over the table. "Then what say we have a little trade? Rob for Cedric. Just for tonight."

It was a long moment before Dean could even find breath. "Mr. Parker, tell me: are you much of a shot?"

The other man looked confused at the sudden change in topic. "I beg your pardon?"

"Because I am," Dean continued. "I'm accounted a very good hand with a pistol. Make such a suggestion again, and I'll be happy to give you a personal demonstration, tomorrow at dawn. Are we clear?"

Parker didn't take offense, just sat back in his chair and gave a rueful chuckle. "You've got it bad for the lad, don't you? Can't say I blame you, Rob is remarkable. I've offered him a fortune for exclusive rights, but so far he's turned me down. But every man has his price, and when we're in Italy next month I'm determined to find it. So enjoy him while you can, because soon," and his eyes glittered at the thought, "soon he'll be all mine."

Dean's gorge rose. "What of your Cedric?"

"Haven't thought." Parker shrugged. "If I decide to sell off his contract, I'll give you first crack. But there's no reason I can't keep both of 'em." He smiled at Cedric, who was returning, at last, with Dean's toddy, and another whisky for his master. "Yes, I believe I'll take them both to Italy this year. Just picture Rob and Ceddie together—now *there's* something to make your prick jump to attention."

Dean, who was having difficulty keeping his fists from jumping to attention instead, downed his hot toddy and ordered another. Getting drunk might on occasion lead to disastrous consequences, but sometimes, it was all one had.

Chapter Nineteen

Dean groaned. How was he supposed to sleep, when Ceddie was pounding rhythmically on his head with that damned walking stick? He opened one eye, and clamped it shut again instantly. The sun would have chosen that morning to assert itself over the past few days of endless rain. "Curtains," he rasped. "Close the bloody curtains."

Nothing happened. Dean peeked through his too-fair, good-for-nothing lashes and saw Rob, fully dressed for the day, seated at the dressing table in front of the window. He was writing a letter, slowly and painstakingly, in apparent ignorance of Dean's terrible suffering.

"Curtains?" It came out a plaintive mew.

Rob dipped his quill into the inkpot again, blotting it with care before continuing his missive. He did not turn toward the bed when he finally deigned to speak. "Do you know the chief problem with trying to drink your troubles away? In the morning, the troubles are still there *and* you've got a damnable headache. At the very least."

Dean raised his hands to cover his eyes, which felt so raw as to be bleeding from the pupils, and winced anew as his right hand discovered what seemed to be one hell of a black eye on that side

of his face. "I hope Parker looks worse," he mumbled.

"And why," Rob asked, "would you assume you got into a fight with Mr. Parker?"

"He said such things about you," Dean said through the protective cover of his hands.

"Yes, I know." Rob's voice held a certain tartness. "You repeated them to me, over and over."

"Hell and damnation." With enough of the bed's pillows piled behind him, Dean found he could assume a sitting position, although he could still only bear one eye to be open at a time. "I don't know why I stayed to listen to him."

"I was wondering that myself."

"For the same reason one picks at any scab, I suppose." Dean wished he hadn't said that out loud, but his mind and mouth had yet to find synchronization.

"Do you know," Rob said coolly, "I have my own scabs. But I don't get drunk and berate people, endlessly, for things I can't change. Didn't I tell you before I dislike it when someone calls me names?"

"Hell," Dean said again, mouth dropping open. "*You* hit me."

At last, Rob looked at him, a reluctant smile playing about his lips. "Perhaps I should have. But no, you did that yourself: stumbled and smacked your face into the bedpost. I was sure you'd put your eye out, from the way you carried on."

"Damn." Dean assayed a tentative stretch. "If it helps any, I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Rob was silent for a moment, and the scratching of his quill sounded

loud in the quiet, sunny room. "There's a headache powder and carafe of water on the bedside table."

Dean availed himself of these thoughtful amenities before attempting to speak again. "Are you writing to Parker?"

"No. We've been on the road longer than we first thought. I need to reschedule an appointment to next week instead. Why would I write to Parker?"

Dean blinked. "To cancel the trip to Italy. I told you—I don't remember, but I must have told you that he's bringing that confounded brat Cedric along, too. That he wants.. he wants..."

"To see us perform together for his benefit? Yes, I believe you did mention something about that. Thirty or forty times."

"And you're still going?"

Rob sighed. "Do you remember nothing of our conversation last night? Nothing at all?"

Tentatively, Dean rummaged into the corners of his mind, certain he wasn't going to like what he found. "Nothing," he admitted, coming up blank.

"Then I'll repeat myself, one more time. I do what I'm told. That is, after all, why they pay me."

"Anything." Dean did remember Parker's salacious boasts, and immediately wished he didn't. They had become more and more colorful as the drinking had progressed. And with sick fascination, Dean had been unable to tear himself away from the recitation of Rob's talents, and Parker's imaginative use of them. He shuddered now. "You'll do anything, won't you?"

"No, I won't. Everyone has limits."

"Everyone has a price. At least that's what Parker told me. He's going to find yours, and keep you exclusively for himself."

"Ah," Rob regarded his letter, reading the words carefully. He crossed something out, corrected it, and then signed his name. Or a name, anyway. "Now, there's something he can't have."

"Why not? Wouldn't it be better to sell yourself to just one man, than many?"

"No. There's a difference between being rented, and being owned." Rob folded his letter, beginning to address the outside. He wrote very slowly, forming each letter of the direction with painstaking care. "Next month, when I stand at the dock at Dover, I can begin counting down the days until I'm home again. Every night after that brings me closer to my freedom. And when the trip is over, I'm my own man, at least for a while."

"But he says he's offered you a fortune. If it meant—"

"No," Rob said, looking up from his task. "Damn it, do you think I want to be lost in a card game to some stranger, like Cedric? Parker and the others are forced to show some restraint, because they know I can walk away from each of them at any time. I

do this on my own terms, and until now it's allowed me to keep some dignity." He looked at Dean, his eyes dark, and tired, and hurt. "No one's ever managed to make me feel quite so much of a whore, as you."

A mere 'I'm sorry' didn't seem adequate to that. Dean stared at Rob, trying to think of something to say, and failing.

After a moment, Rob's face softened somewhat. "I'm going downstairs to see if the hotel will see to posting my letter. Can you eat anything?"

Dean put a hand to his mouth. "God, no."

"Well, if you're going to be sick—again—there's a fresh chamber pot on the other side of the bed." Rob pushed back his chair and stood, the sunlight glinting off his sleek black hair. "I'll order you some coffee, and check in with Erich, too."

"Do you have the dictionary?"

Rob patted his pocket. "Yes. There's water for a wash and shave, and I've laid out clothes for you. If you feel up to dressing yet, that

is. If not, no hurry. Mr. Au Sable said the clothes won't be ready until at least ten o'clock, and it's barely half nine now."

"You're very thoughtful," Dean said, contrite. "Especially considering I seemed to have harangued you half the night."

"Only half?" Rob's smile held a trace of warmth, though. "Do unto others, I suppose. And you did rescue me from the ghost-cat a few nights ago."

Dean had a sudden vision of himself on a white horse, sweeping down and effecting a true rescue, carrying Rob far away from the men like Parker who just wanted him for his body. In a different world, he could take Rob in his arms and tell him that. Three months ago, he could even have done it. Now, he had only the meagerest of offerings. "Will you let me write to my uncles, and see if I can find a place for you?"

Rob hesitated a moment, then nodded. "If you like. I don't think it will happen. Frankly, I don't think it should happen, since anyone who took me in would be risking his life's reputation. But if it suits you to try..."

"I will. And remember, Smiths are a stubborn and unsociable lot, and don't care much for the opinion of others. The chance is better than you think, *mein Blümchen*."

"Thank you." Rob nodded again. "I'll be back shortly."

Too late, Dean remembered that Rob had the German dictionary. Christ, he must still be half bosky. Still, even if Rob looked the endearment up, it didn't necessarily mean anything. It was something you might call your favorite pony. Scowling, Dean kicked back the covers. He was still fully dressed, which was worth something. At least he hadn't been drunk enough to throw himself at Rob last night.

The mirror over the dressing table showed him to be a right mess: bleary-eyed, banged-up, and wearing trousers so wrinkled they must have still been damp when he was put to bed. If there had ever been a reason for Rob to see anything in him, it

certainly wasn't apparent this morning. But his disgraceful performance last night had doubtlessly killed any lingering attraction the other man might have felt for him.

He did what he could with soap and razor and fresh clothing, and was feeling somewhat better by the time Rob returned with the coffee.

"Take your time," Rob said, collecting Dean's discarded clothes and stuffing them into one of the valises they'd purchased yesterday. "I'll bring these down to the coach, and wait for you there."

Dean lifted his head from his coffee cup. "Is Erich all right? I'm ashamed that I forgot to check in on him last night."

"He's fine." Rob looked around the room, his manner still cooler than usual. "I think I have everything. You didn't lose your ribbon?"

"Got it." Dean touched his wrist. "You're more thoughtful than I deserve. I am so sorry about—"

"Forget it. Please." Rob didn't smile. "It's a hazard of my trade, that it's bound to offend some people. I might wish for my own reasons that I didn't disgust you so, but we'll be in Bath today, and free of each other shortly."

"Rob, I—" He bit off another apology, an explanation of why he'd been so upset. If Rob didn't yet understand how he felt, wasn't it better to leave it at that? Then only one of them would be haunted by the idea that their attraction had been mutual, and wonder ceaselessly what might have been.

"What?"

"Never mind. I'll be down in a few minutes."

Dean emerged from the Hotel Grande shortly after, squinting into the bright morning sunshine. Chippenham's streets were quiet at this hour, the bustle of carts going to market long past. Rob and Erich were leaning against the coach, the former flipping pages in the German/English dictionary as he searched for a word. Today, they weren't laughing, and in fact looked uncommonly serious. Dean colored, wondering with faint alarm if they might be discussing his untoward behavior of the night before.

He began to descend the marble stairs from the hotel, pausing for a moment when his way was blocked by a woman in a grey dress, who had unaccountably stopped directly in front of him and stood, rigid, staring into the street. She held her hat in one hand, its long grey veil trailing onto the steps. It would be rude to push past her, so Dean waited politely for the woman to come to herself. After a moment, she resumed her progress, and he shrugged off her strange behavior. Probably going over a shopping list in her head, or some such womanish business.

"Danke," Dean heard Erich say as he approached the carriage. The coachman reached out a hand and patted Rob's shoulder awkwardly. "Mein Freund."

"What was that about?" Dean asked, climbing into the carriage and taking his customary seat.

Rob took a minute to raise the window shades and tie them into place. "There. Might as well enjoy the sun while it lasts. I was telling Erich about my own brother."

"Oh? I didn't know you had a brother."

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me."

Was that a rebuff, or an opening? Dean took a breath. "Will you tell me, too?"

"About my brother? Perhaps another time." Rob was quiet for a moment, staring out the window. They were crossing the bridge over the Avon now, heading back into the verdant, rain-washed countryside. "'This green and pleasant land...'" Rob murmured. "I'll tell you one story about my brother and me. If you want me to."

"Yes. I'd like that."

