

Cerridwen Press



ELAINE
LOWE

*Match Made
by Moonlight*

A Cerridwen Press Publication



www.cerridwenpress.com

Match Made by Moonlight

ISBN 9781419912016

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Edited by Helen Woodall.

Cover art by Croco.

Electronic book Publication November 2007

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MATCH MADE BY MOONLIGHT

Elaine Lowe

Dedication

For Mom, who taught me to tell stories, and Dad, who taught me to love books.
And for Lawrence, who taught me the meaning of romance.

Prologue

Spain, 1813

He sat on the bare rooftop, worn regimentals splashed with blood. The smell was somewhat less here and the intense heat of June in Spain a little more bearable. It could have been the height of this old warehouse, currently housing what passed for a hospital in post-siege Vitoria. Or it might have been the French cognac that Eddington had received from a grateful and resourceful sergeant for saving his leg earlier in the week. Eddington had lost consciousness several cups ago and Fergusson, Eddington's assistant, may or may not still be awake and aware. Brandon himself had been more moderate with his drinking and sipped his libation a mite more slowly, contemplating the glowing orb above him.

The night was hot and still and the bright light of the full moon shone down with intensity, setting the beaten rooftops of the war-torn town alight with silver. The light seemed to infuse power and life into the city. No place needed it more after the deprivation under the French and then under Wellington's siege. Brandon Kelsey was a Lieutenant Colonel, an aspirant doctor and the second son of the Earl of Chester but still he sat here, transfixed by something as common as moonlight.

He had killed a man three days ago. The face of the young Frenchman hung in his mind's eye. All the anger that had driven him from the bosom of his own family and into the ranks of Wellington's army had left him with that act. He felt lost, adrift in the sea of blood that was war. The moon, hovering huge in the sky above, seemed to pull him away from everything. Away from the darkness that plagued his thoughts, the hopelessness that gripped him when he was away from the struggle of saving the mangled bodies of young men.

Fergusson rolled over and muttered in his semi-sleep, crushing his shabby hat beneath him. A scent was released from the sprig of herbs ever present in the hatband. Fergusson swore by those herbs, explained that his sainted mother had always said that the lavender, sage and rosemary would ward off illness and that she'd never been wrong yet. Brandon breathed deeply, smelling home somehow. England.

Is there anything left there for me? Family? Maybe someday a wife, children even. Something beyond war, beyond the heat and stench of battle?

The moon smiled down, silent and peaceful, keeping her secrets for now.

Chapter One

England, October 1813

The smell of drying lavender, sage and rosemary filled the air of the stillroom. The girl within sighed with contentment as she sealed the last of the willow bark and chamomile decoctions for this year's round of winter ague. Anna glanced up toward her drying racks and took stock of her angelica stores, knowing that she would have to make up a new batch of her special honeyed cough syrup soon. She sighed and stretched her long arms over her head in a most unladylike but comfortable manner.

The cool of this cellar room was a welcome relief from the rare warm spell that had enveloped all of Shropshire that October. Particles of dust and pollen danced in the morning light streaming through the small window at the top of the wall. The jars of her various tinctures and ointments glowed brown and yellow and green in the soft light. Anna removed the stopper from a large glass flask and sniffed gently to determine the potency of the cordial within. It wouldn't do for her aunt's favorite remedy to turn too bitter, regardless of the increased potency of the herbs. The amount of brandy seemed to determine its benefits in Aunt Harriet's eyes. At least more so than the lemon balm, sage or other mildly beneficial herbs that turned the drink from "libertine excess" to "medicine". Aunt Harriet was very fond of her medicinal cordial, even if it was the only useful thing her aunt saw coming from Anna's botanical efforts. As she cleaned the marble counter, the air was rent with a caustic cry.

"Marianna Penelope Sanderton, I insist you attend me this moment!"

Anna winced as the voice penetrated into the far corners of Gladstone Abbey and she raised her eyes up the stairwell to the kitchens where her aunt was surely waiting for her. She had conveniently chosen to forget that this was the day her aunt's stepson would be arriving. Now that her memory had chosen to return, she dreaded surfacing to the world above. She sighed again and set her shoulders resolutely. Brushing her hands clean on her linen apron, she removed it to a hook on the wall, turned the corner from the small cellar room to the stairs and took determined steps up toward the kitchens. If nothing else, she would attempt to remind her esteemed aunt to lower her voice when Mama was resting. Since such advice had been disregarded for the last four years of her aunt's residency here at the Abbey, Anna doubted it would do much good at present.

As she reached the landing the aunt in question, Lady Harriet Dalrymple, let out a dramatic gasp.

"I knew I would find you down there, wasting hours with your silly plants like a veritable child. At least you aren't digging in the dirt like the groundskeeper today. Herbert is due to arrive in time for dinner in two hours and yet here you are looking

like a menial." She eyed Anna's old and serviceable brown calico frock and shook her head, the artfully positioned curls of her black wig shaking. "I demand you give up this foolishness while he is here and give your time over to proper pursuits." As Lady Harriet closed her eyes and took yet another theatrical breath Anna edged toward the door ready to make good her escape.

"Dear Aunt," she interrupted. "I will change immediately. Please forgive my inadequate memory but I was worried about poor Mama and I always feel better with something to occupy my hands. She is resting fitfully upstairs and I did not want to bother her with excessive noise."

"Oh yes," said Lady Harriet, her voice managing to lower a smidgeon from piercing to merely loud. "That was kind of you, my dear. Margaret needs her peace I suppose. Still, I expect you to look your very best for dear Herbert. He's a Viscount now and he honors this house with his visit, Marianna. He has the most exquisite taste and expects the very best." Lady Harriet would have continued but Anna managed to dart out before her aunt could continue with her catalogue of Cousin Herbert's charms. She had encountered Herbert Dalrymple once before, when she was a child of twelve. All she could recall of the now Viscount Liston was that he looked and smelled rather like a fish. Her aunt's descriptions of him since did little to better the picture in her mind. Her grandmother's training would lead her to believe he had some kind of kidney imbalance. But perhaps it was just his arrogant and haughty nature to look out at the world as though he exclusively preferred the fishbowl of *haute* society.

She trod lightly up the steps and down the hall toward her mother's bedroom. She glanced out the windows and across the winter garden enclosed by the wings of the house, toward the opposite older wing, which had changed little from the time when it served as a cloister for a group of nuns. The pointed arches detailing the balcony were now enclosed by glass windows but had once been bare, open to the sounds of the bells of the long ruined bell tower to call to compline or vespers. She smiled to herself at her speedy descent into fanciful reverie, calling up images of the long ago past. Her imagination was vivid and it seemed to get her into just as much trouble with her relations as did her medical proclivities.

The tiny rooms in that wing were rarely used for guests anymore but their presence felt somehow comforting to Anna, a reminder of a simpler time when this house was given over to the pursuit of learning and the nuns had been known for their medical knowledge and skills. She felt a kinship with those women although she had no wish to lock herself away from the world. On the contrary she made an effort to aid her community at every opportunity and tended a herb garden that would have made the convent proud. She made regular visits to the needy in the area and spent as much time as allowed at the side of Mr. Trent the apothecary. She was especially grateful for the tolerant teachings of Mr. Harlowe. Mr Harlowe was an elderly physician who had retired from a larger practice in Shrewsbury and had settled in Oswestry. It was but a short three mile trip to Middleton village where Gladstone Abbey was the main estate.

Unfortunately neither she or Mr. Harlowe, nor all the prayers promised by the parson Mr. Clowson could help her poor Mama. Her mother suffered an odd malady where she regularly heard a great ringing in her ears and was subjected to a violent dizziness. Oftentimes the smallest noise triggered a terrible headache whereas other days she would have to read lips to participate in a conversation, as she could hear nothing at all. It was a good day if she could but join their little household downstairs in the dining rooms or the main parlor. Even then, a maid must needs always be present to aid in her descent or ascent of the stairs. Anna knocked lightly at the door not wishing to disturb her mother if she could help it, for although she might not hear the light knock, a heavy one might set off another headache.

She heard no response but she nevertheless entered with care. Her mother lay on the counterpane in her favorite lavender silk dressing gown, her feet propped up on a small pillow and one hand held a damp cloth to her forehead. Mrs. Margaret Sanderton, née Carew, had been a lovely woman at one time and her daughter had fond memories of days spent with her mother and her *mamgu*, her grandmother, telling wonderful tales of the Welsh faerie, the Tylwyth Teg. They would spend hours together planting in the garden or working in the stillroom. But Mamgu had passed away almost five years now and her father had died suddenly of a heart seizure two years past. So at seventeen years of age and out of mourning, Anna found herself virtually in charge of defending her household from her dictatorial and controlling aunt and trying to take care of her invalid mother. She had tried desperately to find something to aid Mama and had made brews of ginger, chamomile, celery seed, mint and lavender. Some of these helped for a time but the vertigo would return eventually, incapacitating her mother for hours or even days.

In the end, she had learned to take on the responsibilities of the household and the village. She did the account books and worked with the steward, Mr. Jamison, to manage the estate as her father had shown her, his only child. Her aunt could not be bothered with figures and would take no part in management and would tut-tut with abandon whenever she heard mention of Anna's involvement with such things. Aunt Harriet's solution was for her to be married as soon as could be.

Along with the household responsibilities, she was also doing the charitable work her mother was now incapable of doing, as she was unable to go about in any vehicle and the risk was deemed too great for her to walk the mile required to reach Middleton.

She noticed again how her mother was thinner than years past, the constant dizziness making it difficult to keep down food. At least things seemed to have reached a plateau and the dizziness, although crippling, no longer caused any episodes of fever or violent retching. Her mother had simply adapted with a routine of quiet reflection and lessened activity, often in her own chambers, reading if her eyes could stand to move across the page or playing the small pianoforte that had been brought up to the suite. The soft green walls and cream upholstery seemed welcoming to Anna and memories from her girlhood returned in full force, the smell of her mother's perfume lingering in the air. She lowered herself into a chair by the bed, looking at her mother's

pale, drawn but still beautiful face, searching for any sign of distress or the flush of fever. The mild creaking of her chair caused her mother to stir.

"Lucy, is that you? Is it time for dinner yet or have I missed it again?" Her mother turned her face, still covered by the damp cloth, toward the chair and Anna captured her mother's free hand.

"Mama, it is Anna."

Her mother swept the cloth from her face and opened her eyes, looking into a matching pair of green eyes belonging to her only child and noted the concern evident in their depths. "Anna, it is so good of you to come up to me. Is something wrong?"

"No, no, Mama, it is just that I am worried about you."

"Pish-posh my dear." She slowly rolled over to her side, carefully raising herself into a sitting position, trying to move her head as little as possible as she focused on her daughter's face. "I just needed a rest. Today is a good day."

Anna smiled. "Will you be able to go down to dinner? I believe I could use your support in the face of the certain censure of Lord Liston—I mean, dear Cousin Herbert."

"Oh dear, I forgot all about him. Can he really be all that bad? Harriet has the highest praise for him. Perhaps you should give him another chance?"

"I will try Mama. Lady Harriet has reminded me that I should try to look my best and so I should begin to dress for dinner. But I did want to tell you that the fall harvest is looking very fruitful this year, what with the fine weather we are having."

"That's excellent dear. The weather has been excellent for a good early harvest. Your father and mamgu would be so proud of you, managing everything like you do. I don't know what we'd do without you. I worry that you are carrying too much on your shoulders."

"My shoulders are surely broad enough, Mama." She smiled, trying not to dwell on how "robust" she was, tallish and chubby, with sturdy shoulders to match. Add brown hair and unfashionable green eyes and she was not the lovely petite model of English femininity like her mother or the slightly exotic beauty of her Welsh grandmother. She was just plain Anna. "But I have had my bit of fun today, I have put up a good year's worth of comfrey ointment and Mamgu's special plasters for congestion."

Margaret clucked her tongue. "Your idea of fun is most young ladies' idea of more work. You need to feed your fanciful side sometimes my dear Marianna."

"As long as I do not have to spend all my time with embroidery and at the pianoforte, as my dear aunt would have me do, I am content."

"Lady Harriet only wants what is best for you, as do I. She may be...challenging at times but she always means well." A light knock at the door signaled the arrival of Lucy and mother and daughter parted to dress for dinner.