"Once, when my father was still alive, my brother and I got into a terrible fight. He was nine, I was seven. From what I remember, it was as if we were truly trying to kill each other. It took two footmen to separate us, and one of them was bitten so badly in the attempt that his hand was in a sling for a week. Mother lectured us for two hours on family duty and the bonds of brotherhood. Father didn't interrupt, just stood there while she gave her sermon and looked at us with eyes that left me shaking in my shoes. He waited until she was finished, then told us both, 'Come with me.'"

Rob continued to stare out the window while he talked, absorbed in the scenery or his own memories. Now and again he paused for a drink from one of the stoneware bottles of lemonade the Grande had provided for their journey. "We followed him, silent and afraid. Father, carrying a bundle wrapped in cloth, led us down to the seashore below our house. My brother and I had to scramble to keep up with him, over and around the slippery rocks. The knee was torn out of my trousers, and there was seaweed slime all over the front of my shirt by the time Father stopped. 'Come with me,' he said again.

"Clambering over an enormous set of boulders, we followed him into a cave. It was shallow and low-ceilinged, but it wasn't yet our final destination. There was a small hole in the back corner, so small that it took Father some time to wriggle through into the chamber beyond. Easier for us, of course, we were much smaller. The passage opened into a much larger cavern, with walls reaching up beyond our sight. It was very dim in there, although the light that came through from the hole was reflected upwards by the pool of seawater in the middle. Around it was enough space to walk, about four or five feet wide at the entrance, narrowing to barely two at the far wall.

"Father skirted the water to the back of the chamber and stood for a moment, studying the rough rock face of the cave wall. He stuffed the bundle he was carrying into the back of his shirt, then began climbing. A strong man, my father. He must have been three or four inches taller than I am now, and correspondingly broad. We stood there and watched, terrified that he would fall and dash his brains out in front of us. My brother and I moved close enough to each other so that our arms brushed, before remembering that we were bitter enemies and stepping apart.

"At least fifteen feet above our heads, Father paused and hung on one-handed while he fished in his shirt for his bundle. Retrieving it, he reached up and placed it carefully on a small outcropping even higher up. Then he very carefully made his way back down to us.

"I'm not your mother," he said to us. "Fight it out as you please. But you're staying here tonight, the two of you." Father pointed up at the bundle above. "There's your supper, and a candle and tinderbox, too. If you work together, you just might reach it."

"He came around back to the hole leading into the outer cave, and stooped to begin wriggling back through. "Oh, and if you had any notion of giving up and spending the night on the beach, know that in two hours, the tide will have blocked this entrance completely. I will wait outside long enough to keep you from emerging before then. There are several ledges in here which are both wide enough to hold you and high enough to stay dry throughout the night—I suggest you make an effort to find them. Good night."

"Of course we begged him not to leave us there, told him we were sure to fall and die if we tried to reach the bundle he'd set so impossibly high. He said the pool was plenty deep enough to break our fall, and that we'd best get started while there was any light left at all."

Rob stopped, still studying the landscape as the coach jolted along.

Dean cleared his throat. "He really left you there, alone in the cave?" "Yes."

"Well, what happened? Did you fall? Was either of you hurt?"

"We retrieved the bundle." Rob smiled out the window. "Father was right: there was no way either of us could get it alone, the foot- and handholds were too far apart. My brother had to boost me to each new hold, then actually scramble over me to reach another place to brace himself, so that he could boost me higher again. By the time we got our bundle, sloshed through the now knee-high water and clambered up to a dry ledge, we were almost too exhausted to eat."

"I bet by then, you'd forgotten what it was you'd been fighting over in the first place." Dean said.

"Not at all." Rob turned and looked him full in the face. "He called me names."

Dean felt himself flush to his brightest and deepest crimson. "There's a moral there, then?"

Rob shrugged. "If you wish to see one. But working together is always preferable to fighting."

"I did try to apologize," Dean muttered.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean it won't happen again. Will you please remember that I don't have to be helping you with this? And that what I've done, or will do in the future, is none of your business?"

"I remember. And you're right. I'm sorry. Truly."

A smile warmed Rob's features as he regarded Dean. "Oh, my. You are colorful

today. The purple around your eye would be bad enough with the ginger hair, but when your face is that shade of red as well—"

"If we're avoiding sore spots," Dean began indignantly, but Rob hushed him.

"You're adorable. That hasn't changed." He resumed looking out the window, and they rode in silence for several minutes.

"Do you keep in contact with your brother?" Dean asked, after a time.

"He's dead."

"I'm sorry."

Rob lifted a shoulder. "Long time ago. I thought telling Erich about it might—I don't know—help somehow." Dean leaned forward. "Did he say anything? About himself." "No. But I didn't think it would be that easy." "He did thank you."

"Yes, but he might have just thought I was being friendly," Rob said. "I was mindful of you saying not to push him to remember that he's English, so I didn't ask anything about himself. I merely told him the story as best I could, in the hopes that it might encourage him to think about his own brother again."

"How did your brother die?"

"My lord," Rob said coolly, "that's among the things that you really have no reason to know."

Dean flushed. Again. And reminded himself that it was better to keep distance between himself and Rob, anyway.

Chapter Twenty

The woman in grey stumbled into the first public house she came across. She had remembered to put her hat on, but hadn't bothered with the veil, which now hung askew down her back. "Gin," she said to the bar maid, a sullen, pasty-faced girl of about fourteen. Picking up the glass, she threw back the contents in one practiced swallow. "Again."

"Summat to eat wi' that?" The bar maid was eyeing her cautiously.

"He ignored me," the woman in grey said numbly. "Looked right through me."

"Ah," the young girl poured an extra-large measure. "Men." Her glum, knowing tone was at odds with her extreme youth. She turned awkwardly to reach for a plate of small meat pies, revealing a belly about five months swollen with child. "Here," the girl said, placing a pie on the counter. "On me."

The grey lady lifted her eyes from her glass, trying to remember the manners she had been working so hard to master. "I thank you kindly, miss."

"I'd a given him a right set-to, bastard ignoring me an' all. Fact is, I did just that. Fat lot o' good it done me." The bar maid set another glass on the counter, and helped herself to some gin as well.

"I couldn't speak to him. Not in front of the other man; not when he looked through me like that. All this time," the woman sipped at her gin, blue eyes focused elsewhere, "all this time, I assumed that when I found him again, and gave him the news, that everything would be good again. Wonderful, even. But he didn't so much as acknowledge my presence."

"Other man, did ye say?" The girl nodded wisely. "They gets right snooty around others, don't they? Sweet words when yer alone in the middle o' the night; won't give ye the time o' day when the sun's up." She leaned forward and patted her stomach. "'Specially if ye gots *news* for him."

"Oh." The woman blinked. "Not that kind of news. I—I came into some money, from an uncle who made a fortune in India. Enough so that his hoity-toity family might actually accept me now." She bit her lip, blinking back tears. "But they must have convinced him to deny me. Perhaps the annulment they were insisting on has even gone through."

"Annulment?" The barmaid's eyes grew round. "He's not yer sweetie, then?"

"No." The grey lady set her glass back on the counter with a thump, signaling for more. "He's my bleeding husband."

Chapter Twenty-One

Bath. Dean hadn't visited the charming little city since his father had come to take the waters during his last illness over ten years before. It hadn't changed much in the interval, still holding onto the grandeur bestowed upon it in the late years of the last century, when Beau Nash and his set had made it a fashionable resort. They skirted the large green mass of Claverton Down and came into the city from Bathwick, turning onto Great Pulteney Street to cross the bridge over the River Avon.

As usual when approaching a new town, Rob couldn't keep himself completely inside the carriage, hanging out the window to better see the honey-colored arches of the Pulteney Bridge. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he said, pulling himself back inside the coach. "I'd read that it was inspired by the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, but this is actually prettier. Smaller, too, of course—the Avon has nothing on the Arno, I'm afraid."

"Since you've never been to Bath before..." Dean leaned out the window himself, shouting directions to the coachman. Retaking his seat, he said, "I told Erich to drive through town so that you can see the Circus and the Royal Crescent. People who like architecture go wild for that sort of thing." Rob rested his arms on the window sill, absorbing the passing townscape. "What sort of thing?"

"Classical." Dean frowned, searching his memory. "Palladian, I think. Lots of tall windows framed by columns. Even I think it's nice."

Dean wasn't surprised that Rob was able to tell him more once he saw the Circus, a circle made of three curved sections of adjoined houses, all built of the same soft gold limestone as the Pulteney Bridge. "It's wonderful, isn't it?" Rob said. "Look— did you notice there's a different type of column on each floor?" He pointed. "Doric, Ionic, Corinthian up on top. Same as the Colosseum in Rome."

The Royal Crescent, just up Brock Street, was similar to one of the curves making up the Circus, only on a much larger scale. "Same architect?" Rob guessed. "They might go together—the Crescent being the moon to the Circus's sun."

Dean shrugged. "I'm not sure. Much of the city is in a similar style, though."

"Thank you for showing me. Where will we stay?"

"My Uncle Phineas keeps a set of rooms on Stall Street, not far from where we came into town. As long as he isn't in residence, anyone else in the family is free to make use of them. It's just a bedchamber and sitting room, but convenient to the Pump Room and the baths."

"Fancy," Rob said, shaking his head. "The same hot springs the Romans bathed in."

"And drank," Dean reminded him. "While we're here, you'll have to have your three glasses a day of Bath water." He grinned. "Although anyone who can choke down three glasses of the stuff is hearty enough so that they don't need it."

Uncle Phineas's rooms were empty, and the landlady, upon receipt of the proper family password (not to mention a sovereign for her troubles) soon gave them the key.

"I don't do meals for lodgers," Mrs. Waddhams said, huffing her way up the stairs before them. "But if you come downstairs to my parlor after eight o'clock in the morning, I can give you coffee and rolls. Just nine-pence each, and that's a bargain, considering what the tea shops on the High Street will charge you. There's a stable for your rig and horses one block up on Westgate Street—if there's no room for your coachie there, he can share with my handyman in the attic. And there'll be no fancy girls up here, understand?" She eyed them with pursed lips. "Couple of young bucks like yourselves."

"I assure you, Madam," Rob said with a straight face, "we'll bring no women back." "Hmph." Mrs. Waddhams was obviously unconvinced. "If you're late coming in, be mindful of the other lodgers and keep yourselves quiet. Understand?"

Dean sent Erich to settle the horses, then he and Rob unpacked their things as best they could in the cramped bedroom, hanging their new clothes in the wardrobe and setting toiletries out on the tiny dressing table. There was no help for it, they would have to share the only bed, as the furniture in the sitting room didn't extend to a sofa. Rob, who had been making the bed with fresh linens provided by the landlady, finished with a final plumping of the pillows. "Do you have a plan?"

"Since we're so close by, we should start with the Pump Room. Everyone in Bath makes an appearance there at least once a day, and early afternoon is one of the busiest times, while the band is playing." Dean took off his jacket and began unbuttoning the shirt he'd traveled in. "We might find Minerva there at once, and I could be re-engaged by dinner."

"I wish you all the happiness in the world," Rob said quietly. "May Miss Lewis be exactly what you need."

Dean concentrated on his buttons. "Amen to that."

He and Rob finished dressing in proper afternoon-wear, Rob skillfully arranging their cravats into a simple but elegant style. "This must have a name," Dean said, touching the starched folds of white at his neck. "But I'm damned if I know it."

"It's called the 'Mathematical.'" Rob brushed a bit of lint from Dean's lapel. "Look at you—you look quite respectable."

Dean stooped to see as much of himself as he could in the inadequate mirror. "Well, at least my clothes do."

"You'd be very handsome, without the black eye," Rob said with amusement. "Just tell the ladies you got it sparring with Gentleman Jackson instead of a bedpost, and they'll be all over you."

"Hmph." Dean scowled at his reflection. Mutton dressed as a baron of beef was still just as unappealing underneath.

"Honestly," Rob said, putting a hand on his shoulder, "you do dress up nicely."

As did Rob, who looked especially gorgeous in proper clothing, carrying himself with an easy elegance that seemed to bolster his claim to good breeding. And yet... "I preferred you in your shirtsleeves, the day we caught that blasted fish." Before the other man could read anything into his words, Dean continued quickly. "None of your old men will be here for the waters, will they?"

"I don't know," Rob said. "I wouldn't expect so, but I didn't imagine we'd meet anyone I knew on the road. I'm truly sorry we did, and that it embarrassed you so. If you like, we can split up when we reach the Pump Room, so that no one realizes we're traveling together."

"Perhaps that's for the best," Dean said, nodding. You'll signal me if you see the man who hired you to ruin me?" Anticipation made his breathing tight. It would be so satisfying to confront an actual, verifiable enemy.

"I'll consider it, if you promise not to make a scene right there and then."

"I promise."

Rob gave a tight smile. "Then let's go."

Dean stood just inside the doorway to the Pump Room, looking around in dismay. More than sixty feet long and forty-five across, and every inch filled with laughing, chattering, gaily-clad people. When he'd been here with his father, the elegant, colonnaded room had been much less crowded. But the Season had ended in London, and the *ton* had few choices this time of year: retire to their country estates for grouse hunting, or recuperate from the demands of the social whirl at one of the spas. Brighton, in higher fashion these days, was probably even more crowded. Dean made a few aimless circuits around the room before realizing that everyone else was circling it, too. He'd have better luck observing the throng if he stayed in one place and let them pass.

Which was, Dean noted, exactly what his companion was doing. Rob had taken a post at the south end of the room near the pump itself, a marble vase from which the water issued, and was standing there sipping a glass of the waters while watching the passersby. An older man looked up from filling his own glass from the fountain, peering at Rob intently. Dean watched with dismay as the man smiled and approached Rob.

"Lord Carwick, isn't it?"

A man, vaguely familiar, had stopped to speak to him. Dean placed the pudgy young face with difficulty. "You're Minerva's cousin, aren't you? How are things at school, Mr. Lincoln?" He smiled and nodded as the other man responded, not failing to keep an eye on Rob and his gentleman on the other side of the Pump Room. Were the prostitute's patrons everywhere? Only thirteen, Rob had claimed. And yet Dean was supposed to believe the man had never lied to him. The two spoke for a long moment before the elder took his leave, shaking Rob's hand warmly.

Dean tried to pay attention to his own conversation. "Are you in Bath for long?"

Lincoln was saying.

"A few days, I suppose. Minerva's still in town, isn't she?" Across the room, Rob looked smaller when the elderly man was gone, pulled into himself somehow.

"Well—yes, she is. Until the end of the week, anyway. Then she and her..."

Dean didn't care where Minerva and her aunt were going next. Rob had found and locked eyes with him, and Dean felt a tangible pull in his direction. What's wrong, Rob? What did he say to hurt you so?

"I'm sorry, excuse me. If you see Minerva, tell her I'll call on her tomorrow." He found himself crossing the room, heedless of his earlier resolution to keep separate from Rob in public. Dean managed to restrain himself from pushing roughly through the crowd to get to his target. Just. The closer he got, the less he liked the look on Rob's face. At last he reached the pump. "Rob. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Rob smiled, unconvincingly. "Have you found Miss Lewis?"

"No. She's not here, but she is still in Bath." Dean put his hand on the other man's arm. It shook beneath his touch. "Do you want to leave?"

"Yes, please."

"Rob, what is it? Was that one of your gentlemen?"

"Oh. No. Something much less expected, actually. It turns out..." Rob sipped from his glass. "God, this stuff is dreadful. Here's hoping it really has some health to it." He looked at Dean. "It turns out I resemble my father more than I thought. The man who spoke to me was a good friend of his."

"He recognized you as a member of your family?"

"Yes." Rob's laugh was tremulous. "Somehow, being known for who I am is worse than being known for what I am, if that makes sense. If anyone ever put the two together, it would be a terrible embarrassment for my family. Mortifying. I couldn't stand that."

"Come on," Dean said gently. "Let's go."

Rob shook his head. "You should stay: the band won't stop playing for almost an hour. If Miss Lewis should come in, you'll miss her."

"We'll go to her aunt's house tomorrow. What's another half day?" He took Rob's forearm and guided him from the Pump Room. What could he do to make Rob feel better? Given their location, there was one obvious possibility. "Let's go to the baths. A good long soak is just what you need."

It did seem to help, Dean thought shortly later, sitting next to Rob in the hot room of the New Private Baths. Dressed in coarse canvas smocks and trousers supplied by an attendant, they wallowed up to their necks in steaming water. The baths were all but deserted at this time of day, several of the larger establishments already having closed after the morning rush of business. Dean welcomed the privacy as much as the bone-penetrating heat. After so many days spent jostling around his uncle's old coach, the water was an unimagined pleasure, melting away the physical aches of the journey.

Rob's eyes were closed, and he looked on the verge of liquefying himself. "Better?" Dean asked.

"Almost perfect." One of Rob's hands was holding onto one of the brass rings set into the wall of the bath, the other tugged at the trousers of his bathing costume. "Apart from a bit of chafing, but it's a small price to pay."

"I'm glad," Dean said. "I mean, that you're feeling better."

Rob opened his eyes. "Thank you, Dean. I think, under other circumstances, we could have been good friends." Or more. Tactful as always, that part was left unsaid, by all but the wistful expression on his face.

Dean swallowed at a lump in his throat. "You're so easy around people, so pleasant to be with. You must have quite a circle of friends back in Hereford."

"Well, no." Rob made a business of readjusting his canvas smock. "I don't get close to people. Who would care to know someone like me?"

"I'm sorry," Dean whispered. "But it's beneath you, Rob. You know that. When I think of you selling yourself to men like Parker, I get so—so angry."

"Angry? Or perhaps jealous?" Rob's steady gaze seemed to challenge him to speak freely for once, admit his feelings.

Dean shook his head. "It doesn't matter how I feel—it's still wrong."

His friend smiled at him gently. "It matters to me. But don't fret. In a few years, I can put this all behind me."

"What will you do then? Once you've retired."

The water swirled as Rob resettled himself on the bench. "Buy a little house somewhere in the country. The Lake District, maybe, or the seashore. Learn how to play the piano. Read, and fish." His smile picked up some of its customary sparkle. "Go ghost-hunting when I feel like it."

Dean felt himself smile in return. "I enjoyed that, Rob. I've enjoyed this whole trip, really. Oh, hell, not all of it—we've had some bad patches, but..." He knew how that sentence should conclude. Would it be so wrong to hint at what Rob wanted to hear, here at the end? Would it hurt Rob if he did so? It was confusing, this instinct to shield and protect a fully-grown man who had shown himself more than capable of meeting whatever life threw at him. Dean continued cautiously. "We've had some bad patches, but even then... I was with you."

"I know," Rob said. "Me, too."

Dean looked away first. Minerva waited, and a long future without the person he would have chosen, above all others, to spend it with. The least he could do was make their remaining few hours together as pleasant as possible. "Is there anything you'd like to do this evening? Some entertainment, I mean."

Rob considered. "I saw a notice for a concert at the Upper Rooms. Do you like Mozart?"

"Very much."

"Didn't you say you'd met Miss Lewis at a concert?" Rob asked. "Perhaps if you're lucky, she'll be there tonight."

And that, Dean thought, depended very much on one's definition of "luck."

Minerva did not appear to be at the concert, but the Upper Assembly Rooms were so packed with London's summer refugees that it would have been difficult to pick any one person out from the crowd. The string quartet was one he had seen perform several times in London, the two violinists especially remarkable. Tonight, they were to play a Mozart quartet in B flat.

Rob studied the handbill outside the Assembly Rooms before they went in. "Why is this piece called 'The Hunt'?"

"You'll understand once it starts." Dean set a gloved hand on the arm of Rob's new tailed evening jacket. "Come on. If we don't claim seats quickly, we'll have to stand."

Once the concert began, Rob closed his eyes and relaxed, visibly opening himself to the music. Dean envied that ability: he could not himself escape his early training, which forced him to keep an appraising eye on the musicians as they played. They performed admirably tonight, he thought, but his attention wandered despite the quality of the music.

They walked back to their lodgings after the concert. The third time Dean had to reach out quickly to steady Rob when the latter stumbled over an uneven patch of paving on Broad Street, he laughed and said, "Rob—I'd swear you were drunk, if I didn't know better. Watch your feet, will you? Bath's very proud of these gas lights, so stop ignoring their illumination."

"Sorry." Dean's companion gave a vehement shake of his head, as if to clear it, and his high-crowned beaver hat tumbled neatly to the street.

Dean stooped to retrieve it. "Here. Seriously: are you feeling all right?"

Rob gestured to a low brick wall running in front of the Grammar School. "Do you mind if we sit for a moment? It's a gorgeous night." After they sat, Rob twirled his hat in his hands. "Can you play music like that?"

"Like a professional?" Dean considered. "Yes, and no. I'm proficient enough with the notes, but I never had the passion that sets a brilliant player apart. I'm not up to the level of the quartet tonight, but I suppose I could find employment in a provincial orchestra. Or even one of the London music halls, if it weren't top drawer."

"And yet you hate playing." Rob put up a reflexive hand to smooth his hair, disordered by his hat's tumble. "If I could create sounds like what we just heard..." He lifted his face to the gibbous moon.

Dean cleared his throat. "My father..."

"Yes, I gathered. He was a harsh man, and he forced you to play."

"He.. .Father came to music late, since my grandfather wouldn't let him pursue it. He always thought that if he'd only had an earlier start, he could have been great."

Rob nodded. "So he tried to make you into what he could have been. And all you

wanted to do was fish."

His words sounded bitter, and Dean couldn't help stiffening in reaction. "Was that reason enough to beat me when I made mistakes? Refuse to let me stop until my bladder hurt so badly I cried?" And worse, but he would never admit that, would never put into words the anguish and humiliation he'd felt when the warm gush of urine could not be held back any longer. Gall rose in Dean's throat. "Would you do that to a child?"

"No." Rob looked at him. "But if it happened to me, I'd hate the man, not the music."

"I don't hate the music. I need the music, Rob, I told you—"

"But you won't play it. Every day, you could bring those sounds forth, could create them for yourself or anyone close to you."

"I've never told anyone what I just told you," Dean said tartly, rising from the bench. "Thank you very much for your sympathy."