As Anna walked to her own bedroom, she sighed. *Mama is so good*. She doubted she could be so forgiving. Lady Harriet's entrance into their lives four years ago, upon the death of her husband, had disrupted their happy lives more than anyone would politely

admit. Herbert Dalrymple was Lady Harriet's stepson and had upon his father's death promptly booted Lady Harriet out of Liston Manor. And as Herbert's grandmother was still occupying the Dower house, it fell to Lady Harriet to seek out her brother's house in the wilds of the border country. Her brother, Anna's father, had managed to keep her somewhat in line. Then, two years later, with the death of George Sanderton, Lady Harriet had decided that it was her mission to try to run the lives of everyone in Gladstone Abbey. Two centuries of Margaret Sanderton's Carew ancestors had managed it perfectly well but Lady Harriet did not let that stop her from her incessant meddling. Why Lady Harriet would look so kindly upon the man who had removed her from her home, Anna would never understand. Not after Aunt Harriet had spent fifteen childless years playing nursemaid to her decrepit, spendthrift husband.

However, Aunt Harriet was always making remarks about the dismal, backwater state of their surroundings. Anna supposed that Cousin Herbert's visit would add a touch of glamour to a life in the country. Anna would try to make the best of it.

Chapter Two

Anna found herself two hours later dressed for dinner more formally than was typically her wont and waiting in the evening sitting room for the arrival of the illustrious Viscount. He had in fact arrived as the ladies were all getting dressed and had insisted via servants on a bath after his arduous trip. Anna, her mother and her aunt had all had to complete their toilettes sharing one upstairs maid, Emmaline, as the others had been needed to carry water and prepare the Viscount's bath. Her aunt was still flustered from the experience and rose to check her appearance often in a mirror above the mantle. Anna tried not to be amused at the sight of her aunt primping her wig unnecessarily and smoothing her overly formal, red sarcenet gown with the nervousness of a newly come-out debutante. Anna herself was simply glad her mother did not seem too taxed by the journey down the stairs and Margaret rested on a settee, her hands busy with simple needlework.

Dinner was already late and Anna hoped that Cook would not mutter for the next week over the inconsiderateness of "city folk". Aunt Harriet regularly ranted over the familiarity of the staff and their insubordination but the staff were as close as family and Anna would rather listen to Cook's muttering and biblical parables than the pronouncements of her aunt. Besides, when receiving her aunt's wisdom, one gained little but blistered ear drums. When listening to Cook's complaints the reward was more likely to be a lemon tart. Of course, that might be partly to blame for Anna's lack of fashionably petite form but it would not do to insult Cook by not enjoying her lovingly made creations.

More minutes ticked by and Anna herself began to fuss with her gown. Newly purchased from the one seamstress in Oswestry, the style was simple, the fabric a thin, soft-twilled silk in a cornflower blue. Her aunt had often huffed at her for not wearing pristine white muslin, as most young and fashionable girls of property were wont to do. But after years of mourning, Anna enjoyed wearing color and she felt that it quite suited her. Besides it was yet another chance go by to subtly irritate her esteemed aunt. When could she ever let just an opportunity pass by?

The door opened and a footman finally showed in Lord Herbert Dalrymple, Viscount Liston. In walked a blond man two inches shorter than Anna, attired in a shockingly yellow waistcoat and bright blue jacket, with starched shirt points high enough to cut the chin of his pinched face. *I must compliment his valet on such an achievement in the wilds of Shropshire!* Anna barely managed restraining the giggle that threatened to erupt. Cousin Herbert actually raised a quizzing glass to inspect the room, the furniture, the Brussels carpet on the floor and finally the occupants of the room. An awkwardly silent moment ensued and then he was besieged by Aunt Harriet.

"Oh Herbert, I do hope your journey wasn't too taxing."

He flinched at the familiar greeting but recovered quickly. In a smooth, cultured voice, utterly devoid of warmth, "I seem to have arrived in one piece, thank you, my lady."

"You can't be too careful with your health, as you have no heir yet to take on the family name," Aunt Harriet then glanced meaningfully at Anna, who felt her stomach drop. *Of course! How could I have been so stupid?* Cousin Herbert had come to court her, not to visit his unloved stepmother. She ground her teeth and tried to maintain a polite half-smile as her mind whirled.

She may not be beautiful but she was the heir to a good-sized estate, regardless of its location in the border lands. The Abbey had a tidy income and she could boast a dowry of near fifteen thousand pounds. Her father had worried about fortune hunters when she was not yet fifteen. As such, Anna held no enthusiasm for the Marriage Mart that was London society. She had not thought that her own family would conspire against her in this manner. Apparently, if she would not go to find a husband in a civilized fashion, her aunt had decided to bring a husband to her.

Dear Cousin Herbert had gone on to greet her mother, bowing not quite low enough over her hand. Anna, as his quarry, was to be last on the list of introductions. He bowed over her hand as well and as she glimpsed the top of his coiffed hair, she could have sworn that the lustrous blond hair was in fact a wig of some sort.

"How you've grown my dear." His eyes appraised her form mercilessly. "You are so much bigger...I mean taller, than last we met."

The subtle dig at her weight may not have been intentional but she would have bet good money that it was. Was he attempting to court her by making her feel inferior? She had to concede the tactic might have worked as little as year ago, when she was fresh from heavy mourning. However, after time spent virtually running the estate single-handedly and doing valued charity work in the village, she was no silly young miss to be so cowed.

She gave him a bright smile that did not quite reach her eyes, "It must be the fine country air, dear Cousin Herbert." He winced again at the informal address. She batted her eyelashes in response. "It does wonders, why everything just grows like mad. Barley, cows, young girls, why, even hair grows thicker here." He returned her false grin but an indignant gulp was unmistakable. No doubt about it now, it was definitely a wig.

They were saved from trading further quips by the announcement of dinner and Lady Harriet eagerly accepted the arm of her stepson, leaving Anna to carefully escort her mother in to dinner. Conversation lagged on the Sanderton end of the table, while Lady Harriet and Lord Liston managed to keep up a running dialogue which emphasized the inadequacies of the roads in Shropshire, the terrible food at the inns in Shropshire and in general the inferiority of just about everything in Shropshire. If Cousin Herbert was seeking to win her heart with his sophisticated London tastes, he

was not starting off in the best manner. Nothing would alter her love of the rolling hills of her home. But perhaps that was what he desired, a biddable wife he could stash deep in the country, while he entertained himself in the city. By the account of her aunt, he would have no need of her fortune. By his manner and tastes, he would seem more suited to looking for a mate among the social butterflies of the *haute ton*. Why in heaven was he here, interested in the hand of a country chit like herself? It was quite a conundrum, one that she rather wished she did not have to bother solving.

By the end of the second remove, Anna was using every ounce of restraint she possessed not to roll her eyes as the two “sophisticates” began a discussion of wallpaper fashions, Cousin Herbert casting a cool eye on the lightly patterned peach-colored silk that graced the walls of the dining room.

“The Duchess of Marlborough has just had her morning room done in the most fantastic and bold *chinoiserie* style, with a square gilt and red brocade sofa set. The Prince Regent himself awoke before his usual time just to be able to view it.”

“How extraordinary! It must be the most amazing sight,” Margaret put in with forced enthusiasm. She sent her daughter a look of shared suffering and as the meal was over, Anna decided to save her mother from further strain from this buffoon, no matter how cynically amusing.

“I’m sorry that there are no gentlemen here to share cigars and port but feel free to partake if you so wish. Still, I’m afraid you must be fatigued from your journey. Do you wish to retire early?” she asked hopefully.

“Oh but Cousin Marianna, your aunt has told me you are most accomplished at the pianoforte and I would so love to hear something soothing before retiring.” Anna was sure her aunt had said no such thing and she was only able to pluck out some country tunes. Her mother was the one accomplished on the instrument and she made that known.

“I’m afraid that we may not be able to oblige you however, as Mama is quite fatigued herself.” With a glance at the door, she saw that Lucy and James had anticipated her and were already waiting to escort Mama upstairs. Anna nodded and they came forward and her mother smiled her thanks and made her apologetic leave of the others.

“Let me wish you a peaceful repose then, Mrs. Sanderton. Still, dear Cousin Marianna,” Anna forced another smile at his words. “I’m sure anything you would play would be delightful.” Anna nodded, resigned to her fate.

The trio made their way to the music room, where Anna rang for tea. She made her way to the instrument and began to play a weak rendition of “Greensleeves”, unconsciously humming to remind her fingers of the notes. She noted a delicate shudder from Cousin Herbert and wondered whether it was her ineptitude at the instrument or the marbled green paint on the walls of the room that had elicited such a reaction. She reached the end of a third repeat and her fingers stilled, as she tried to think of something else to play. Her aunt, trying to fill in the uncomfortable silence,

began a rather inappropriate round of applause, which was halfheartedly copied by Cousin Herbert.

"Lovely my dear, lovely, such simple pleasures here in the country, isn't that so, dear Herbert."

He nodded his head sagely. "There are many pretty things to be found here certainly." Anna tried to smile at the compliment, though she doubted its sincerity. He crossed the room and much to her consternation, made to sit next to her on the tiny bench. "May I turn the pages for you, dear Cousin?"

There was another awkward silence as he realized that she had been playing from memory. "Well, perhaps then I can simply remain here, to better enjoy the music." She sent a glare toward her aunt, expecting some censure of this inappropriate behavior but her aunt had suddenly become fascinated by the state of her fingernails.

Anna began to pick out the tune from a church hymn from last Sunday, hoping that its somber message would not be lost on her unwanted companion. His knee pressed against hers in a very unpleasant matter and the resultant cacophony of chords made both of them jump. She began again, looking at his face out of the corner of her eye. He wore a self-satisfied smirk. He must have thought things were going particularly well.

However would she get out of this? She had been aware of her aunt's attempts at matchmaking with Squire Milford and Sir William Barry, neighbors that she had known since she was a little girl and both in need of a second wife. Obviously, her aunt's attempts were getting more serious, as Lord Liston was closer to her own age, although still more than ten years her senior. He was also her superior as far as status but only in the jaundiced view of the ton. She doubted that dear Herbert was her superior in much of anything but decorating, although she was sure that he also excelled at selecting haberdashery and evaluating the merits of superfine over merino for an evening dress coat.

Suddenly she felt his hand on her knee. She stiffened again and glanced toward her aunt, who from her position across from the pianoforte could not see anything of his actions. She very deliberately played the last few notes and abruptly stood up, practically knocking him from the bench. These ham-handed attempts had to stop.

"I'm sure that my poor playing has not given you the relaxation you seek, my lord. You must be out of your senses with fatigue by now," she hissed. She turned to her aunt. "Travel can be most wearying, so I have heard. I have had little opportunity for it myself. I would so like to visit some other places, even perhaps have a Season in London but I am afraid that either poor Mama or dear Aunt Harriet would find the experience too trying, so I am resigned to remain here in the country." Her aunt raised her eyebrows at this unfamiliar sentiment and began to attend very closely to Anna's every word. Perhaps she had managed to reroute her aunt's attention from immediate matrimony with the promise of a Season in London. Now she would try to eliminate her erstwhile suitor who meanwhile had begun a pallid rendition of a Beethoven sonata, as though he was trying to turn away attention from talk of the metropolis.

She sat beside her aunt on the brocade settee and rudely continued on with the monologue she had begun. "La, I am sure that if I were to see the bright lights and beauty of London, why then I'd never want to return to the country. It all sounds excessively diverting." She glanced at Cousin Herbert, who did seem to show a marked discomfort by this announcement, disharmony creeping in to his playing. She was not yet sure of his motives in trying to court her but the mention of London definitely left him a bit flustered.

Her aunt responded enthusiastically, "Why my dear, I had no idea you entertained such desires!" She continued to Herbert, "She is such a generous and giving creature, you know, she barely thinks of herself normally. She would make such a marvelous mother." Both Anna and Herbert flinched at this, a major chord turning to minor at Herbert's only slightly skilled fingers. Oblivious, Aunt Harriet turned back to Anna. "It would be a trial but I would be overjoyed to provide you with such happiness my dear. Why, what a wonderful birthday present for you, to spend a Season in London."

Her aunt gushed about a new wardrobe and how a dear old friend, Mrs. Grant, could surely recommend an excellent townhouse to rent in a fashionable area. Throughout this Anna smiled calmly, half turned toward her aunt in an attentive pose. She snuck a glance again at Cousin Herbert to assess his reaction to this outpouring. His skin was pale as though drained of color but his eyes were locked on to her figure in a most blatant way, as though assessing it for market. She suppressed an outraged gasp and vowed to lock her door tonight.

Thankfully, the party soon finished with tea and entertainment and they bid their goodnights, Cousin Herbert kissing her hand and lingering in an attempt at flirtation. She smiled coldly and took her leave of him as quickly as possible, mounting the stairs with alacrity and slowing only when she reached the door of her mother's suite.

She opened the door as quietly as possible, to check that her mother was asleep, only to find her figure alit with soft light, standing at the window in her dressing gown peering through the curtains.

"Is aught the matter Mama? Do you need some ginger tea? Should I ring for Lucy?" Margaret merely smiled in response.

"Come here dear," she whispered reverently and Anna walked softly across the room. She stood alongside her mother and looked out upon a glorious full harvest moon rising in the distance. It was as golden as newly threshed wheat and seemed to kiss the earth as it just cleared a hill over the horizon. Its beauty was breathtaking and it filled Anna with peace. The stress of the day seemed to melt away for a moment.

"It is such a moon that makes magic, you know," her mother whispered softly. "It was by such a moon that I called your father to me, some twenty years ago."

Anna smiled. Her mother had always sworn that her wish to the full moon had caused George Sanderton's horse to throw a shoe in Middleton, just as young Margaret Carew was passing through to deliver a pie to a new mother in the village. Maybe it was true but it was certainly the case that Mr. Sanderton had returned time and time

again to court young Miss Carew and he had won her heart. He had stayed there in Shropshire to make his bride happy, rather than return to his own leased property in Hertfordshire. He and his bride had never regretted that decision, choosing instead to be deliriously happy.

Thoughts of her father and her parents' happiness brought back the tears that had been threatening all night. She tried to suppress a sob but her mother turned to her and seeing her look of distress, wrapped her arms around her daughter. Anna leaned her head upon her mother's shoulder, inhaling her comforting scent and wept.

"Mama, will I ever find anyone as wonderful as Papa?"

"Of course you will my dear. Never settle for anything less. Your young man will make himself known in good time."

Anna straightened, the maudlin mood passed and she said laughingly, "You mean that it isn't dear Cousin Herbert?"

Margaret mimicked a look of shocked indignation. "I would disown you first. I do not trust that man farther than I could throw him. Besides, Mrs. Henderson would panic at the thought of all the redecorating he would require even for a brief visit!" They collapsed in laughter, thinking of how their ancient housekeeper would balk at any changes to the Abbey, her beloved charge.

"I needed that, Mama. I do believe he is attempting to court me and he is making a right mess of it too. It is quite a trial." She neglected to tell her mother of the knee incident, not wanting to upset her. She even hesitated with the next bit of news. "I'm afraid I have agreed to go to London for the next Season in spring, Mama, to stem any further of Aunt Harriet's attempts at matchmaking. I'm sure Aunt Harriet would welcome the chance to chaperone me. You need not worry about me."

After a pause, Margaret let out a resigned sigh, "I only wish I could come, my dear. I have not been to London in an age. It can be a very interesting place for a visit, though I should never want to live there. I would miss these hills too much." She looked back out to the moon, now higher in the cerulean sky. "You should not miss your opportunity with such a moon, my love. She will only wait so long for your wish."

Chapter Three

It was madness, simple madness. Lunacy, induced by the brilliant moon. But she had taken her mother's advice. It was near eleven o'clock but she had donned a comfortable walking dress and a dark pelisse to cover the light fabric of the dress and crept from the house. She carried a basketful of jars of one of mamgu's special skin ointments of glycerin, rosewater and calendula flowers. Such a mixture was said to be more potent if left to steep in the light of the full moon.

That was merely an excuse. She let her fanciful self take the lead for once and her steps brought her to a small rise cushioned with thick grass, the base of which was dotted with the first of the season's mushrooms, in a true "faerie ring". At the top of the hill, she set the jars down and pulled out a small bottle of cooking sherry spirited from Cook's stores on the way up from the stillroom. She poured a small libation to each direction of the four winds, a salute to her grandmother and then sat down, leaning back upon her hands to contemplate the glorious moon, now silver again as it rode high in the sky. A slight wind caressed her face blowing away her cares and the unseasonably warm weather soothed her into a meditative state.

What did she really want? She should wish to find a cure for her mother but that did not seem to be the thing to ask on this night. No, this was a lovers' moon, this night a lovers' night. It was a night to ask for the man of her dreams, even if she did not know who or what that might be.

"I wish...I wish for someone to share my dreams with," she whispered, feeling foolish but yet strangely exhilarated at the power she could swear coursed through her. That sounded so right somehow, as if she had been meant to say exactly those words. She realized that it was true. She wanted someone who could understand her love of learning and of medicine and plants. Someone who would love her home and the land around it enough to stay here with her. Someone with a sense of serious dedication, with just a touch of fancy and a sense of humor. Someone who knew there was more to life than parties and balls, hunting and gambling and all the pursuits of the idle rich. Someone to share her dreams.

A strange sound, almost like a tinkling laugh, intruded into her thoughts and she jumped at the noise, looking about her curiously. Mayhap the tales her mamgu told of the Tylwyth Teg were more than mere superstition. The hills of Oswestry were said to be the birthplace of Guinevere and carried a history older than the written word. She shivered. A dog bayed in the distance and she was brought back to reality. With a shake of her head to clear out the moonbeams, she realized that she had been lost in a trance for far too long. The air was chilled and the strange balmy weather that had helped lure

her out into the moonlight seemed to change back to the cold of mid-autumn in a heartbeat.

She collected her jars and made her way back to the house clutching her pelisse around her, hoping no servant would catch sight of her and report her activities to her aunt. Her peaceful reverie had been all too brief and a turmoil of thoughts flooded back as she got closer to the house. Thoughts about her unwanted guest, her troublesome aunt and how she would ever be able to leave Mama and the estate long enough to satisfy her aunt's idea of a proper Season. She reached the house and returned the jars to the stillroom and the sherry to its home among Cook's supplies. She reached the servants' stair and took off her half boots and crept up in her stockinged feet, praying that Cousin Herbert did not take it into his head to partake of a midnight stroll. She reached her room unmolested and locked her door anyway, just as a precaution.

Her unsettled state followed her into her dreams that night. Although she had felt herself too tense to find repose quickly, in truth sleep found her as soon as her head hit her pillow.

* * * * *

She came to awareness bound by her wrists to a post, sticks and straw around her feet, at the center of some kind of village square. Her heart filled with a strange mix of resignation, cynical amusement and dread, her eyes filled with tears of frustration. Before her a short, pinch-faced balding blond man, dressed in a severe black cowl at odds with the multitude of rings on his fingers, alternated swinging a lighted torch in her general direction and preaching at the frightened crowd before him. She looked down at her bare feet and the tattered remains of what had once been a blue overtunic and cream linen gown, with long pointed sleeves now ripped and tattered and hanging to her knees. She moved her lips in silent prayer, to whom she knew not and waited for the agony to come, all the while trying to twist her wrists in some conformation to remove the rope constraining them.

Suddenly, there was the clatter of horse's hooves in the distance and in an impossibly long and yet impossibly short moment, a rider came barreling through the village on a giant horse, long black hair waving behind him. He pulled to a halt in front of the screeching priest. Piercing brown, in truth almost black, eyes stared at her for a moment, before he unsheathed his sword and with the flat of the blade, knocked the torch away from the pile of kindling at her feet. The priest, thus disarmed, promptly opened and closed his mouth in the most cunning imitation of a fish and fainted dead away. Her rider then arched an eyebrow, leveled a glare at the assembled crowd, who shuffled away quietly leaving the priest unattended in the dust. He casually dismounted, stood before her and gave her a thorough inspection, from the tip of her bare toes, all along her somewhat tall frame, resting especially on several areas of typical masculine interest, to the top of her crown of disarrayed chestnut hair. Her own demeanor gradually changed from overwhelming gratitude to shocked irritation the longer this perusal took.

"If you are quite finished with the inspection, sirrah, perchance I could ask for your further assistance in my rescue?" she said with clenched teeth. She may have not been the most beautiful woman he ever rescued but at least he didn't have to appraise her like some bit of horseflesh before finding her worthy of his aid. Black hair and dark eyes, combined with the rough planes of his intimidating face added up to make him a villain, not a hero at all.

"But of course, my dear lady." He gave her a boyish grin and the deep brown eyes twinkled up at her, causing a sudden catch in her breathing. *Well, maybe not a complete villain. Villains don't have dimples.* He clambered up the haphazard pile of wood and reached behind her, pressing his body against hers, as he attempted to free her hands. "I am simply enjoying this experience. I don't remember ever having dream...attempted a rescue quite like this before. It is a very 'captivating' experience, I assure you."

His head at her shoulder, his breath against her neck, she tried to appear unaffected. "I am thrilled that my discomfiture has caused you such excellent entertainment, sir."

He laughed and after several awkward seconds, with a lot more bodily contact than she believed necessary, the rope freed and she vigorously massaged her wrists in an attempt to restore circulation. She looked around, assessing the best course of action for a future that would not include being returned to the stake. She let out a gasp as her knight in not-so-shining armor, actually just some chain mail and dark green tunic and leggings, swept her up in his arms and carried her to his horse.

"Sir, I thank you for your assistance but I believe further aid is unnecessary." He plopped her unceremoniously in the saddle of the large horse, the height of which made her very nervous. He mounted easily behind her, his moves speaking of long practice and skill. He clasped an arm around her waist and trotted his horse off the way he had come.

She was pressed against the chain mail shirt he wore and his arm held her tightly against him. She wondered who he was. He was mysterious, infuriating, charming and smelled entirely too good for her composure. She felt the warmth of his thighs against hers through the thin material of her tattered dress and she suddenly wondered where her petticoats must have gone to. Petticoats? And just who was this man taking such liberties with her person. Did she know him? Why on earth would he carry a broadsword? And why on earth was she being burned at the stake, of all things. On the whole it was preposterous. Why, it was just as though she was...

"Dreaming..." she whispered. She was dreaming and yet, she did not awaken upon that realization.

"What my dear?" he asked and she felt his breath tickle her ear.

"Where are we going, good Sir Knight?" she decided she might as well play along, as no harm could come of it and he was exceedingly handsome, if impertinent.

"My home, where else?" He said this easily and yet, it was as though a cloud passed across his face and he quickened their pace. A trot became a canter and then a full gallop as they raced along the road.

Anna was unused to such speed upon a horse and was content enough riding a simple and placid animal when not in Morpheus' realm. She clutched his arm and the pommel for support. Suddenly, as they came upon a ruined toll house along the road, the world melted, shifting around them like watercolors running off the page in the rain. In an instant, instead of the country road on which they had been racing, the horse's hooves began to rouse the most amazing clatter against the marble steps of a large manor house and Anna gasped as they rode full bore into the open front door. They rode on through the immense front hall, which seemed to grow more immense every second and she realized that it was not the room increasing in size but she and her erstwhile savior all seemed to be shrinking.

She noticed the lack of mail pinching at her back and looked down to see them both clad in most respectable, modern attire. She in a dove-gray riding habit, he in charcoal breeches and black Hessians. But they were still in a most unrespectable position, with her astride the horse and his arm still wrapped around her tightly. She threw a glance up toward his face and noticed his hair was trimmed, no longer the wild black mane he rode in with. His face was stern, intent on some business. He did not seem to note the changes in their surroundings or attire however but rode on intently. As she glanced about at the giant settees and gargantuan grandfather clock which boomed the hour ominously, she suddenly heard horns blaring and they were joined by a full fox hunt in progress.

They were soon surrounded by several dozen avid horsemen and women, all equally miniature and elegantly groomed and stately as could be. If they were in fact in search of a fox in this house, she began to fervently hope it was a miniature fox, for a conventional fox could easily have made a fine dinner for himself out of any of the miniature company, horses and their riders. None of the group seemed to pay them much mind, as intent on their task as they were, although to have a couple riding amidst the hunt so intimately entwined would indeed be quite a scandal. Their speed did not slacken and she continued to clutch the saddle and the steady arm of her gentleman. She prayed that she would wake up before she lost her lunch or whatever meal she might have eaten in dreamland recently.