Rob stood up, replacing his hat. "Don't you see? You're not spiting your father, you're depriving yourself. It's all of a piece with the way you feel about your looks, isn't it? You get stuck on an idea, and can't get past it."

"You're a fine one to talk." A well-dressed couple strolled by, the lady glancing over in interest at his raised tones, and Dean fought to control his voice. "Easier to let your gentlemen use you than search for an employer who would value you for your gifts, not your one disability."

"Ah. But at least my disability is real." Rob took a long breath. "Please. I don't want to fight with you tonight."

Dean felt his anger drain away into the moonlit night. "I don't want to fight with you, either."

"Good." Rob put his hand on Dean's shoulder. "My apologies if I've hurt you. Let's make a bargain, shall we? If you try to let go of what your parents did to you, I'll try to forgive God for what He did to me."

Dean couldn't think of anything to say to that, except, "I'm sorry."

They resumed walking, and had barely turned from Cheap Street onto Stall when a figure detached itself from the shadows near the Pump Room and approached them. It was a woman, dressed in a grey traveling dress with a matching veil. "Pardon me, my lord," she said, curtsying to Dean. "I must speak with you."

He exchanged a glance of confusion with Rob. "Haven't I seen you somewhere? This morning. Was that you on the steps in Chippenham?"

Rob folded his arms. "You were in Tewkesbury, too. Have you been following us?"

"I have," she said simply. "But this isn't something we can discuss on the street. May I come up to your rooms?"

"We're not to bring women up there," Dean said automatically. He couldn't think of

what this stranger might have to speak to him about, and after this latest argument with Rob, was certain it could wait until morning.

"Please, my lord." The woman sounded near tears. "I know it's presumptuous to approach you, but I don't know what else to do."

"Perhaps we could start by who you are, and what your business is," Rob suggested gently.

She took a breath. "My name is Mrs. Westport. The Honorable James Westport is my husband."

Dean shook his head slowly. "I don't know any James Westport. I don't know any Westports at all."

The woman stared at him. "You most certainly do. I don't know why—perhaps he's still in hiding from his family—but he's been pretending to be your coachman."

Rob's mouth dropped open. "Jim. She means—"

Dean's followed suit. "Erich. You're Erich's wife?"

Rob shared a look of surprise with him. "I thought you said Erich didn't have any family?"

"As far as I knew, he didn't." Dean said with a shrug. "Jacob was under the impression that Erich's brother was his only family."

"Erich?" The woman in grey looked from one man to the other. "Who in God's name is Erich?"

Rob laid a hand on her arm. "You'd best come upstairs. This is going to take a while to explain." He whipped off his long black cloak and settled it over her shoulders, arranging the hood low over her face. In the shadowy street, with the grey veil beneath, she might have been a faceless phantom, a Black Lady or Hooded Monk. Dean smiled against his will. There had been a Grey Lady haunting the inn in Malmesbury, hadn't there? He'd never imagined they'd be smuggling one of them upstairs. "Now, put your own hood up," Rob instructed Dean. "I'll stay out here for a moment, while you go on up with Mrs. Westport. With luck, the dragon will think she's me."

Luck was with them, for the landlady did not emerge, neither when Dean and his charge ascended the stairs, nor when Rob followed stealthily a few minutes later. In the cozy sitting room, the woman removed her hat and veil, revealing a pleasant face of something less than thirty years. Her light brown hair, blue eyes and chiseled cheekbones would have made her quite pretty, had she not been saddled with an air of such bitter defeat. Napoleon, surveying the aftermath of Waterloo, could not have looked worse.

Rob poured them each a glass of port from a bottle Uncle Phineas kept stowed in the bookcase. "Now," he said, "shall we begin?"

The explanations on both sides took some time. First, Mrs. Westport, whose first name was Charlotte, briefly described her James's background. He and his twin

brother Michael had been the youngest scions of the Earl and Countess of Dannemora...

"Dannemora?" interrupted Dean. "Jim's Irish?"

Charlotte blinked at him. "Of course. Can't you tell from his speech?"

"We'll get to that," Rob murmured. "Please, go on."

Charlotte had met James when he was studying at Oxford, where her mother ran a bakeshop much frequented by the students. He had been taken with her, but Charlotte was too respectable a young woman to yield to him without the benefit of clergy. Impulsively, Jim had secured a special license, and they were married, taking rooms in Oxford so that he could continue his studies. They'd been surprisingly happy, the only cloud on the horizon the prospect of breaking the news to the Earl and Countess.

"Michael finally did it," Charlotte told them. "He was always the stronger of the two of them, looking out for Jim." She paused for a swallow of port. "A few weeks later, he came barreling back into town, his horse half-dead beneath him. Michael said they had to leave at once, that his father was sending a couple of toughs to abduct Jim and bring him back home by force. They were going to annul our marriage, and make him wed some knock-kneed cousin instead." Charlotte's hand tightened on the glass. "So Jim and Michael ran away. The only place they could think to go, to get Jim out of his father's reach, was into the Army. It was dreadful, saying goodbye, but what else could we do?"

"I see," Dean said, blowing out a breath. "Did the Army not contact you when Jim was wounded?"

"Wounded? I didn't even know he had been." She shook her head. "No. He must not have dared put my name on the enlistment papers, and the two of them doubtless used a false last name as well, so that their father couldn't trace them. For the first year, Jim sent letters occasionally, through an acquaintance at Oxford. He couldn't even risk sending them to me directly. After that, nothing. For over two years, nothing. I thought he must be dead, he and Michael both, because his brother would have written to me if anything happened to Jim alone." Her face reflected the bleakness of these long, uncertain months.

Rob fiddled with his glass, seeming subdued by the story. "How did you find out Jim was still alive?"

"My cousin Christine, who'd stood up for me at our wedding, saw him driving your coach in Worcester, my lord. She wrote me at once, but by the time I got to Carwick, the charwoman there said you'd gone off on a journey with a friend. I've been following you ever since, trying to catch up." Charlotte raised tired blue eyes to Dean. "Now, can you please tell me why Jim won't even acknowledge my very existence?"

Dean looked at Rob. "You're so much better with stories. Will you tell her?"

It did sound much better, coming from Rob, who painted the tragic picture in indelible colors. Jim and Michael, and their Hessian friend Erich, facing death together

on a battlefield in a land foreign to them all. The loss of the real Erich, followed so closely by Michael's terrible, messy end.

Charlotte raised a horrified hand to her mouth on hearing of the grapeshot canister that had taken her brother-in-law's life. "Poor Jim. Oh, my poor Jim. Michael was his protector, half of him. He must have been insane with grief."

Rob and Dean exchanged a sober look. "In a way," the former said gently. "Mrs. Westport, Jim couldn't face losing Michael that way. He still can't face it." Succinctly, Rob described the transformation from Jim into Erich. "He's no raving lunatic. As Erich, he gets on quite well. But he didn't recognize you this morning because Erich has never met you."

"And I had no idea, I swear," Dean put in. "His captain, my friend Jacob Franklin, knew him only as Jim Piatt, and thought there was no other family."

A silent tear slid down Charlotte's cheek. "What am I to do? I've come into a legacy, so I have the means to care for him, but he'd have no reason to go off with a complete stranger. And suppose his family gets wind that he's alive? They'll take him back home to Ireland, and if what you say is true, the shock could break his mind completely."

Dean leaned forward. "Come to Carwick, Mrs. Westport. Next month, after I'm married—or better yet, right away, if you can bring your mother or cousin to make it respectable. If you're there, every day, in time Jim will come back to himself, I'm sure."

Charlotte looked hopeful. "Your fiancée won't object?"

"Of course not." Dean frowned. "Maybe not. Oh, dash it, I'll just explain it to her, best as I can. I'll have to find her first, though." He looked at the clock. "We'll speak again tomorrow. Do you have lodgings in Bath?"

"Yes, my lord." Charlotte rose. "I have a room at the Essex, on Milsom Street."

Dean stood as well. "I'll walk you over there, and check in on Erich—Jim—on the way back. Rob, will you come?"

"Yes, of course."

The three of them had barely reached the foot of the stairs when Mrs. Waddhams's door flew open with a crash. "What did I say?" she hissed, hands on hips. "None of your bits of muslin in my house! Your uncle will hear about this, and if I don't cancel his lease on the spot, he'll be—"

"This is my sister," Dean said through gritted teeth. "And my uncle will hear from me what an interfering and filthy-minded old hag you are. If he doesn't cancel the lease on the spot and—"

"Sister?" The landlady snorted in derision, but only halfheartedly, doubtless remembering that Uncle Phineas paid his reckoning promptly and without demur. "Very well. This time perhaps I'll let it go. But we'll have no repeats while you're here."

"None," Rob averred. "Good night, Mrs. Waddhams."

They saw Erich's wife to her lodgings, then stopped by the stable on Westgate to visit the coachman himself. As in many establishments of this kind, there were rooms available to be shared by the grooms and coachmen who looked after their employers' horses.

Dean saw that Erich was comfortably established, trying to picture him the son of an aristocratic house, like himself. More so, since Dean had grown up merely the nephew of an earl, not the son of one. "Alles ist gut?"

"Ja, Herr Graf. Alles ist gut."

Dean hesitated, putting out his hand to Rob, who immediately divined his need and handed over the English/German dictionary he'd been in custody of for the past few days. "Diese Frau in Grau, Erich, heute morgen in Chippenham."

Erich tilted his head. "Ja?"

"Kennst du sie?"

Erich shook his head: no, he hadn't known her.

Dean sighed. "Maybe you will." He didn't need to look in the book to translate that. Pity his new language skill had so little other practical application. "Vielleicht kommt das noch."

"Ja, Herr Graf. Vielleicht."

He and Rob walked in silence back to their rooms. Mrs. Waddhams's door opened a crack when they passed, then closed with a soft click once she'd verified that they did not have a whole muslin company in tow. Just one prostitute, Mrs. W., Dean thought to himself. If you don't count me selling myself to the Lewises.

Dean was careful not to look at Rob while they undressed and got into their new nightshirts. Sharing a bed with him was going to be hard enough, without tempting himself with glimpses of Rob's naked flesh. When he turned around, his companion was safely covered to the knee with white cotton and sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at him.

"You know," Rob said. "You're a remarkable man."

"Hardly that."

"You are. You took in Erich despite his difficulties. You're trying to place me with one of your uncles, so that I don't have to..." He waved a hand. "And now, you're taking in Erich's wife as well, even though it's bound to cause trouble with your fiancée."

"I have to," Dean said. "It's the right thing to do."

"It doesn't seem remarkable to you? To care what becomes of damaged soldiers, unclaimed wives, and," a strong shoulder lifted and fell, "fallen men?"

"I make mistakes," Dean said, looking directly at Rob. "Terrible ones. If anything else I do helps to make up for them, it's a mere droplet in the ocean, I assure you."

"May I tell you one last story?" Rob asked. "About me."

"Yes. I'd like that." Dean sat on the chair in front of the dressing table, not trusting himself to sit next to Rob on the bed.

"Once upon a time," Rob began, his voice uncharacteristically halting, "once upon a time there was a young boy. He was different from the other children, and they made fun of him."

Dean nodded sympathy. He certainly knew what that was like.

"Even his mother, who was flawed in the same way, was driven to say things she shouldn't, and that hurt even more."