Although she could see no fox in evidence in the middle of the giant sitting room, apparently miniature fox hounds passing around them and creating a cacophony of barking could sense its presence in the library which loomed ahead. Holding on for dear life, she prepared to join the headlong dash, when suddenly the horse slowed and her companion heaved a sigh and stated simply, "I want no part of this."

She sighed in return, grateful for the respite, until a large figure loomed over them from the doorway. A severe man, perhaps just under three score years, large of girth and small of humor glared down at them. He pinned them with brown eyes that bore some little resemblance to her companion and then he thundered, "You must

participate in the hunt, it is your duty as a gentleman. Think of your position! What will everyone think, that you are weak?"

Her gentleman looked up at the man, motionless for a moment and she took a moment to interject, "If that is the case, why are you not down here as well? Or could you not find a horse willing to carry you?"

The man behind her barked a laugh, gave her ear a quick kiss, which made her skin burn with the contact. She should be outraged at the entire situation but she was merely dreaming and this man made her feel strange and wonderful and alive. He wheeled the horse about and they were off again, this time back toward the front door. The horse began to increase in size and speed, so that the giant behind them could not catch them. All at once they were full size and clattering through the front door and down the marble steps. They continued their gallop across a wide lawn and through wheat fields. The wind blowing in her face was invigorating, though hardly more so than the presence of the male behind her. His broad shoulders cradled her against him and the smell of man and horse engulfed her. It was all something she had had little experience with and yet she was amazed that it could be so intense in a dream. He nuzzled her hair and the rush of feeling through her body overwhelmed her. Her heart beat with a birdlike cadence, fast and light and she felt flutterings throughout her body. She was amazingly aware of every place of contact between their bodies, from his arm across her waist and the fingers splayed across her hip, to his lips in her hair and his chest against her back. The scenery flew by, trees and fields, ponds and meadows, until they began up a steep hill.

He whispered in her ear, "I must go and I cannot take you – but I cannot leave you either." The horse charged up the hill and then over and then with infinite slowness, they were falling and panic set in as the horse and both riders tumbled into the red fog boiling below them. Heat and stench rose up at them like from the Pit and she gasped in shock.

Chapter Four

October 1813, France

Lieutenant Colonel Brandon Kelsey sat up in his cot, breathing fast and hard, sweating despite the chill of autumn in the Pyrenees. The panic was not only a gut reaction to the fall but the sudden shock to being torn away from his mysterious companion. As he looked around at the familiar surroundings of his camp tent, he shook his head, trying to clear it of the sense of loss he felt as the face and figure of the lady faded quickly, as dreams were wont to do.

Still, he had rarely had a dream so vivid. He had clearly known he was dreaming at first, wearing clothes so ridiculous and carrying out the rescue of a maiden was not something he had ever dreamed of before. So the moment he had come upon the scene of an attempted burning, he had guessed that he was dreaming. It had given him a certain freedom of movement, a freedom to play that he had rarely engaged in, certainly not since childhood. The damsel in distress was a fiery thing that triggered his baser instincts upon first sight. He had rarely felt such desire and he was grateful to his imagination for the experience and for not requiring him to act the gentleman in her presence. She had felt entirely exquisite trapped against him.

He ran a hand through unruly black hair that Fitzhugh, his batman, had been trying to pin him down to trim this past week. He smiled to think what his intrepid man would have thought of the long hair he had sported in that maiden's fantasy. In all it had been a most excellent dream and he only wished it had continued in that vein, instead of plummeting into an odd reenactment of an old argument with his father. The lady seemed to have continued with him into that dream and helped to beard the old goat in his den. He only wished he could take her with him the next time he traveled to Stinton Hall. He would enjoy seeing his father opened-mouthed with indignation. Sadly, this dream lady would have to remain trapped in his mind. He gave a sigh and stood up, stretching his tall frame after a night curled in his tiny camp cot.

Sensing the movement within, Fitzhugh, his batman, pulled back the entrance flap and looked for permission to enter. Brandon nodded and thus Fitzhugh began preparing his ablutions for the day. Refreshed by a shave and the promise of rations other than hardtack, Brandon made his way to the mess. The supply trains had finally followed Wellington across the Bidassoa and into the Frogs' home ground, La Belle France itself. Perhaps there was a bit of bacon to be had, or if God was smiling on the British, a cup of real coffee. They only held a toehold in France so far but it was a start. Some of the other staff officers looked to have Boney roasting over a slow fire by spring of the next year but Brandon was more circumspect. It depended just as much on the Austrians and the Russians as it did on the few thousand Englishmen, Portuguese and Spanish partisans that followed Wellington to harass Napoleon's south flank.

Breakfast in hand, with a bit of bacon but alas, no coffee, Colonel Kelsey turned to his duties. The intricacies of battle planning were not his worry. His purview was the complexities of providing care to injured soldiers and securing the supply lines to ferry them to safety. He began his walk across the camp which served as the temporary headquarters for the General's staff. They had set up on the north side of the Bidassoa River as the center of preparations for a spearhead into the heart of France. Every available draft animal and anything that might be used as a cart or wagon was to be requisitioned from the surrounding countryside. The French hadn't left much behind and trying to find the means to transport supplies was like squeezing blood from a stone. The few remaining farmers had to be convinced to accept English coin or nothing and most of the provosts doing the bargaining had to be convinced by superiors to pay for their requisitions, or risk a more pesky insurgency behind them.

The air on this side of camp was filled with the scent of manure from the hastily built stockade containing the few animals they had scrounged so far that had not been taken by Napoleon's troops or found their way into a stew pot. He frowned and waved over Major Barnes, the leader of the requisition brigade.

He came straight to the point, in a no-nonsense manner that the men had come to respect. "Barnes, I'm afraid that either the stockade must be moved, or the injured men. The bad air from the animals can't be good for them and the wind's just not agreeable to the current arrangement." Barnes nodded resignedly and offered some of his contingent to help move the sick to a better location. It was best not to argue with the Colonel over the health of the men, as Kelsey had probably saved more English lives with his efforts than the most daring attack on a French-held position. Barnes' superiors had had the sense to recognize it, as did every soldier in the Peninsular Army. Kelsey had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel within eighteen months of entering service on Wellington's staff as a Major and now oversaw a large percentage of supply and recovery operations, as well as organizing better care of the British troops.

That accomplished, Brandon continued on to visit the few wounded and sick that this temporary headquarters had collected and to prepare them to be moved, yet again. His first stop was to visit a young corporal who had been wounded by a French farmer holding an ancient flintlock musket, trying to defend his elderly donkey from "requisition" by the British forces. The wound had grazed the thigh but had missed any arteries. Brandon had been on site to stanch the flow of blood when young Smith had collapsed upon reaching the camp. Barring infection, Smith would recover and fight again, if there were any Frogs left to fight.

Brandon picked his way among the still sleeping men clutching stomachs from the inevitable intestinal complaints a prolonged campaign created. He found his goal, "How are you, Corporal?"

"Very good sir. They say I'll be back on my feet in no time." The young man smiled. He couldn't be more than nineteen and suddenly Brandon felt, at only twenty-six, very old.

"You'll be dancing in Paris soon, Corporal, have no fear."

The boy smiled and Brandon walked through the lines of pallets and asked a few brief questions of the surgeon on duty. Nothing was amiss and most of the men could be moved easily. He reluctantly took his leave and continued on his camp rounds, to assess the quartermaster's figures for the current supplies brought in by supply train. He shook his head in amusement, for the mathematics he had suffered through at Eton and Cambridge in order to continue with his medical studies had gotten him farther than any of his frustrated tutors would have believed.

Lost in thought, he made his way through the camp, his thoughts turned to his father, whom Brandon was certain would have balked at the idea that his son was merely a "supply manager" and not at the forefront leading the charge. The Earl of Chester, Lord Edmund Kelsey, would have been appalled that his son's most valuable skills on the battlefield were not the hours of sword practice he had endured as a child but the math and sciences that the earl had so belittled. Brandon Kelsey had spent many years at Cambridge, taking every medical class he could attend. He was endlessly fascinated by the workings of the human body. But he was the son of an earl, even if but a second son. According to the earl, Brandon could not deign to engage in such a profession and so dishonor the family. Somehow, it was acceptable to his father that he join the military and engage in the business of death rather than stay in England and engage in the business of life.

He gave a cynical chuckle. That damned dream was so vivid it still caught at the edges of his consciousness. It must be responsible for these uncharacteristic musings. The day passed quickly and the night brought no further visits by brown-haired green-eyed firebrands, witch-hunts or miniature horses. Weeks passed and the front moved to the Nivelle river, where Marshall Soult waited for the British juggernaut. The defensive lines of the Nivelle broke and the English moved on and the supply lines with it. The wounded poured in to the field hospitals strung from southern France across the Pyrenees to Bilbao and Brandon spent more time on a horse than he or his backside cared to contemplate.

The villages in Spain were coming back to life as the French had been forced out and one morning at the foot of the mountains, he and a small escort from his regiment stopped to fill their canteens in a village whose well had escaped poisoning by the French. In the distance he caught sight of a glimpse of long brown hair with hints of copper and the swish of a blue skirt. He followed, the soldiers laughing that their commander would do something so highly uncharacteristic as chasing after a peasant girl. He ignored their catcalls and caught up to the woman as she entered a farmhouse.

"*Perdóname, señorita?*" She turned, alarmed at the man's voice so close behind her. She realized he was not a Frenchman but an English officer and she gifted him with a shy smile.

A strange sense of disappointment filled him as he looked into brown eyes in a simple, sweet face and not the flashing green eyes that filled his daydreams in the saddle. He tried to figure out how to extricate himself from the embarrassing situation, when the girl's father rounded the corner, pitchfork in hand. The armed man leveled

him a stare that could melt an iceberg and Brandon did not wonder any longer how this father had managed to keep his daughter untouched in the face of the rampaging Frogs.

He executed a small bow, smiled at both the girl and her guardian and beat a hasty retreat. His men wisely looked elsewhere but he noticed the irrepressible smiles on a few faces. He could not fault them, even Fitzhugh. They mounted and continued their journey. What had possessed him to do something so impulsive? He rode on in silence for miles.

The next evening, the small group reached the bustling port of Bilbao and Brandon looked forward to enjoying a comfortable bed for the first time in ages. First, it was time to report in and check on the status of supply shipments. The main quartermaster at the docks was a surly fellow and it took all of his patience to deal with him civilly. It wouldn't do to make an enemy of such a man. On his way out of the office, a lieutenant stopped him.

"Excuse me, sir, are you Lieutenant Colonel Brandon Kelsey?" the officer asked nervously.

"Yes, lieutenant. Why?" Brandon said curiously.

"There was a letter for you in the latest diplomatic packet. The protocol office thought it should be forwarded to you as soon as possible." He handed over a thick envelope with the Earl of Chester's seal. The lieutenant left with a quick bow and Brandon clasped the envelope in his hands. He strode back to the inn where he and his men had found lodgings and pushed aside the offers to share a round of drinks. He made his way up to his room and sat at the small desk the room afforded. He stilled the shaking of his hands as he broke the seal, hoping that there was no terrible news from home.

To Col. Brandon Kelsey, General Staff,

I hope this letter finds you well and that none of your dratted diseases you find so interesting have made off with you...

Brandon smiled. His father, at least, was still robust as ever. He read on:

The war seems to be progressing well and I am sure that Wellesley will not have much use for you soon...

The earl was reluctant to use or acknowledge Arthur Wellesley, the Marquess of Wellington's recent title, even if the man could conquer half of Europe with a handful of troops.

It would behoove you to return to England as soon as may be done and take up your duties to the family. Your brother Harold, I am afraid, does not take his duties as seriously as I would wish and has not yet managed to produce an heir with Lady Patricia...

He skimmed the rest of the letter but little more was said of substance, other than the yields at the home farm and a few of the antics of the Prince. This drivel merited inclusion in a diplomatic packet? He had known his father was in the same club as the Minister of War but this went beyond the pale. The fact that his brother Hal had little or no interest in his wife Patricia, the former Lady Sampson, was well established. The

marriage had been arranged by the two families and both parties had readily acceded to the match, clearly a marriage of convenience and no child had yet been produced.

But his father wanted an heir for the title and so the pressure moved to him to provide it. He wanted nothing to do with satisfying his father's dynastic ambitions but the thought of a wife and children did actually begin to sound better as he considered it. The last two years of blood and sweat had tempered his ambitions to save the world with modern medicine. He would be happy in a small village somewhere where he might be able to practice medicine without the uproar that would occur in Town. He thought his father's requirements for the bride of a Kelsey—a noble lineage and large dowry—could not be more different than his own—that she possess a quick mind and lively disposition. True, he wouldn't mind a pretty face, or a set of flashing green eyes...enough of that. There would be a long road to haul into France before he could think of a wife or an heir. Or the begetting of an heir with said wife. He yawned and exhaustion seemed to overtake him suddenly. He glanced out the window and a full moon hung over the bay, the waves sparkling silver.

He blinked and the sheets that Fitzhugh had obligingly turned down on the mattress looked inviting, whether or not he had enjoyed dinner. He shed his dusty uniform, took advantage of the clean water in the pitcher and basin for a quick wash, and slipped under the sheets. With another yawn, he was asleep.

* * * * *

He could not conceive of how he had let his father convince him of the necessity of obtaining well-bred wife to the extent that he was here. Here at a ball, a ball that would surely be described in the best drawing rooms on the morrow as a "horrible crush". The inane chatter of young misses. Their mothers' avarice-filled appraisals of his person and his fortune. The come-hither glances of married "ladies" filled with *ennui* and looking for the next thing to relieve their boredom, preferably in the bedroom... It all combined to sicken him. His reintroduction into polite society engendered appraisals of his fortune and his person from all corners. To the matchmaking mamas, he might be only a second son but he had his mother's settlement of some four thousand a year in income and so was still quite a catch for the enterprising young lady. For the married ladies seeking adventure, his reticence and dark good looks promised an exciting challenge. He shook his head. Yet, he supposed it was this amalgam of polite society that he must suffer if he was to find a wife.

The room was oppressively hot and the lemonade punch almost as bad as that at Almack's. He was sorely tempted to ask the portly gentleman occupying the wall not ten feet from himself, for a dram of spirits from that flask, which he had been unsuccessfully concealing in a waistcoat pocket. He did not wish to join the bulk of the gentlemen for port and cards in the card room, gambling held little interest for him anymore and there was no other alcohol being served at the time, drat it. The hothouse lilies from the flower arrangements bedecking the room gave off a sickly perfume,

which somehow served to remind him of the fetid odor surrounding the field hospitals in Spain.

He looked at a young miss parading down the floor in the current set with the catch of the day, the Earl of Suffolk. He suppressed a small shudder. She was perfectly attired in pink silk taffeta, diamonds winking from a generous necklace and from pins in her perfectly coifed blonde hair. Perfect, perfect, perfect. She had all the marks of classical beauty and she was supposed to look young and innocent and enchanting. To him, she appeared cold and predatory. The dance took her past where he stood at the side of the dance floor, imposing in all black with a flash of starched white shirt and cravat. With his black hair and dark brown eyes, he looked like the very devil.

As the set progressed past him, the sight of a shy smile turned toward him broke him out of his pensive reverie. The owner of that smile turned her head back to attend to her partner but his interest was captured by the first sign of genuine sentiment he had seen tonight. The chit was in a simple, becoming dark green dress. Her brown hair was arranged simply, with a few escaped curls teasing her neck and a cream ribbon wound through her hair. Drop pearls graced her ears, their whiteness emphasizing the rosiness and health of her complexion, subtly different from the pasty white skin that most young ladies aimed to achieve. This girl had held her face to the sun occasionally and the effect was charming. Here was someone real, not a cold automaton. Her companion was a jolly-looking older man and as they turned a corner in their form, she laughed at something he said and so the first true glimpse of her face was of her green eyes alight with mirth, her mouth open and laughing, her cheeks flushed pink.

He felt the shock of recognition, without understanding why. Why did he remember those eyes glaring at him with annoyance? Why could he remember her body pressed against him? Her form was pleasing to him, that was certainly true. It was not the reed-thin form that was fashionable for the day. No, instead, her curves were generous. She might even have been referred to as plump by the uncharitable but he had no fondness for stick figures. He swore he remembered how that form felt with his arms around her and it was more than simple musings to pass the time. It had all the strength of a cherished memory. She glanced his way again and met his stare. She held his eyes for a moment and then broke away with aplomb but she could not hide the subtle blush suffusing her cheeks. After another few moments, the set came to a close and her partner escorted her to the refreshment table. A few more steps and she disappeared from view behind one of those infernal giant flower arrangements.

He abandoned his post at the wall and moved to find her again. He couldn't see her at the refreshment table and not with any of the groups of chattering biddies that ringed the end of the ballroom. He managed to skillfully avoid being brushed into by several ladies who had tried to catch his eye throughout the evening and spent several minutes slowly circling the entire room, searching futilely for the girl in green. As he passed the bank of windows, a slight breeze touched his cheek and he turned. She was outside, on the balcony, looking down at the moonlit garden. The pale light shone on her hair and made her rosy skin glow softly like the pearls at her ears.

He followed her outside and suddenly the world seemed to shift slightly, almost to blur around the edges. She turned to face him and smiled. The moon still shone brightly but she had changed. Her eyes still danced but her hair fell loosely around her bare shoulders and instead of a ribbon in her hair, she wore a crown of white flowers which shone in the moonlight against her dark hair. Her dress was still green but it was simple gauze and flowed around her ankles like a soft breeze, her feet bare. Her hands, once adorned in proper gloves, were deliciously bare. She reached out toward him, beckoning. Then smiling mischievously she turned and scampered over the grass.

He looked around for a moment in bewilderment. Gone was the balcony, even the ballroom. He was standing somewhere in an open meadow, rolling hills and trees surrounding him. It was not so different from the hills he had galloped across as a youth on his father's Cheshire estate. It certainly had the mark of the wilds of the Welsh border country. He wore a simple, comfortable dark shirt and trousers and something that tickled his face, a mask! He brought his hands up to touch it and felt what appeared to be feathers of some kind. The girl, some yards ahead now, turned to him and called in a rich soprano, "Cannot you keep up with me, or are you even trying?"

He took off after her at a steady lope, intent on seeing where the girl would lead him. As they crested a hill, he heard music again. Not the proper, restrained tones of the ballroom they had left somewhere behind, but the wild tones of fiddle and drum, flute and lyre, all wound together in the wild music of another age. She had stopped at the top of the hill and as he caught up to her, he impulsively captured her hand in his. Turning her head, she gave him a shy smile and returned her gaze to the players in the field before them.

It was a celebration of some kind but the attendees were different from anything he would have imagined past the age of ten. The wild music was accompanied by a rousing dance and the participants were enthralling to watch. There were tall elegant gentlemen and ladies in clothes of dazzling, shimmering greens and blues, with skin so pale it was almost transparent and an odd cast to their features. And then there was the matter of their ears. Were they pointed? There were short, round little men who wended their way between the other dancers while playing on tiny flutes. There were animals that moved among the crowd as well, seeming to take their part in the dance as well. Large birds, a few dogs, even a goat. The women all wore crowns of flowers, as his partner did. There were others in masks as he wore, brilliant scarlet made orange by the moonlight, or more of the greens and blues. His mask, as far as he could tell from the edges around his eyes, was as black as his hair. Even the trees in the glade seemed to sway with the hypnotic beat of the drums.

He was dreaming, that was for certain. A dream unlike any he had ever had. The girl next to him seemed utterly content and happy watching the dance and her eyes held no sense of the oddness that surrounded them. She squeezed his hand and the simple contact seemed to fill some hole in his heart. Mayhap this was her dream and he was merely a player in it. A thought to fill a philosopher's thesis, he supposed. He smiled to think himself a hero in some girl's dream, as she had been a heroine in his to

rescue him from the boredom of that ballroom, or the hell of his life on the battlefield. Somewhere in France, if his hazy brain could but remember. But some hero he made, wrapped up in his own thoughts.

"Would you care to dance, my Lady Spring?" he turned to her and gallantly bowed over her hand.

She curtsied and answered in that same smooth voice that had enchanted him upon his entrance into this fantastic vision, "Why of course, milord Raven. I thought you'd never ask." She gave him a wicked little grin and clutched his hand, pulling him toward the circle of otherworldly dancers.

She paused at the edge of the group and he took the lead, clutching his arm about her waist in a way that felt so familiar. He smiled down into her eyes and after half a moment of shock her mischievous glint returned and a smile graced her features. Without knowing the steps of the ongoing dance, he whirled them about in his best approximation of that scandalous dance, the waltz. Whether the dancers altered their path for them or they themselves unconsciously knew the patterns by instinct, Brandon and his lady seemed to flow in among the others with ease. The world flew by, reds and greens, duns and yellows bathed and altered by moonlight to an ethereal glow. He was reminded of the stories his mother had told him, of the faerie under the hill and how on the full moon they came out to dance again in the real world. This lovely woman in his arms must have held her share of faerie magic. She felt so right in his arms, like she had always belonged there. They had spoken only a few words and yet he felt that he could trust her with his heart, if he were so brave. If only this was not a dream he would have no trouble following his father's dictum to marry. His father might not agree that such a magical maiden was the proper choice for his wife, but Brandon found he did not give a farthing what his esteemed sire thought of the matter.

She breathed hard and fast with the exertion of the lively steps and her tongue unconsciously flicked out to wet her rose-colored lips. She smiled and he felt a throb of desire for this charming siren in his arms. His expression must have altered with the erotic nature of his thoughts, for she tilted her head and furrowed her brow.

"Are you weary, shall we stop?" she queried.

"If you are asking, then you yourself must need rest." He spun them out of the circle of dancers and they collapsed, laughing upon a convenient natural bench. The rock upon which they sat seemed to have been carved out by nature as a true loveseat and its slope seemed to determine that they were to sit uncommonly close together. Their thighs touched and their hands were still linked.

She looked into his eyes and then away, a bashful half-smile upon her lips. The awkward silence seemed to stretch and he cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid we have not been properly introduced...umph..."

His formal little speech, so out of place on this wild, magical night, was cut off by his fair companion's visage suddenly disappearing altogether, along with all other light. The lady sighed in rapture, why he could not tell. The music played on however and he

realized his mask had been pushed down over his eyes. He moved his hands to right it but heard a soft whisper.

“Do not move, sir. Do not even breathe.”

A light touch tickled his forehead and suddenly he felt the warmth of her hand cupped against his brow. The pressure lifted and regardless of her directive, he moved the obstruction and regained his vision.

He too gasped at the sight which greeted him. In the palm of her hand, his lady held a tiny person, bright silver and no bigger than a thrush. Dressed in gossamer threads, the little sprite had a glorious pair of bluish purple wings that would have made any butterfly mad with jealousy. It seemed to regard them both with amused curiosity and with a tinkling laugh and an impish grin, it took flight and sailed over the dancers, bobbing and twisting in sync with the beat of the drum. They watched it fly away and when his senses returned, he realized their faces were mere inches apart. He could no longer resist the pull of her lips and he leaned forward gently, praying that she didn't pull back.

She met him instead and her warm lips tasted of honey and rose-water. Her response was earnest but innocent and he would have guessed this was her first kiss. His heart thrilled at the knowledge that she was his alone and he would have given anything to keep it so. He forgot that this was a dream, forgot that she was a figment of his imagination, or perhaps he was a figment of hers. Her hands came up to wrap around his upper arms and his hands threaded behind her back, tangling in her long silky hair. He was flooded with the scent of her—woman and lavender and roses. He could barely believe this was a dream, she felt more real to him than anything he had ever known.

He pulled back slightly, allowing them both to breathe. Her eyes were wide, her skin flushed. She was completely ravishing. He had never wanted a woman so much in his life and his sense of honor warred with common sense and desire. This was a dream, he could do as he pleased...but some voice in him warned him to be careful, not to push too hard. This was a lady, regardless of the unconventional setting. This was a young girl, an innocent. Willing perhaps but somehow unaware of what she was doing to him. He cleared his throat.

“Would you give me the gift of your name, my fair one?”

She blinked, his words bringing her back to Earth. She blushed, aware of the inappropriateness of their actions. She was just answering with a soft, “Maria...” when a great knocking ripped through the air, interrupting her. The dancers flew in all directions and the world twisted in upon itself and for a second time, he lost her.