Dean hadn't realized they'd shared that, too. But for the first time he thought about how hard it must be, to see in one's offspring the same trait one hates in oneself. "Go on," he said, hurting for Rob.

Hurting for all four of them: sons and mothers alike.

"The boy found it difficult," Rob said, "getting close to people, and as he grew he made few friends. Still, he dreamed that one day, someone would see beyond what was wrong with him." He paused, chest expanding in a deep, painful breath. "And beyond the superficial things that made others consider him a kind of trophy."

It began to occur to Dean, uncomfortably, that the story thus far could be about either of them. The superficial things: Rob's beauty, or Dean's title? But despite the similarities, this story was supposed to be about Rob.

"But you see, along the way, this boy—this man, now—was forced by financial circumstances to make a choice. He did what he felt he had to do, even though it might put what he truly wanted out of reach forever."

Rob paused for a moment, and again Dean slotted in the details for both of them: the one, turning to prostitution; the other, to a betrothal with a woman he barely knew. He himself had told Rob that no one would get romantically involved with a man who had sold his body. Dean regretted those words now, regretted even more the marriage vows that would soon serve as the final barrier between them.

"And then," Rob continued, "he did meet the man he wanted, wanted with all his heart. A man who didn't just ignore his flaw, but tried to make him feel better about it. Feel better about himself. No one else had ever done that before. But perhaps none of his other acquaintances so fully understood what it was like to be different, and scorned."

"So." Dean cleared his throat, shifting on his chair. "What did he do?"

Rob shrugged. "What could he do? He had laid out his course, and there was nothing to do but follow it."

Dean shook his head. "So much of it familiar. Tell me—which of us did you truly mean your story to be about?"

Rob looked at him keenly. "Can't you tell?"

"No."

"Well," Rob said, lips quivering in an incipient smile. "That's something, I

suppose."

Too late, Dean realized what he'd revealed: the man he wanted with all his heart. He flushed, groping for words.

"I'll miss you," Rob said simply. "Tomorrow, you'll find Miss Lewis, and whatever happens, we'll likely never see each other again. I just wanted you to know that I think you're quite wonderful, and I'll miss you."

Dean stared at him helplessly, with nothing left to hide. Allowing himself to drink in Rob's beauty, fixing each feature in his memory against the lifetime of cold nights to come. Rob's sleek black hair, rarely ever out of place. Those warm, dark eyes. The lips that so easily curled into a merry smile, that felt so shockingly right on his own. The intangibles, he knew, would haunt him even more: the quick sense of humor, lively curiosity and bright intelligence that were as much a part of Rob as his broad shoulders and long-fingered hands.

But, as Rob had said, their course was set.

"We'd best get some sleep," he said at last, peeling back the covers and sliding within. Rob had blown out the candle and curled on his side away from him, carefully keeping to his half of the bed, when Dean admitted at last, "I'll miss you, too."

"Good night, *mein Blümchen*" Rob said softly in the dark room.

Dean smiled. Rob had looked it up. "Gute Nacht, mein Traumprinz." Let him figure that one out, Dean thought, staring into the night. Rob was right: assuming he located Minerva tomorrow, their time together was over. His heart ached, thinking of what lay ahead for Rob, the bastards like Parker and his foul little Ceddie. Even if he wrote the plea to his uncles and sent the Quarterly off tomorrow, he wouldn't receive a reply in time to save Rob from the scheduled trip to Italy. No time before the wedding next month to visit them all in turn, and make his case in person. Bugger the Quarterly: he would write them each individual letters and post them at once, begging for a response posthaste and including pre-franked sheets of paper for their replies. Was there anything, anything else he could do for Rob?

Nothing but what Rob had asked of him, and he'd refused: *// you can't be in my future, I'd at least want you in my past*. Being Rob, he wouldn't ask again, even if he also lay aching in the darkness. Dean squeezed his eyes shut tight. For someone Rob credited with such compassion, he'd certainly thought mostly of himself lately. Rob had never shared passion with someone he desired for himself. For that matter, Dean realized, neither had he. The drunken, one-sided encounter in the barn hardly counted. Was it right to deny them both such sweetness, on the grounds that it would add to the pain of parting? But nothing, it seemed, was going to spare him that. Not now, when Rob had gravitated to the very center of his world.

Dean shifted in bed, rolling to face Rob's back. How do you tell someone that you were wrong, that you've changed your mind? Rob was the one who was good with words, and with all his might Dean wished he had even a smidgen of that talent.

He reached out and placed his hand, palm flat, in the center of

Rob's back. "Rob," Dean whispered. Beneath his fingers, he could feel muscles stiffen, and then the bed creaked as the other man rolled slowly to face him. And waited.

"I won't hurt you." The words tumbled out without thought, and Dean could have kicked himself. Such a stupid thing to come up with, the sort of thing you'd say to a virgin, not a man with Rob's experience. But perhaps it was the right thing to say after all, because with a small sound Rob was wrapped around him, lips seeking and finding his in the darkness. Their bodies strained against each other, chest against chest, thigh against thigh, cock against cock. Nightshirts were first pushed impatiently out of the way and then shed completely. Now naked in Rob's arms, Dean's world was reduced to a series of sensory flashes that he tried to grab onto as they passed, for further examination later. Rob's skin was warm and supple, the hair on his body as soft and sleek as that on his head. He smelled of soap and a sweet, natural musk that was all his own. His muscles were hard, all of him tense with excitement, yet his lips—oh, God, Rob's lips—were gentle everywhere they touched: Dean's face, his neck, his collarbone. They searched lower, and with a cry Dean found out why men have nipples. He couldn't stand it. He tugged on Rob's head, bringing their mouths back together, trying to express without words how badly he needed completion, that they had to join or he would surely die.

Rob understood. "A moment," he breathed, and he left the bed. Dean was cold and bereft without him, but soon the covers lifted again, and once again Rob was kissing him. There was something cold in one of the other man's hands, and Dean realized that Rob had fetched the hand cream he'd purchased at the apothecary in Chippenham. *You never know when a nice slippery balm will come in handy.* Dean shivered, wondering if Rob realized what he wanted, even though until just now Dean himself hadn't known.

"Rob." Dean reached for one strong, warm hand, placing it first on his hip, and then guiding it back to rest on the curve of his buttock. He could feel himself blush, the heat spreading from his face clear down into his chest. "Show me." Hell and damnation—what if this wasn't what Rob desired? "I mean, if you want—"

Rob wanted, making it unmistakably clear. There was a moment when it seemed impossible, long enough for Dean to mourn that he would never know the magic of having Rob within his body. Rob was too big, or he was too small, or not made for such pleasures, or... But Rob was patient, keeping up a gentle pressure until something within Dean relaxed, and then Rob was pressing into him easily and Dean could have wept for the joy of it. The physical pleasure was intense, but that was the least of it. The wonder of Rob, within him. Rob, around him, supporting Dean with one arm while pressed tightly against him from behind. Rob, on him, his breath coming in uneven gasps against the back of Dean's neck. The only reason it wasn't perfect was

that it wasn't enough: Dean felt that if he could dissolve himself into Rob and be the blood in his veins, he still wouldn't be as close to Rob as he craved.

Rob's pace increased to a near frenzy, his hand groping for Dean's cock and pumping it in a matching rhythm until Dean could hardly breathe from the double pleasure. Then Rob stiffened and shuddered, involuntarily tightening his fingers on Dean so that he was coming, too, in a burst so unlike any he'd known in the past that it was as if he had suddenly discovered a whole new sense.

Rob rested his head against Dean's back, laughing breathlessly. "So much for my legendary control." He gently disengaged himself, rising and returning with a towel to clean them both up. Then, they cuddled together in the darkened room, in a shared peace and protective quiet. Rob couldn't stop touching him, his hands stroking down Dean's arms and back. "God," he said, "how you could ever see yourself as anything but beautiful is beyond me. Do you mind if I light a candle, so that I can see you properly next time?"

Dean raised his head from where it was resting on Rob's chest. "Next time?"

Rob laughed at him. "You didn't think we were finished, did you?" He rose again and Dean heard the small noises of items being moved around the dressing table while Rob felt for the tinderbox. "Ah." Soon, the warm light of a small flame brightened the chamber, Rob setting the candle on a small table by the bed before he climbed back in beside Dean.

"You were gone too long," Dean complained, reaching. They kissed again, a slower exploration possible now that the first urgency was behind them. Dean had already discovered how intense and earth-shaking sex could be; now he was introduced to its playful side. He broke apart long enough to say something important. "Rob. I want to make you feel good. What can I do?"

Rob's eyes glittered in the candlelight. "There's a very sensitive spot on my neck. Nuzzle me properly there, and you'll truly drive me wild."

"Where?"

"Find it," Rob whispered.

Sometimes the journey is better than the destination. Dean took his time, first trailing soft kisses along Rob's jaw line from ear to ear, then beginning a systematic investigation of parts south. He made careful note of Rob's reactions along the way, barely

skimming over the areas that got the greatest response, saving them to return to later. There. Just at the base of Rob's throat, to the left, a precise inch above the collarbone. He flicked at the spot lightly with his tongue, the shudder that racked Rob's frame proving his accuracy, then progressed from nibbling to sucking, while Rob writhed beneath him, laughing and gasping.

"Stop!" Rob was breathless, his cock gratifyingly hard against Dean. "I can't stand it." He kissed Dean, long and hard, then released him abruptly. "You're not done yet,"

he said, dark eyes dancing merrily. "There are several other places on my body that are just as sensitive."

"Where?" Dean asked, but he thought he knew the answer.

Rob kicked off the covers and lay back against the sheet, arms splayed, a slow grin suffusing his face with light. "Start looking."

Chapter Twenty-Two

For the first time he could remember, stretching back even into the days before his mother died, Dean woke up happy. The source of this unfamiliar feeling was not hard to find: the invisible line down the center of the bed had been shattered, and Rob was half-sprawled on top of him, one arm flung possessively over Dean's shoulders and a leg entwined with his. For a moment, Dean squeezed his eyes tight, reveling in the feel of Rob's body draped over him. If only... The crudest words in the English language.

Dean allowed himself the brutal joy of imagining what might have been, seeing the false future unfold in front of him. He and Rob, spooned together for warmth on cold winter nights. Rob, sitting across from him in the parlor, face intent with concentration as his quill scratched their doings into the Quarterly, using his talent for storytelling to turn their ordinary daily activities into amusing adventures. Dean, his own pen busy, fair-copying Rob's collected ghost stories for a waiting publisher. The two of them in their shirtsleeves, drowsing with their fishing poles on the bank of the Little Creek on a hot summer's afternoon. Talking, laughing, arguing, making up, kissing, touching...

He opened his eyes to the grey light of day. If Rob wanted to know what real stupidity was, he should just ask Dean. Three months ago, in a single act of carelessness, he had thrown away any chance of such happiness. Useless to wallow in the misery of it now. Gingerly, he disentangled himself from Rob, who didn't so much as stir. A small smile tugged at the corner of Dean's mouth. He needn't have been so careful; Rob could sleep through an earthquake.