Chapter Five

November 1813, Shropshire, England

Bang, bang, bang. The sound of the knock at the door woke her abruptly from the beautiful dream she had been having. Her handsome, playful man was back and he had kissed her! Oh, had he kissed her. *Why ever did I tell Mary to wake me so early?* She sighed with frustration at her maudlin reverie and threw back the counterpane. She was not an early riser by choice, although her chosen obligations to the needy through the Middleton and Oswestry area often had her up as the cock crowed, bleary-eyed and much dependent on strong tea. If she was wide awake this early, then she would make the best of it and make some rounds with her best pepper poultices for the Widow Granger's rheumatism and make sure that Mr. Tinger's foxglove powder was not losing potency, as his dropsy had seemed worse in church on Sunday. She was the only resource for the sick or injured that day, as Mr. Harlowe was still across the Welsh border in Llywnmawr, attending a difficult birth despite his own relative infirmity. Mr. Trent the apothecary was in London attending a cousin's wedding. And Mr. Clowson, the parson, had been confined to his bed lately with gout. As she sat at her white oak dressing table and brushed her hair, she clucked her tongue over Mr. Clowson and his adamant refusal of any of her "pagan potions", as he referred to her remedies. Although she was certain her mixture of black cherry juice and willow bark extract would work wonders for him. That and a better diet.

She called for Mary, who knew better than to come into the room before Anna had made up her mind to fully awaken. She sat and contemplated her appearance in her mirror. The dressing table had belonged to her beloved grandmother and she only wished the image looking back at her was as lovely as that of the painting of her mamgu, which hung in the main hall along the cloister wall. Mamgu had been fair and tiny, with reddish blonde hair and a wisp of a waist and a pert nose. She was from old Welsh stock and Anna's grandfather had somehow managed to win her heart enough for her to step over the border into Shropshire to be with him at the Abbey. She could see barely any resemblance between the portrait below and the image in the mirror but mamgu had always called Anna her image in spirit. Perhaps that was true, although she could have wished for a bit of the physical resemblance as well.

Her suitor last night hadn't seemed to see a problem though. He had looked at her as though she was a particularly tempting cream scone that he was about to devour. Mary came in with a cup of strong tea and a piece of toast and busied herself setting out a dark green walking dress that was one of Anna's favorites. Anna barely noticed Mary's actions, her thoughts still upon the handsome gentleman who had danced with her at the faerie revel, whose eyes had followed her across a stuffy London ballroom. She was certain it had been the same man as her erstwhile rescuer from her vivid

dreams a month ago. What had come of that strange night in which she had communed with the harvest moon? It had been a full moon again last night, hadn't it? What a coincidence. The two most vivid dreams of her life, both with the same dark stranger playing the lead.

She smiled at the vagaries of her imagination and how her secret desire for romance had blossomed into such fancies. Still, it had certainly been enjoyable while it lasted. She doubted it would happen again. 'Twas a pity, that kiss had been remarkable, awakening desires she had barely understood. If only there was such a man at a local assembly ball, she would never need to go to London at all. She'd be wedded and bedded as fast as could be—though with the way his eyes had consumed her and his kiss had set her aflame, perhaps not in that order. She blushed at the thought, though the smile never left her face.

Mary gave a chuckle. "What has you looking like the cat who's got the cream this morning? I can never remember you being civil at this hour, much less happy!"

Anna gave her worst scowl. "Is that better?" Mary laughed again.

"Why you're even playful! It must be a man. Are you thinking about Lord Liston perhaps?" Mary arched an eyebrow.

Anna blanched and turned pale and Mary let out a guffaw. "My mother always said that if a girl is happy in the morning, it must be because of a man, either in fact or in thought!"

Anna wrinkled her nose. "I can assure you, you impertinent thing, that there is no particular gentleman who has captured my heart. Certainly not Lord Liston."

Mary grinned. "Thank goodness for that!"

They had only just got rid of Cousin Herbert after almost a month of his sneering insults. He was not missed and neither were the overly sumptuous meals at Aunt Harriet's insistence, his inept advice on house management or his wandering hands when he thought no one could see. Over the course of his visit Anna had delivered several firm set-downs and made clear her determination to have a Season in London before committing to any "long-term arrangements", a delicate term used instead of that serious word, marriage. Finally, Lord Liston had finally left, citing a nonexistent letter from his solicitor regarding business in town.

Why he had stayed so long when she had refused his advances so clearly from the first moment, she had no idea. Surely he could attract someone in town, if he was that desperate to marry. She was not the most wealthy and certainly not the most beautiful or well-connected marriageable female in England. She left off her musings and performed her morning rituals—washing, a bit of tooth powder and donning stays, chemise, loose petticoats and her walking dress, warm stockings and half boots to protect her from the chill November air. There had been no rain yesterday, so hopefully the roads would be dry and she could walk to town and back without Aunt Harriet chastising her for having her petticoats six inches deep in mud.

She descended the stairs, unlikely to meet her aunt at this hour. Hopefully her mother was also still asleep. She went to the kitchens and found Cook hard at work already, rolling out dough for pies for the servants' dinner. Anna gave her a smile and received another look of shock for her good mood.

"Am I really such an ogre in the mornings?" she asked, filling a basket with biscuits from the larder for the tenants' children she met along the way.

"Only since you were six months old, love. Before that, you were as happy as a lark in the morning." Cook said, entirely serious as she went back to her methodical rolling.

Anna heaved a dramatic sigh and went down to the stillroom to fetch more supplies. Cough syrups, poultices and plasters, soothing muscle rubs, everything she would need for her many charges. She donned a simple poke bonnet and stepped out into the morning air. The weather was brisk but not too terribly cold, though she was glad for warmth afforded by her thick mantle.

She had made most of her rounds by late morning, as Widow Granger's rheumatism was reasonably quiet and she had not chosen this particular day to singe Anna's ears with one of her highly improper tales. Widow Granger preached that all young women should be made familiar with the facts of life, and the parson Mr. Clowson would certainly disagree if any of those girls happened to tell him of the ancient matrons' impromptu sermons. Mr. Tinger had thankfully listened to Anna's lecture about taking his foxglove tea without his usual grouching and the other aches and pains of the community had proved simple enough. She now sat comfortably ensconced in the warm kitchen of Mrs. Simmons, surrounded by two dogs, three cats and the antics of five children, who were all trying to be on their best behavior in the hopes of a reward in the form of Cook's famous biscuits.

Anna looked on the domestic scene with fondness and a small amount of yearning. "They are such wonderful children, Mrs. Simmons."

The matron laughed and wiped flour-covered hands on the copious folds of her apron. "They certainly seem ta be when you come ta visit, Miss Anna. It might be your sweet disposition that rubs off on 'em."

"Or it might be the desire for sweets." The two women shared a chuckle.

Mrs. Simmons grew grave for a moment, "You are sure that little Timmy will be all right then?"

Anna had come to check on the youngest, the sixth child of the Simmons brood. "He has only a minor cough, nothing like last year." Four-year-old Timmy had almost succumbed to a terrible cough that swept through the village and the family last winter. Anna had stayed with Timmy for two days, when even Mr. Harlowe and Mr. Trent had given up and the child had pulled through by sheer force of his will. "Some angelica syrup and broth and in a few days he should be back wrestling with the rest. Nothing can stop him for long."

"Thank the good Lord for that. And you, Miss." Anna blushed, still unused to the praise for her work. Mrs. Simmons clucked and said, "Dearie, there's nothin' wrong

with acceptin' a complement if it be the truth. Your mamgu would be very proud of you. I don't know what we would all do without you. Mr. Trent does his best but you have the heart for it, that you do. Without the heart, the healin' oftentimes doesn't take near so well."

Anna smiled in gratitude and soon bade Mrs. Simmons and the children goodbye, declining the offer of a meal. On the walk home, she mused on the responsibilities she had taken on in the village and how rewarding it was to see everyone doing well that year, despite the loss of three lads in the spring to join up with the Regulars and fight with Wellington in Spain. She hoped that her father and mamgu would be proud of her, as everyone always claimed and part of her wished that she could claim some happiness for herself. The vision of a warm smile in a strong face, with deep brown eyes and black hair filled her thoughts and she felt warm despite the chill wind which had risen and billowed her cloak about her legs. She returned home in time for a simple dinner and the protestations of her aunt over the simplicity of lamb and potatoes.

"I still don't understand why you insist on these visits to cottagers every week, much less on why you would walk. Why not take the curricule, or at least the pony cart? One would think we had no means of transport, the way you traipse about the countryside. You will catch your death, I'm sure of it, or some ruffian will carry you away. And then where will we be! Your mother would simply fade away and I would be left in mourning forever I vow." Anna let this continue for a bit but at the mention of her mother she did intercede.

"Mama approves, as you very well know. Besides, if I did not engage in at least some exercise, I should be as big as a house and then I will never catch a husband. I am doing my best to attain a more fashionable shape for London." Mollified with the mention of London, Aunt Harriet still gave a dismissive huff and Anna eyed her aunt's considerable girth. Her aunt had not walked more than the fifty feet from the carriage to the church in Middleton since she had taken up residence with the Sanderton family and it showed. Anna's height and her "robustness" had certainly been inherited from her father's side of the family and she considered her aunt as a warning of what she could become if she did not make an effort at staying fit.

After dinner with her aunt, she checked upon her mother, who had not been able to make it down the stairs for luncheon. She was asleep, resting quietly and so Anna stole to her bedroom for an hour's worth of reading before her afternoon "appointment" with the steward, Mr. Jamison.

In truth, Mr. Jamison was supposed to consult with Mrs. Sanderton with regards to the estate but he had known Anna for the ten years he had worked for the Sandertons and he had acted as her mathematics tutor more so than any of her governesses. Mr. Jamison knew that Margaret was in a fragile state and her daughter could be trusted to make intelligent, even wise, decisions with regards to the running of the estate. Anna read voraciously and she had tackled books on crop rotation and the latest farming methods by the time she was thirteen. If Mr. Jamison thought it was a shame that such a young girl be asked to shoulder the burdens of running the Abbey, he did not say it.

But he did try to help Anna with the bit of subterfuge that made life with Lady Harriet more tolerable and smuggled her the herbals and medical books that she so loved.

At the moment, she was absorbed in a beautifully rendered anatomy book that Mr. Jamison had had sent from London. Anna sat curled in her window seat, the heavy tome on her lap and she studied the musculature of the hamstrings and quadriceps. She grinned for a moment, knowing that most proper girls her age would have a fit of vapors over the mere mention of the word "leg" instead of "limb" in polite society. Here she was spending hours learning the most intimate details of what went on beneath the very skin of said "limb".

After her stolen hour of reading, she carefully slipped a false cover over the book, turning an anatomy textbook into a thick botanical treatise. Yet another subterfuge, should her aunt enter her room. Aunt Harriet had been known to snoop and the house had practically caved in at the sounds she had made upon her discovery of a book on blood circulation six months ago. Margaret had been hard-pressed to restrain Anna from doing bodily injury to Lady Harriet when the woman had thrown the offending book in the fire. It was safer for all concerned to avoid another such incident at all costs.

This day was much like any other. Her aunt's conversation was peppered with references to London, which was still four months away. Anna thanked her lucky stars that she had not been convinced to attend this winter's Little Season, or all the energies of her aunt would have been so compacted that one or the other of them would have surely burst. The minor colds and complaints of the crofters were easily dealt with and the activity on the farm was slight. As the holiday season approached, Anna oversaw the decorations of the Abbey, although for this activity even Aunt Harriet found some time and enthusiasm.

Still, Anna was restless and could not fully explain the reason. She began to find herself more often daydreaming, reminiscing about the dark stranger from her dreams. She could think of no man she knew who could have served as the model for the tall man, whose fuzzy features only remained clear in her dreams. She tried to concentrate on her studies, only to be distracted by some stray memory of an imagined smile.

Anna's days of reveries came to an abrupt end as her mother caught a severe cold as they exited from church on the second Sunday of Advent. Margaret had been doing particularly well and winter always seemed to clear up some of the dizziness that plagued her and she had enjoyed a slow carriage trip into the village. A head cold could change all that quickly and by the time the carriage pulled up in front of the Abbey, Anna was holding her mother's hand tightly as she turned increasingly pale and tense.

Margaret took to her bed and the inactivity and bouts of retching from the nausea resulted in yet another nasty chest cold. The coughing racked her body and Anna did her best with angelica and comfrey syrup, mint and mustard plasters and willow bark tea for the fever. But even as her symptoms lessened, the dizziness and nausea got worse. Finally Mr. Trent, with the backing of Mr. Harlowe, insisted on laudanum to allow Margaret to get some needed rest.

Christmas Eve found Anna holding vigil by her mother's bedside, an uneaten tray from Cook by her side. She had read to her mother some of the poetry her mother loved best, works that would have scandalized her aunt but seemed to soothe her mother. William Blake, Hannah Cowley, even the romantic and risqué Lord Byron had found their way to her mother's shelves. She had just finished Charlotte Smith's "To the Moon", when her mother had finally found some repose in her tossing and turning and seemed to sleep easier for a moment. Anna stood for a moment and stretched, rising to gaze out through the drapes at the moonlit hills outside the window. A dusting of snow had graced the children with a white Christmas on the morrow and the world glowed silver with the full moon a queen looking down upon all. Words from the poem flowed back to her, "While I gaze, thy mild and placid light sheds a soft calm upon my troubled breast, And oft I think – fair planet of the night – That in thy orb, the wretched may have rest..."

She walked quietly back to the bed and held her hand to her mother's forehead. She was cool and her breathing even. It seemed as though she would soon recover. Anna felt drained and decided to return to her room to sleep for the first time in nearly a week. She resigned herself to finally taking the advice of the household – not to mention the doctor and the apothecary – to find rest or risk a bout of the same illness. Exhaustion filled her with each plodding step and by the time she reached her bed, she fell into it, fully clothed.

* * * * *

Her throat was gripped with the dry, acidic feeling of tears that would no longer come. She knelt at the side of her mamgu's grave, dirtying her gray bombazine mourning gown. She knew that her mother would scold, that at thirteen, she should have been more careful and more ladylike. The graveyard behind the Middleton parsonage was quiet, with nothing but a gentle wind blowing her hair in her eyes. She placed her grandmother's favorite, lavender blossoms, by the marker, next to the fading lilies that were the more appropriate, more common tribute to the recently deceased. Anna still didn't understand exactly how death could have claimed this powerful lady, one who knew so much and had so much left to teach. Mamgu knew she was dying and had prepared everyone as best she could as she faded away from the demon eating her away from the inside. In six months she had gone from the vital matriarch of the Abbey and the town to a wispy shell. She had taught Anna how to relieve some of her pain, with yew bark tea and small amounts of judiciously applied laudanum from Mr. Trent. She had faced every day with a valiant struggle but she knew her time was near and she had quietly slipped on to her reward, at peace with her life. The gray sky above the church yard threatened rain, an ominous rumble in the distance broke Anna from her reverie. Anna could not yet find such peace at the death of someone so dear.

The world spun and she stood in the front hall of the Abbey, her gray gown traded for deepest black. She would be sixteen tomorrow but there would be little celebration. She stood silently crying over her father's body as it was prepared for the funeral the

next day, her aunt and her mother lovingly dressing him for the last time. The smell of tallow and beeswax combined as all the candles in the house were lit to give the room light, to dispel the shadows that followed on the heels of death. Hers were tears of sorrow and of shame. She should have seen it, she should have known. Two days of indigestion in her robust father were not normal. He had complained of a pain in his left arm at breakfast the day before but he put it down to his horse having unexpectedly jerked at the reins. James the footman had found him, lying facedown in his beloved library still clutching his chest. Mr. Harlowe had pronounced it a heart seizure and Anna recalled all the symptoms as clear as day in her memories. She should have known. She should have insisted Papa take the willow bark tea that Mama prepared for him. But he often refused it, laughing that he was perfectly healthy, the stuff was too horribly bitter and that she was much too young to worry so. He too was gone and she was not able to stop it.

Again, the world spun away and she sat, watching her mother's fitful sleep. Mama's complexion was that sickly yellow-green that followed a bout of retching. She could do nothing for her that she had not tried a hundred times before in two years. She racked her brain, thinking of how she could fight this. If only her mamgu had lived long enough to teach her more. If only her father was here to help Mama keep up her strength. She felt an aching loneliness that threatened to overwhelm her.

She leaned her arms upon the bed in front of her and buried her head to block out the world for a moment. The door creaked open, doubtless Lucy again with more ginger tea. The entrant came closer, with hesitant steps, heavier than they should be. She felt a warm hand touch her shoulder and she looked up from her trance. Brown eyes held her own green, hers glossy from unshed tears. A blush overcame her, as she sat up quickly, hating to think of what her hair and her face must look like. How was he here? She must be dreaming, a wishful fantasy. She just needed to rest. She looked down to her lap, where the floral pattern of the sprigged muslin suddenly held tremendous interest. When she raised her head, he would be gone, she was sure of it.

She felt his finger under her chin and he raised her head, she closed her eyes and felt the lightest brush of his full lips on hers. Her precious control broke and her shoulders shook as she began to weep. He held her as she buried her head in his shoulder, turning the red broadcloth of his military coat a darker shade of crimson with her tears. Did she need someone to chase away her demons so badly that she dressed her dream lover as a soldier?

"Is this your mother?" he asked, his voice hushed.

"Yes. She, she feels poorly, dizziness, intense nausea. I've tried everything." The tears overcame her again.

"Any other symptoms?"

She raised her head and looked up at him curiously. He had the same tone that Mr. Harlowe always used. How on Earth had she managed to dream up a soldier who in his spare time acted the physician? She gave her standard answer, the one she'd given to every physician within a hundred miles and those they had brought in from London.

"Vertigo and nausea are the main symptoms, aggravated by other minor illnesses and worse during certain seasons of the year. It has not become markedly better or worse in the two years since it began."

He let her go and walked to the bedside. He gently laid his hand on her mother's forehead, examining her with a practiced eye. "Ah...interesting. Any pain? Headaches?" At least he seemed to be taking her seriously.

"Not severe, no, although certain sounds can bother her at times and she hears a roaring that coincides with the worst of the dizziness."

"Must be her ears then."

She blinked away her surprise. "Her ear, actually it's only the left side that plagues her."

The assessing clinical voice continued, "Ah...have you tried mint?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "And ginger and chamomile and more. Nothing has worked."

"You don't let them bleed her, do you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Do I look like a fool?"

He smiled at her and stepped closer. Gone was the stiff clinician. "You, my dear Maria, are nobody's fool." He leaned toward her again and she could smell him, man and sweat and bergamot. Her breath caught and she could not find the words to correct him as to her name. It was improper enough that he should be standing here, in a bedroom and be calling her by her first name, even if it was the wrong name. His lips brushed hers, light as a feather and she closed her eyes for a moment.

When she opened them, she saw him contemplating her mother on the bed but his eyes had a far away look. He was searching for a memory. He began to mutter under his breath, "Perhaps...yes but the danger..." His face darkened into a scowl.

"Would you have any books on herbs from the New World, by any chance?"

Prodded into action by his intense focus, she answered unhesitatingly, "Yes, in the library."

He pulled her toward the door but as they passed through the portal, the world twisted and bent and the soft candlelight of the room they had left turned into daylight streaming in through small windows high above a large, high-ceilinged room. She stopped suddenly, disconcerted by the abrupt change and the noise and clamor of so many people. They ignored her as though she were invisible, all of them men in the black robes and mortarboard of university students. The large room they had just entered was some kind of a lecture hall, she would guess, with a podium at the front and a tiny, bespectacled man with graying hair and a prominent mustache obviously preparing to speak.

She hurried after her guide to this world, who was now wearing the long robes of a student. He seemed younger somehow, closer to her own age. She threaded through the crowd, who still did not seem to notice a woman in their midst and plopped into a seat

toward the back of the hall, next to the only person she knew, this soldier-doctor-dancer-student-figment-of-her-imagination, just as the chatter died down and the speaker began to tactfully clear his throat.

"Gentlemen, as you know, I am visiting from the Americas and I have been requested to discuss the botanical findings of your North American colleagues." She assumed the odd accent was an American one, the long drawling tone was very interesting to her ear, unaccustomed to anything but the soft tones of Shropshire with some of the overtones of Wales. She was not surprised that it was a lecture on botanical matters, for she was now completely certain she was dreaming again and how many times had she daydreamed of attending University, of being welcome at a lecture just like this one, of even giving a lecture such as this. Amused at her own imagination's expense, she once again listened to the little man who peeked over the podium at his attentive audience.

"The native inhabitants have an extensive knowledge of the flora of their environment and each group has made impressive use of that knowledge for the purposes of healing. I believe although we have already incorporated many of the food plants to be found from the Americas into our culture and cuisine, there remains to be interesting discoveries to aid in the development of medicines. Now, I would like to begin with a review of the uses of tree bark by tribes along the mid-Atlantic coast. The Balsam fir, *Abies balsamiae*, is an essential component of Iroquois medicine and utilized in a wide array of preparations..."

Anna sat riveted and wished desperately for paper and a quill. How such information could flow out of her own brain in dream form, though she had no memory of it, she could not fathom. Some minutes passed and a wide range of topics was covered. She certainly had some familiarity with plants from the Americas and had acquired several herbals but here was a level of detail of their medicinal use which she had never before encountered. The speaker was quite thorough and during an anecdote relating the flowering of a particular species of berry to the natives' calculation of the time for maize planting, she felt a prickling along the back of her neck. She turned her head to the side and there was her companion. He had been quite oblivious to her up until that moment, where now he was openly staring at her, a smile playing about his features.

She could not help but return his amused grin and whispered, "Should you not be attending to the lecturer?"

"Mr. Drayton will be jawing on for an hour or more and I do not often get to see a beautiful lady in our midst." He cocked his head and looked at her curiously.

She turned back to the speaker, a Mr. Drayton she now knew, but she had difficulty attending to what he was saying, as she could sense her admirer's eyes upon her and felt as though they burned her skin with their touch. The seat they shared on a bench uncomfortably reminded her of another foggy dream, one where a version of the same man had kissed her senseless. A flush crept up her neck and she swore she could sense his eyes following its progress up to her chin. His hand lay on the bench between them

and a single finger brushed against her pale muslin skirt, so out of place among all of the black robes. She shivered in response and closed her eyes, praying that no one had observed her shameless reaction to such a simple touch. Then common sense returned.

It is all a dream, this is all ridiculous. Why do I not awaken? Then, the speaker's voice pierced through her befuddlement, with words that made her immediately sit up and take note.

"Dizziness, inflammation and breathing difficulties are treated with this powerful plant by certain tribes in the Tennessee area and it is very effective, especially at relieving the affect of intense nausea and dizziness. However, it should not be used in the pregnant woman, as..."

Which plant? What have I missed?

"However, other tribes regard *Datura stramonium* as a powerful poison and still others regard it with a religious mysticism and reserve its use for powerful coming-of-age rituals. I was able to discover very little about its uses in this regard. A small amount of the seeds of this flower can easily kill, if not used with judicious care.

"The local farmers of the region have named the plant the Devil's Trumpet, as the flowers only unfurl in the dark of night. I've seen them and the blooms are quite lovely, reflecting the moonlight with a most remarkable glow." An odd wistfulness came over Mr. Drayton's face and though lost in a fond memory. Suddenly, he cleared his throat and regained his serious demeanor, shuffling the stack of notes before him on the lectern.

"Unfortunately, I have seen it become popular as an ornamental plant, mistaken for European, less potent relatives and if that trend continues here, some of you may see cases of poisoning, which are very difficult to treat. It is no doubt a plant worthy of more considerable study. Let us move on to *Ambrosia artemisiifolia* and its use to purify the blood, it is a very interesting plant and its use is widespread..."

She turned to look at the man beside her and he smiled. He was dressed again in the red military regimentals and her tears were drying on the sleeve. Somehow, he had brought her here. This was *his* memory. She did not know how it was possible, she only hoped she would remember. She reached out her hand and caressed his cheek, oblivious to the students that surrounded them. He trapped her hand against his face and turned toward her palm. He kissed her there and brushed his lips down along the inside of her wrist. He nipped at the delicate skin there and she felt as though she would slide out of her chair and melt in a puddle at his feet. Somehow, she found the means to form words.

"Th-Thank you. Who are you? How is this possible?"

He lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes dark with desire. He opened his mouth to reply but a tremendous noise shook the hall, they were thrown apart and a thick fog began to roll in through each door and window. They were encompassed by white and she lost sight of him, her heart aching at losing him again.

Chapter Six

December, 1813, France

He gasped to wakefulness, an artillery barrage shaking the mirror from the wall of the tiny room he occupied and it fell to the floor with a crash. He roared at the injustice of it. Damn and blast to Wellington and Soult and to hell with taking Bayonne. Why did they have to fire the big guns at such an ungodly hour? He could not even tell her his name. Was she real? Was the war making him go slowly mad? He saw soldiers battle shell shock every day and he thought that after all he had seen that he was immune. But these increasingly bizarre fantasies made him begin to question his sanity.