He washed, shaved and dressed in his finest morning clothes, refusing to so much as glance at the bed behind him, or its slumbering occupant. Time to look to the future, to think of his responsibilities. Of Carwick, its lands and tenants and history, all of them under his guardianship now. Of Minerva, to whom he would be a good husband, if it killed him. He looked at himself in the mirror, vaguely surprised to see tears on his cheeks. Stupid. Dean scrubbed at them with the back of his hand. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He would go downstairs now, avail himself of Mrs. Waddhams's coffee and rolls, and plan exactly what he was going to say to Minerva when he made his morning call. Dean paused, his hand on the door. It would be pointless and melodramatic to cross over to the bed and give Rob a last kiss of goodbye. He did it anyway, pressing his lips reverentially to the sleeping man's forehead. Rob smiled in his sleep.

Dean was on his third cup of coffee by the time Rob made his appearance, looking sleepy and subdued in Mrs. Waddhams's parlor. Silently, Dean poured him some coffee, then retreated behind a copy of this week's *Bath Journal* that he'd found abandoned on a chair.

Rob wouldn't let him go quite so easily. "Dean. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, of course," he said from behind the *Journal*.

"I thought you might be there this morning when I woke up. I wondered if it meant something that you weren't."

"Don't be silly. I just thought it kinder to let you sleep."

"Then," Rob said, "why won't you look at me?"

Dean crumpled the newspaper and dropped it on the table. "Will you drink your damned coffee so that we can go see Minerva?"

Probably not the words Rob was looking to hear after such a night, but there was little use in sugar-coating the reality of their situation. They'd had their night of magic, like Rob's patron in Venice so long ago, the difference being that there was no choice for them to make in the morning. Back when he had heard the story, Dean had thought the two young men fools to risk the memory of such perfection for the merest possibility that they could build on their experience. This morning, he would have sold his soul for the chance.

Rob, pale and downcast, reached for the *Journal* and smoothed it out, giving it his fixed attention. Dean didn't blame him. He scowled at himself, wishing he hadn't given up the damned newspaper. Perhaps he should go get the Quarterly, and finish reading the other entries, seeing how he'd almost certainly have something to report by the end of the day. Except, of course, apart from Uncle Silas, his uncles would have no idea that his engagement had been broken in the first—

His reverie was broken by a small cry from Rob, who was staring down at the newspaper with shock.

"What?" Dean said. He rose and circled the table, looking over Rob's shoulder. "What is it?"

Rob shook his head mutely, and Dean snatched the paper away, scanning the page. Shipping news: the usual arrivals and departures, something about a shipwreck. Advertisements: *Discreet, able-bodied companion desired for hunting trip to Highlands. Must be handy with a gun.* Oh, subtle. Was that what had upset Rob? One of his regular patrons looking for a replacement? If so, the reaction seemed a bit extreme. Rob looked absolutely stunned. Society tidbits, wedding announcements...

Oh, no. It wasn't possible. "Minerva." It came out a strangled whisper.

"What?" Rob blinked as if confused.

Dean stared down at the paper. "But you just read it yourself. *At Bath Abbey, Miss Minerva Lewis, to Baron George Keesville...*" On Sunday, while he and Rob had been wrestling in the mud with a champion trout, his fiancée had been marrying someone else. His legs collapsed, and he sat down heavily.

"It doesn't matter," Rob said, easing the paper from his hand and squatting down next to him, his hand on Dean's knee. "I don't think your attachment can have been as deep as you once believed." His eyes were lit from within, a false hope kindled by the idea that Dean might be free.

Free to starve together, Dean thought, pushing Rob's hand away. "It does matter,

you fool! I haven't just lost Minerva, I've lost bloody *Carwick*! His head sunk down onto his hands. "Oh, God. It's true. I've lost Carwick. Seven hundred years in the family..."

"I—I don't understand. I thought it was possible you were marrying Miss Lewis for her money, but she's hardly the only heiress in England."

"No?" Dean's head jerked back up of its own volition. "Can you find me one I can marry tomorrow? I might have a week, if it takes that long for Melton to track me down."

"Who?"

"Samuel Melton. The man to whom I lost Carwick at cards, on the very night I discovered I'd inherited it." Dean laughed bitterly. "I felt like celebrating, drank too much. Ended up at a gaming hell in Chelsea, and when I sobered up, I found I'd wagered the estate on a hand I couldn't possibly lose...and lost. Melton was very sympathetic, told me he'd accept ten thousand pounds instead."

"Ten thousand," Rob whispered. "Sweet Jesus." Dean nodded shortly. "Carwick's rents barely pull in half of that in a year, and most of it goes straight back into expenses. But Melton would make a fine profit by stripping the forest and selling it off as lumber, and parceling out the land along the river to sell to factory owners. Hell, even the Little Stream can be dammed for a millpond." He squeezed his eyes shut. "If one doesn't mind displacing the tenants from land their families have farmed since the Conquest. Oh, bloody hell."

"Would he take less? Perhaps your uncles—"

"My uncles live on fixed incomes, from investments and what little their own property produces. The lot of them together couldn't come up with a sum that large. And Melton was only willing to wait for payment because I was already engaged to Minerva. Once he finds out that she's married someone else, he'll come to collect."

"Oh, blast, Dean. If only I'd known..." Rob blinked, his eyes far away.

"What difference would it have made?"

"It would at least have given you another week to find a rich bride," Rob said quietly.

Dean stared into his eyes, seeking the meaning behind those words. Rob endured his glance without flinching. "Hell and damnation...you knew. Somehow, you knew. Told me from the start I wouldn't get Minerva back. How did you...? Oh, shit. Shit." It was falling into place. "Magistrate Lewis hired you himself, didn't he? Minerva decided she wanted Keesville instead, but our engagement had to be broken off first, or I might have had a suit to press for breach of promise. That's it, isn't it? My God, Rob. *You* ruined me."

"I swear I didn't know that—"

Dean gave a bark of laughter. "Did he pay you extra to tag along and delay me as much as possible? Or to seduce me, so that I wouldn't dare call him on the plot? Last

night—was that part of it, Rob?"

"No!" Rob grabbed for his hands, but Dean shook him off. Rob hunkered back onto his heels, face flushed with emotion. "Listen. Please, just listen. Two weeks ago, I appeared before Magistrate Lewis." "Right. Despite the fact that you don't walk the streets."

Rob's eyes blazed. "I *don't*. I had a patron in Worcester, whose daughter objected to him squandering her future inheritance on the likes of me. She arranged to have us found together. My patron was a respectable man, so was let off with a warning. Lewis called me into his chambers and told me he'd let me go as well, as long as I did this one favor. Play the amorous highwayman for a friend of his. It would be a lark, he said."

"So you did it. Without asking questions, without confirming that your subject was actually willing."

"You do realize that Lewis could have had me deported to Australia?" Rob's voice was even. "No, I didn't ask questions. And even if I had—Christ, Dean! He could even have hanged me, if he'd a mind to. But I swear, I had no idea that it was a set up until you mentioned the name of the magistrate you were hauling me to. If you remember, I tried to stop you then."

"Christ." Dean slumped back in his chair. "What do the details matter? I set myself up on the cliff's edge, you just pushed me over. All that really counts is that I'm ruined."

Rob rose and stood behind him, resting his hands on Dean's shoulders. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Dean said wearily. "Go to London. Try to find a wealthy merchant whose daughter wants to be a countess. Sell myself to a stranger.. perhaps we're not so different after all."

"If I could get the money—"

"Ten thousand pounds?" He laughed shortly. "There aren't so many cocks to suck in all of England."

The hands tightened. "I don't know for sure how much I can raise. I have to find out. But it might be enough. Please, Dean. Let me help you."

Dean's stomach roiled. He must mean Parker, who had offered Rob a fortune for exclusive rights to his body. No, and no, and no. Dean had to end it now, before the urge to save Carwick made him agree to be party to such an abomination as allowing Rob to be owned by that dreadful man. It was ironic, that he should still care so deeply for the man who had conspired to ruin him, but there it was.

"Get your hands off me," Dean said deliberately. "And get out. You stupid bloody whore. I don't ever, ever want to see your face again."

The hands dropped off his shoulders. For a moment, he felt Rob standing motionless behind him. Then, noiselessly, the presence behind him was gone, and the

soft click of the parlor door severed the connection between them. Forever.
Dean put his head down on the table and sobbed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Erich. Another responsibility to see to, another load to bear. Dean wrote a note to Erich's wife Charlotte at her

lodging, asking her to stay put until they returned from a short trip to London. By then, he would either have saved Carwick with another woman's money, or would have to come up with another plan. The house in Worcester was part of the estate, and his rooms in Hampstead had been leased. Should he lose Carwick, he would have to throw himself on the mercy of his friend Peter or one of his uncles—imagining any of them would even speak to him again. Charlotte said she had money, perhaps they could work up a fiction by which she hired Erich away. His shoulders hunched in misery as he sealed the note. Charlotte Westport seemed a nice enough woman, but it was hard to trust Erich's welfare to a stranger.

He trudged over to the Essex to leave the message, then found Erich at the stable and told him they were going to London. His coachman looked curious at the change of plan, but just nodded, telling Dean he would come by shortly for him and Mr. Black.

Dean shook his head. "Nein. Wir gehen ohne Herrn Black."

"Ohne Herrn Black?" Erich studied his employer's face. "Ich mochte ihn."

"I liked him, too," Dean muttered. "But he's gone. Er ist weggegangen."

By the time everything was packed and loaded onto the carriage, it was already midday. Dean scowled at the sun, high in the sky. They wouldn't make London tonight, nor probably even tomorrow. Not in this lumbering old coach, with a single pair of horses. If it weren't for Erich, he should purchase a seat on the Royal Mail coach and be in the city in less than a day. The Mail was an uncomfortable means of travel, but it was damned fast.

Not that his own carriage was all that fine a ride, he thought later, jouncing over the cobbled streets of Bath. Rob's company had made the long journey bearable, even amusing. Being rattled about was no hardship, when one had someone so easy to talk to. So pleasant to listen to, so fine to look at... Dean stared out at the perfectly adequate scenery passing slowly before his gaze, despising the view because it wasn't what he longed to see.

Thanks to the return of torrential rains that night, it took more than three weary days for Erich to drive the borrowed nags to London. Three sleepless nights in modern, ghost-free coaching inns, noisy with non-stop arrivals and departures at all hours, many heralded by the blowing of tin horns. Unappetizing meals picked at in the company of strangers, chattering tiresomely about the latest *on-dits*:

"Did you hear about Lady Willsborough's little problem?"

"Of course, since Beau shaved his, no one's sporting mustaches anymore, my dear..."

"Cases and cases of the finest porcelain, and not a plate broken!"

"Divorce is in the air, and if it isn't a crim-con matter I'll eat my bonnet."

"Can you imagine being shipwrecked for three years?"

Dean nodded over his plate, all the gossip fusing together into a half-dream in which a mustachioed Lady W. ended up castaway on an island with Beau Brummell, hurling porcelain plates at his head.

They arrived in the metropolis on Sunday evening, he and Erich nearly as exhausted as the overstressed pair of horses. The city was uncharacteristically quiet this time of year. The social whirl of the Season had ended two weeks ago with the opening of grouse hunting, the *ton* retiring to their country estates to shoot, or repairing to the resort towns of Brighton and Bath for recuperation. In their absence, many of the tradesmen who depended on the upper classes for custom were also on holiday. Dean scowled to himself, hoping at least some of the wealthy Cits were still in residence. He might have had a better chance, in late August, of finding a middle-class heiress in Bath.

With London so depopulated, it wasn't difficult to find a room in a satisfactory hotel. Dean unpacked enough items to see him through the night, then went to check to see that Erich was comfortably lodged. Tonight, there were no other grooms, coachmen or valets sharing the servants' quarters of the hotel. Erich had chosen the best bed in the dormitory, and assured his employer that he was quite contented.

"Gute Nacht," Dean said, turning to go.

"Herr Graf?" Erich sounded hesitant, and when Dean looked at him, the coachman was staring at the floor. "Herr Black—sein Bruder."

Rob's brother. Dean took a cautious breath. "Ja?" "Es ist traurig, jemanden zu verlieren."

God, help him follow this. 'Traurig' was sad, he knew that. 'Verlieren,' to lose? Sad to lose someone. Dean felt at a loss, conscious that whatever he said in response might prove to be very, very important. It should be Rob here, with his verbal facility and sense for the right thing to say. If he bungled it...

Dean swallowed. "Ja, Erich. Es ist traurig." He flipped through the pages of the dictionary, seeking the right word. "Fast unerträglich." Almost unbearable.

Erich looked up, touched the scar at the corner of his mouth. "Manchmal passieren einfach schlimme Dinge." Bad things happen. He smiled sadly. "Gute Nacht, Herr Graf."

"Gute Nacht." Dean second-guessed himself all the way back to his room. Had he been too cautious, or did he say the right thing? Should he have pushed a little further, asked Erich if he'd ever had a brother himself? Once again, he longed for Rob, to talk this over with him. Despite the relative quiet of the hotel, compared with the cacophonous posting houses he'd spent the past few nights in, Dean couldn't sleep. Worrying about the future. Wondering where Rob was that night. Wishing that

gorgeous, compassionate man were here, curled up in bed next to him.

It was a long night.

In the morning, Dean rose from his inadequately-populated bed to face the dawn. He bathed fastidiously and shaved meticulously, grimacing at the bruise around his left eye, which had mellowed from its original glaring purple to a ghastly yellowish-green. Not a face to inspire passion in sweet young heiresses, nor compassion in bank managers. His first stop, he'd decided around three a.m., would be to throw himself on the mercy of the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street, the venerable Bank of England. It had looked after his family's interests for over a hundred years, which had to count for something.

Still, Dean was not confident of his chances of success, facing a stern-faced guardian of the bank's assets less than an hour later. Out of respect for his title, he had secured an appointment at once, and with an upper-level employee. The bank officer was not forbidding, but his visage spoke of years of shrewd dealing and hard decisions.

Dean took a swallow from his tea, provided by an efficient and silent underling, then set the cup aside. "The truth is, Mr. Tyler, I'm in need of a great deal of money. Quickly. I was hoping some sort of mortgage arrangement might be possible."

The bank manager steepled his fingers, not quite frowning. "More funds than you have on account with us at present?"

Dean took a breath, hands gripping the smooth polished arms of his chair. "A great deal more, I'm afraid."

"I see." Mr. Tyler looked like he did, too. "May I require as to the necessity for such funding?"

A slow flush suffused his face. "I owe a gentleman a gambling debt."

"In the amount of...?"

"Ten thousand pounds."

Mr. Tyler remained still, regarding Dean thoughtfully. At last, he reached out for a small silver bell that was sitting on the corner of his desk. Its tones rang clear, soft and true, and within seconds the same young assistant who had brought the tea was standing by his side. "Wilmington, bring me the most recent correspondence concerning Lord Carwick's account."

The young man bowed and withdrew, reappearing nearly at once with the desired object.

"That will be all, Wilmington." Mr. Tyler placed the folder neatly in front of him on the richly-colored cherrywood desk, but didn't open it. "My lord," he said when they were once again alone, "for future reference, the Bank rarely covers gambling debts. Payment is too uncertain, and the risk of reoccurrence far too high."

"Of course, Mr. Tyler." Dean rose, trying to keep dejection from his voice. "I'm sorry to have taken your time."

The banker raised his hand. "Wait, my lord. I may not be able to grant you a mortgage, but I can set you straight as to a certain misapprehension you seem to be holding. Please sit."

Dean resumed his seat.

"Our records show that one week ago, you had funds deposited with us in the amount of two hundred and thirty pounds, give or take a shilling or two." Mr. Tyler displayed no need of verifying this information by looking within the folder.

"Yes, I know, I..." Dean trailed off, and Mr. Tyler politely gave him a moment to resume the thought before speaking again.

"Today, however, your available funds amount to some thirteen thousand, seven hundred and ten pounds. You have no need to borrow to cover the sum you mentioned."

"Thirteen—but that's impossible!" Dean shook his head. "There's some sort of mistake, Mr. Tyler."

At last the banker deigned to retrieve a sheet of paper from the Carwick records, handing it across the desk. "A gentleman who owed you some money deposited ten thousand pounds on your behalf on Friday afternoon."

Dean, his hand shaking, scanned the paper quickly, recognizing the carefully-calligraphed script. Friday. He and Rob had parted on Thursday morning: Rob must have taken the Mail to have arrived in London so quickly. Except, of course, the name on the document was something very different. "Adalbert," he said, mouth curling in a reluctant smile. "Well, I'll be damned." His eyes widened at the last name. "You'd recognize it," Rob had said, apparently not in jest. Then the uncle who had taken him in must have been... Dean pursed his lips in a silent whistle, then shook himself back to the problem before him. "I can't accept this, Mr. Tyler."

The bank manager raised his brows slightly. "There's no way to return it. The gentleman left no means of reaching him, and in fact indicated that he would be traveling for some time."

Dean winced. "To Italy. I know." Damn Rob, for striking a foul bargain with Parker, tying himself to that odious man for God-knew-how-long. How had he accomplished it so quickly?

"No, I'm quite certain he said the Lake District. I believe he's looking to purchase a house in that area."

"Purchase a..." Dean shook his head again, confused. "If he's not—then where did he get the money?"

At last, a smile softened Mr. Tyler's august features. "I take it you haven't read a newspaper in several days, my lord. The whole of England has been buzzing with the tale."

"Tale?"

"Your friend's ship came in, quite literally. He had been a major underwriter for a

shipment of Chinese porcelain that was believed lost some three years ago. Two weeks ago, the news came out that the ship had instead run aground on a small island in the South Seas. There have been notices in all the papers, looking for the original shareholders in the endeavor." He paused, allowing Dean the opportunity to admit that he had heard something about that in the endless gossip on the road, then continued.

"Yes, indeed. The *Ellyn Fair* didn't break up instantly. She was caught fast on a reef and remained afloat for several weeks, allowing the sailors to salvage everything from the ship, including the cargo."

Now Dean remembered. "Not a plate was broken," he quoted, running a hand through his ginger curls.

"Indeed, my lord. The shipment was still fully intact when the sailors were discovered. It's very high-quality merchandise, and would have fetched a fortune even without all the attendant clamor."

"But surely this type of case would take months to sort through the various claims?"

"And so it will. Your friend saw the notice in the newspaper and came to us, seeking a buyer for his shares. I tried to persuade him that it would be in his best interest to wait until the porcelain can be auctioned off—half of England is in a frenzy to secure a souvenir piece—but he was insistent that he needed money right away, and as long as the amount was at least ten thousand pounds, he would be well satisfied." Mr. Tyler permitted himself a small smile. "I was able to do somewhat better than that for him, thanks to an elderly lady I know with a shrewd head for bargains."

"Good." Dean leaned back against the soft cushion of his chair, something else making sense to him: Rob's instant of bewilderment when Dean had assumed it was the news of Minerva's wedding that had shocked him. He must have just seen the notice about the *Ellyn Fair* instead. "Oh, good indeed." Rob was free of Parker and his ilk. Rob was free, and Carwick was saved. He was barely able to digest either piece of news. "Thank you for that information, Mr. Tyler. You have no idea how much it means to me."

"Happy to be of assistance, my lord."

There was now just one thing left unexplained. "You said my friend deposited ten thousand pounds, yet my account contains something over thirteen thousand. Where did the rest come from?"

"Ah." Mr. Tyler nodded. "The probate from your uncle's will was settled late last week as well. It was a simple transfer from one account to another, but I do need your signature here." He proffered another sheet of paper.

Dean was still confused. "But I'm certain everything from Uncle Parmenius's estate was already disbursed."

"Parmenius, yes. But Silas—"

"Silas?" Dean had been brought up with strict instructions never to interrupt a man

in mid-sentence, but his shock got the better of his training now. "There's some mistake. Silas Smith isn't dead."

"Oh, dear." Consternation creased Mr. Tyler's features. "Had you not been informed? I'm truly sorry to break it to you so precipitously."

"It must have just happened, then. Quick of the executor to get it through probate so fast." The banker consulted the folder, a confused frown of his own troubling his face. "The executor was Silenus Smith. According to this, your uncle died on June twelfth, and the will was presented on June seventeenth."

"June twelfth." Dean blinked. This was August, and he'd seen Silas not a week ago. "That's not possible." Unless one really did believe in ghosts... For a moment, the hair at the back of his neck stood up straight, then the obvious solution presented itself. Dean laughed. "Uncle Silenus. Of course. He and Silas were twins. He must have been at the house to close it up."

Mr. Tyler looked faintly puzzled. "My lord?"

"I apologize, Mr. Tyler. The family sense of humor is very strange. I believed I had seen my Uncle Silas recently, but it was certainly Uncle Silenus, who thought it a joke to let me think he was his brother." Something nagged at the edge of his consciousness, but he pushed it firmly away.

"Strange indeed," the banker said, gathering the papers back into the folder. His tone implied that there was nothing in the behavior of aristocrats that could possibly surprise him. "Is there any other way in which I can assist you today, my Lord Carwick?"

"No, Mr. Tyler." Dean rose. "That will be all."

"Erich!" Outside, Dean all but flew down the steps of the Bank.. "Erich, Herr Black ist—" What was the word for wealthy? 'Much gold,' he could say that instead. "Er hat viel Gold, Erich. Er nicht muß..." He cut himself off from saying exactly what Rob didn't have to do anymore, realizing Erich couldn't be aware of it in the first place. "Er ist gut," he finished lamely.

Erich laughed out loud, the sound ringing out more naturally now. "Das ist gut." The coachman asked where Herr Graf wanted to go now, and Dean realized he didn't have a clue. To the Lake District, he supposed, in search of Rob. Joy welled up from within. Because if Rob was free, so was he. It was impossible to get his mind around it. Free! But what if Mr. Tyler were wrong, or Rob had changed his mind, driven away forever by Dean's harsh words? He could spend months, fruitlessly searching. If only there were a way to get in touch with him...

But of course, there was. A smile spread over his face.

"Zur Fleet Street, Erich. Schnell!"

On the way, Dean leafed through the Quarterly, looking for the news of Silas's death. Here it was, posted by Uncle Silenus once the circulating letter had made its lumbering way around to him.

July 23rd. Regret to inform the Family that Si is gone to his Rest on Monday the 12th of June, Eighteen hundred and fifteen. The Girl who brings Milk found them all exceeding ill, running to fetch the Doctor. Alas, it was beyond his Powers to save them, for the entire Household did perish viz. Silas, his Housekeeper, the Sister of his Housekeeper and the maidservant, even unto the Cat as well. The Doctor believes it was a Lot of Potted Shrimps causing the Sickness, that had gone bad in the Heat. So many empty Jars of them were found that it must have been a veritable last Feast for our Brother. Scrawled under it in smaller script was the following: Do not get your Hopes up, A I, for the Lot goes to young Dean, in the memory of their fishing together in years past.

Dean smiled and shook his head. Young Dean was going to make some changes in the way the family communicated from now on. Starting with insisting that all six remaining uncles, plus Albertus's entire brood, came to Carwick to celebrate Christmas together. His friend Peter, too. Hopefully, by then, Carwick would have another guest as well...

Erich pulled the carriage up smartly in front of the office of the *Times*. Dean leapt from the coach, instructing his driver to wait. Inside, the young man at the counter gave him a bright smile.

"May I help you, sir?"

"I should like to place an advertisement. These words exactly." He copied them down on a scrap of paper, with a pencil provided by the *Times* clerk.

"Very good, sir. How long did you want this to run?"

Dean considered. Long enough to be certain Rob saw it. The *Times* circulated all over England, but there was no guarantee that any particular issue would reach his intended target. "I suppose... six months?"

The clerk looked astonished. "Six months?"

"Best make it a year, to be safe."

"Yes, sir." The young man totted up a hefty reckoning, which Dean paid promptly out of the money Uncle Silas—Silenus had given him. 'It'll all be yours someday,' indeed. He smiled to himself at his uncle's strange sense of humor, and turned to go. Although the bit in the Quarterly about the cat did nag at him just a little...would Silenus have brought his own cat with him when he went to close up his brother's house?

"Wait, sir!" The clerk held up the piece of paper with his advertisement on it, a supercilious smile on his face. "I believe you've forgotten something quite important."

"What?" Dean returned to the desk and retrieved the paper. "No, it's—damn. You're right." Seizing the pencil again, he printed one more word. "There," he said, pushing the advertisement back to the clerk. "Now it's absolutely perfect."

The employee read the revised copy, and called again after Dean's back. "But sir! Sir!" Dean ignored him and kept walking. The last thing he heard when exiting onto

the street was the clerk's exchange with a fellow employee: "He's not going to get many replies, without advertising a way to contact him." "Not our problem. Paid, didn't he?" Time to go home to Carwick. And wait.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The September sun was slanting across the tops of the trees as Dean made his way across the smoothly manicured lawn leading to his house. Carwick's stone walls glowed a soft gold against the backdrop of green hills, warm and inviting in the autumn afternoon. Incredible to think how close he had come to losing it. Dean shook his head, and paused to adjust the fishing pole dangling over his shoulder, heavy with a line of fresh trout. It had been a day to dream back on once old age has made such pleasures impossible: hours of warm, reflective solitude and hopeful plans for the future.

With Carwick saved and on the road back to prosperity, he was more content than he'd ever thought possible. Still, Dean couldn't help longing for the one thing that could make him truly happy.

The front door burst open before he reached it. His manservant— Dean still had trouble remembering to call him 'Jim'—spilled down the steps, face alight. "Herr Graf! Der Straußenräuber ist hier!"

"The highwayman? Herr Black? Is he in the parlor—Salon?" Dean leapt up the steps, handing the fish off to Jim.

"Ja. Herr Black ist im der Salon." He grinned at the abundance of trout. "Hervorragend—fünf fish!"

Dean wasn't certain he had heard the final word correctly: *fish* and *fische* did sound similar. It wasn't the first time he'd thought he heard Jim speak an English word instead of its German equivalent, but he didn't want to stop to consider the young man's possible progress right now. He skidded to a stop just outside the parlor door. Hell and damnation, he was a mess. Clothes wrinkled, stained with grass and mud. It would only be polite to pop upstairs for a quick wash and change. But it was Rob on the other side of the door.

His appearance couldn't be helped. He had to see Rob, right now.

Dean pushed open the door.

Rob, hearing him, rose from the velvet settee. He was immaculate in exquisitely-tailored afternoon attire, from the high-crowned beaver hat in his white-gloved hand, to the mirror-like gloss on his Hessian boots. Above the boots were a pair of cream-colored inexpressibles, worn so tight as to stop Dean's heart in its tracks. New clothes, to befit his new wealth. They suited him, but in the face of such perfection Dean had a primal urge to put Rob into some disarray. Run his hands through the sleek black hair, kiss him until his clothing wilted and desire ruined the line of his trousers.

"Hello, Dean."

Rob's voice roused him from his instant of fantasy. Dean flushed, at a loss for words, wondering what the other man must think of him. "You got my message, then."

"What, this one?" Rob smiled, and removed a much-folded slip of newspaper from his jacket pocket. "At least I hoped it was from you."

Dean had never seen the message in print, and took it from Rob to read. "*Discreet young gentleman needed to come to Aberdeen at once. Please.* Yes, they got it right." He handed the bit of paper back, biting his lip. "I wasn't sure you'd come. After the things I said."

"Well...you did say 'please.' I feel I should encourage such behavior."

The words were lightly spoken, but Dean was well aware that Rob was good at hiding his true feelings behind a jocular front. "Rob, I'm so sorry I said those things. Can you forgive me? I thought.. I was afraid you meant to get the money from Parker." Dean's hands twisted together. "I couldn't stand that."

"I wondered, later, if it were something of the sort," Rob said quietly. "It didn't occur to me at the time. I was so off balance anyway—I'd just read the news about the ship, and had no idea what would come of it, or if I could get enough money out of it to help you. For all I knew, the lot would go to the men who rescued the shipwrecked sailors. But if I'd known what you were thinking, I might have said something."

"I can never thank you enough for what you did." Dean gestured around the room. "For this." He smiled uncertainly, feeling awkward. "Hell. I'm a terrible host. Would you care for a glass of wine, or some tea? Or.. .or something?"

"Wine, if you're having some." Rob sat back down, turning his hat in his hands.

Dean poured for them both, then handed a glass to his guest. His fingers objected to brushing against Rob's gloved hands, craving the touch of flesh instead. But it was too soon, too difficult to see beneath the other man's customary cloak of good humor and discern whether he truly had forgiven the manner of their parting. Best to keep to pleasantries for now. "You've been well?"

"Yes." There was a pause while Rob tasted his wine. "How's Erich? Is his wife here?"

"He's doing well, and yes, Charlotte and her sister are both in residence. They tried being ladies of leisure, and found themselves so bored they've taken over the kitchen between them. Charlotte is an amazing cook—I can't wait to see what she does with the trout."

Rob laughed. "Last month you couldn't find an heiress if your life depended on it, and now you've got them working in your kitchen. Has Erich recognized her yet?"

"Not yet, but he clearly likes her. They spend quite a lot of time together, so things seem hopeful. He answers to the name 'Jim' now, and lately I swear I've heard him drop an English word into a sentence from time to time."

"That does seem hopeful," Rob said. "I'm glad to hear it."

They both sipped at their wine some more, and then Dean put down his glass. "Speaking of names, is it still 'Rob?' I mean..." He gestured at Rob's fine clothes. "Can you be yourself again?"

Rob looked down into his wine instead of at Dean. "'A man is what he makes of himself,' remember? There's no going back from some things, and too many people who would know me for what I used to be. No, I'm 'Rob' for good now."

"Just as well. I mean, 'Adalbert'?" That got a brief smile from his guest. He cleared his throat. "Rob. Have I said you look wonderful?"

"Thank you." Still too politely said for Dean's taste. "So do you."

Dean laughed, finding it hard to breathe. He raised a hand to his face. "I forgot my hat this morning. Tried to keep to the shade, but I'm afraid I'm even spottier than—"

"You look wonderful," Rob asserted again, the intensity of his gaze giving the words weight. "Sun-kissed." He took a breath, and Dean realized that the other man was as nervous as he was. "Well. You invited me, and I'm here." The question was in his eyes.

"I hope you can stay." Dean reddened again. "I mean, at least for a while. If you want to. I want to show you Carwick, show you what you've saved. The house, and the land, and the people. Little Stream." He looked down. There was mud on his boots. "The fishing was terrific today."

"I've been occupied with house-hunting lately, but I can spare a few days for that," Rob said cautiously.

Dean's eyes flew up to his with alarm. "I hope you can stay more than a few days. I have some money for you. Oh, God." He put up a hand at the look on Rob's face. "That didn't come out right. Give me a moment." Rising, he crossed to the mantel and fished an envelope from where it had been waiting for over three weeks, behind a gleaming candlestick. "I want to start paying you back, Rob."

"That's not necessary," Rob said quietly.

"It is. Please, it is. I was thinking.. as long as I owe you money, you have a stake in Carwick, right? So you should stay here, and—and keep an eye on it." He tried to smile, couldn't. "Keep an eye on me, so that I don't do something foolish like gamble it away again."

"Ah," Rob said. "Stay close to you...to protect my investment?"

"Very close. Here." Dean thrust the envelope at Rob, who removed his gloves and set them, and his hat, on the couch beside him before taking it.

"Just until you've paid me back." Rob looked down at the envelope.

"Open it." Dean's voice fell to a whisper.

With a shrug, Rob broke the seal, and sat staring at the contents. A slow smile suffused his face with warmth, and what looked like relief. "Dean," he said.

"I know it isn't much," Dean hurried to say. "But I can manage the same amount every quarter."

"The same every quarter?" Rob was laughing now, rising to grab Dean by the hand and pull him to his feet, his fingers warm and alive. "Dean, there's ten pounds in here."

"Yes, I know. At that rate, I should have you paid back in about—"

There was nothing wrong with Rob's math skills. "In about two hundred and fifty years."

Dean's hand tightened on Rob's. "Right. Think you can spare me that much time?"

"I'll clear my calendar." And then Rob was kissing him, and there was only one thing Dean could think of that could make this day any better than it was. Rob drew back from him slightly, just enough to allow his mouth to form words. "That tour of Carwick—shall we start with upstairs?"

Dean felt his face heat. "In the middle of the afternoon?"

Rob laughed at him, stroking his flushed cheek. "Night is not a necessary prerequisite, *mein Traumprinz*."

"Lack of housemaids in one's bed chamber is, though. Did I tell you I have servants now? They clean upstairs every afternoon."

"Good for you. Is there anywhere else we could go to be alone?" Rob's voice was low with passion.

"Rob." Dean leaned in to kiss him again. "Can you wait until tonight? Believe it or not, there's something else I want to do, even more. Please, I'll make it up to you."

A shiver went through the other man. "You said 'please' again. I'm utterly at your command."

"You can make me say it again later, I've no doubt at all."

Rob smiled slowly. "I'm looking forward to that."

"Good." He tugged at Rob's hand. "Come with me." Dean led him over to the pianoforte occupying the corner of the room, a new purchase, watching Rob's eyes widen at the sight of it. "Sit next to me here, on the bench. Pay attention, now. No, Rob, don't look at me, look at the keys. Now, this is middle C."