The sounds of drunken laughter floated through the shuttered window and he got up, bundling the threadbare blanket around himself. He stepped around the shards of mirror, opened the window and poked his head outside. He found that it was in fact much later than he usually awoke, the sun already high. The single gun that had jolted him to wakefulness had been fired more out of spite than a concerted attack. It was Christmas Day and the men were already half-drunk and restless. They were tired of fighting the blasted French, tired of the cold, tired of being stuck in some foreign land, particularly during a holiday.

Wellington had wisely turned a blind eye to the drunken revels of the men and the status of the field was at a standstill. The French had retreated behind the walls of Bayonne after four days of fierce fighting over the Nive earlier in the month. Fortunately, the holiday seemed to have an equally demoralizing effect upon the Frogs. Brandon grimaced, knowing he would deal tonight with the effects of too much alcohol and whatever rotten food the men would try to scrounge from the empty country.

He turned back to his room in the small manor that the general staff had appropriated for a command center. He swept the glassy shards under the sorry excuse for a bed and set about washing with the small amount of icy cold water to be had. He hurriedly dressed, the chill of December speeding his actions. He despaired of a shave, as the mirror was now gone and Fitzhugh was unavailable, the last round of dysentery having weakened the man so that Brandon had sent him home. No suitable replacement could be found and he had no desire to deprive the army of a fighting man simply to see to the smoothness of his chin. He sighed, resigned to the nicks and cuts that would surely result and searched under the bed for one of the larger shards of mirror. Then with a razor that needed sharpening, he proceeded to try to scrape his chin free of stubble. The shave progressed without him cutting his own throat but his skin was raw in the cold air. He rubbed his hand along his chin, remembering the feel of her soft fingers brushing against his cheek.

His eyes closed of their own volition and he recalled the sensation of holding her in his arms, comforting her as she wept. He felt more alive in these dreams than he did in waking life anymore. Three times she had visited him now – once a month – and he felt changed, altered through each dream. The dreams he had throughout the rest of the month sometimes included a shady, imperfect reflection of her, insubstantial, a ghost to be chased. It was not the lovely, vibrant woman who graced him with these monthly visitations. She was so strong and had coped with so much. He had seen her as a child kneel in front of one grave, knowing that she had dearly loved whomever the stone commemorated. He had glimpsed a younger version of her, quietly crying over a man who had to have been her father. She looked regretful, angry, almost as though she somehow blamed the death on herself. And then her mother, sick with a mysterious ailment. She had answered his queries without hesitation, the kind of answers that came with long experience of caring for the sick. Her eagerness and attentiveness at Thomas Drayton's lecture from his Cambridge days had been another surprise and he had known that here was someone who shared the passion he had had for healing, the love of medicine. He wanted to embrace her enthusiasm and let it restore his own. He stared at his reflection in the shard of mirror and wondered once again if he was losing his sanity, wanting a woman he had never met, who may not exist.

The day progressed as he had anticipated. The men tried to forget their troubles in any way they could, Christmas carols turned into bawdy songs and liquor stores ran dry. The sick soon poured in and as many of the surgeons were themselves drunk, it fell to Brandon to help assess the motley crew and separate those who merely had to sleep it off from those who actually were ill. It was a thankless job, as drunken men respected no rank and after the third round of bile ended up on his boots, he stomped out of the large tent, seeking some kind of fresh air.

The day was cold and crisp and by now in the early evening the sun was already setting. The moon was already out, almost full, as it had been last night. He closed his eyes and found the ghost of her face staring back at him behind his eyelids. She had seemed so fragile and yet so strong. He longed to hold her in his arms again, to shield her from whatever storms she would encounter. But she couldn't be real, she was just something he had dreamed up, some amalgamation of everything he admired in a woman. Why did she affect him so?

The thrill of healing the wounded had left him by now. That fire that had driven him to join the army despite the halfhearted disapproval of his father, that intensity of purpose was lost. He wasn't sure when but he knew that at some point he had begun merely doing his duty, organizing longer and longer supply lines to shuttle the sick, doing mounds of paperwork and saving what lives he could. But his soul was no longer all there in the moment. They were winning, true and there would be glory aplenty to please his father but he didn't wish to stay for the last of the bloodshed. The unpopular, unsupported British now had troops and supplies and aid pouring in, now that they were victorious. The Austrians, the Prussians and the Russians were finally hauling their end of the load and Boney was quaking in his boots. Some were waiting to dance

in Paris, to put some Louis on the throne and cavort in the streets at his coronation but Brandon simply wanted to go home.

He wanted a bit of peace. That smile that haunted him night and day sang a siren song. Christmas turned to New Year's and the army was still stalled before Bayonne, waiting to smoke out Marshall Soult. January plodded along, with the feints and parries between Wellington and Soult continuing. Brandon spent his time scrambling back and forth across France and Spain. It was a monumental task ensuring the supply lines were reinforced from any sneak attacks. The wounded were shunted back along those same lines to the ports that the English had gained control of along the Bay of Biscay.

As mid-January approached, Lieutenant Colonel Kelsey could not be chastised too harshly if his thoughts began to stray occasionally to a certain brown-haired young miss. He could think of little else, the routine of siege had taken over and as the month had progressed, he could but hope that she would visit him again somehow. Each night he fell asleep and upon awakening a kind of mourning overtook him. That was followed by an icy calm which descended, giving him the strength to take on the continued the misery of war. On the twenty-second of the month, Soult had sent out a flanking effort out across the Adour river and had managed to surprise Wellington for a moment, long enough to give Brandon and his surgeons a long, long day. It was well after midnight when he found his way back to the little manor room that had become his home here outside of Bayonne.

He sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, his hands holding up his head and buried in his hair. That last patient had chased him from the hospital, demons at his heels. If the boy had seen fifteen, it would have been a miracle. Dressed in a sorry imitation of a French Imperial's uniform, Soult had still sent him and his comrades, mostly old men and young boys, out to try to break out of the city. Gutted by shrapnel, the boy had writhed on the pallet until death had overtaken him and there was nothing that Brandon could do for him. They were out of spirits and long out of morphine. The boy's eyes had stared through him and had brought back memories that Brandon had wanted thoroughly buried. He stood up from the bed and closed the curtains from the light of the full moon. Crossing to the basin, he splashed his face with water and shucked out of his uniform, embracing the cold on his skin. He climbed in the bed and buried his head in the lump that passed for a pillow, longing for brandy to drown himself in. Surprisingly, sleep washed over him quickly and he surrendered to the memories that haunted him.

* * * * *

The rumble of artillery in the distance had awakened him from a fitful sleep and he decided he may as well return to work. He uncurled himself from his current billet, a tiny cot in the dusty attic room of what had passed for an inn in this small village in Spain. It was not yet dawn and he had been tending patients until well past two in the morning. The battle for Vitoria was almost over, at least according to the scattered reports reaching his position here in Gastiez. He was leagues to the west of the main

front and the Frogs left trapped in the Vitoria. The flood of the injured that had poured in by cart or hobbled in by foot throughout the day had abated to some degree. Still, if Eddington, his chief surgeon, had not practically pushed him out of the church-turned-hospital earlier in the night, he would no doubt still be there.

He remembered naught after reaching this room but collapsing on what passed for his bed, still fully clothed. He proceeded to shuck off his blood-stained uniform coat and indulged himself of the officers' luxury of pulling on his only other one, even though he doubted it would stay clean for long. He thanked whoever had thought to design his regiment's red coats, at the very least the blood stains didn't show up that badly. After days of use in a field hospital, the smell of the coat was both somewhat overwhelming and surely unhygienic. He considered the sword which sat propped up in its scabbard in the corner. Normally, he managed to avoid carrying it on his typical rounds but he could not ignore the sense of foreboding that crept up his spine in the predawn half light. Besides, his superior would most likely show his face at some point during the day and Colonel Everston would not approve of an unarmed soldier, even if he spent most of his time trying to fix people rather than kill them. The blasted thing got in the way more often than not but he was resigned to wear it for the day.

He washed his face with water from a pitcher and basin in the corner and resignedly strapped on the sword over his rumpled uniform. He walked down the stairs and started across the town square to the doors of the church. The sky was a faint red gold, with streaks of livid purple clouds. The heat of June was already creeping up to make him sweat and the air smelled harsh, with an undertone of blood and bile. He was immune to such smells after two years of war on the peninsula but today he unaccountably noticed them again. So apparently, did the nun standing at the church doors, who covered her mouth and nose with one hand.

As he came up the steps toward her, she leaned against the doorframe and stared at the sights within. Rows of injured, moaning men on bare pallets on the floor, with overworked orderlies and doctors running to and fro throughout, dividing their time between those who could be saved and trying to make comfortable those who could not. She was dressed in a severe black gown, a stained apron covering her front, a kerchief covering her hair. She looked somehow familiar but he must have seen her many times if she helped in the hospital. She looked lost somehow, her shoulders slumped, her free arm wrapped partway around her body. Quite a nice body it was too, full and lush, with a beautiful curve to her... *My, my, been on campaign too long, to be thinking of a nun in such a manner.*

The rough wooden floor of the entryway creaked at his approach and she turned to look at him. Those eyes! He knew those eyes, as green as jade from China. He seemed to remember them, flashing in indignation and twinkling with a smile. Now they were filled with only shock and sorrow.

"Can I help you, Sister?" he said, in English, although she was unlikely to understand.

Her eyes softened, she dropped the hand from her face and resolve seemed to unconsciously straighten her spine. She replied, in the perfect English of a well brought up young lady, "I think instead I should ask how I can help you."

Recognition flared. He did not choose to question how she was here, he was only grateful that she was. He brought his hand up to her cheek and ran his fingers over her soft skin, brushing away the tear he found there.

"Maria," he whispered. She closed her eyes again and leaned into his hand, placing her own hand upon his. They stood there for an eternity, or just a moment, until the sounds of the injured and the bustling of the field hospital intruded.

She opened her eyes. "Where can I help?"

A frown creased his brow. "I do not think... It may not be seemly for you to see..."

"Fustian. Are you suggesting that there is something unseemly about aiding the sick and dying?" She raised a delicate eyebrow.

"No madam but..."

"No buts. I am here, you need me and I can work." With that, she stomped off toward the assistant surgeon, Mr. Fergusson, who was attending a saber wound not five yards distant. She spoke briefly with the man, washed her hands in a nearby basin and knelt by the soldier, helping to hold the wound shut as the surgeon finished sewing it closed. She did all of this with an air of long practice, or iron determination to appear practiced, he did not know which.

Again, the moans of the wounded intruded on his reverie and he attended to his duties, asking about the state of supplies from each doctor and orderly and managing the removal of the bodies of those who had gone on to their reward. Each time his rounds took him through the main nave of the converted church, his eyes would roam, searching for his Maria. He found her comforting a man with flash burns to his eyes that would most likely leave him blinded. Later she was bathing the cauterized wound of an amputee. Although pale and drawn, she seemed to emit an aura of calm strength and caring. She was such an amazing woman, to be so strong in the face of this chaos. Her eyes met his across the room and it was always several moments before he could break away, to return to his duties. Unfortunately, even in the midst of battle, or perhaps one could say especially in the midst of battle, paperwork built up.

After several hours, as the light of dawn filled the glassless windows of the simple village church, he arose from his desk in the corner of the church sanctuary. Administrative tasks completed, he prepared to help the doctors in any way he could. As he walked out to the main hall, that sense of foreboding filled him, a horrible premonition that all was not right. His eyes went in search of Maria but he saw her nowhere. Suddenly there was an awful commotion in the town square, the clear reports from shots fired and then the clash of swords. He strode toward the doors but before he made it, he was driven back. With a roar, the small group of red-coated camp guards charged into the front entryway of the church and scrambled to close the doors behind them. He caught a glimpse of ragged blue and white French uniforms in the square and

his tired mind snapped into action, putting the dispatch maps and battle information he had received earlier in the morning to good use.

"How many?" he asked the lieutenant by his side, who scrambled to catch his breath as the other eight soldiers of the watch tried to shore up the ancient wooden doors with some of the pews that had been stacked at the front of the church to make way for the wounded.

A banging began as the French attempted to break through the English barricade. "At least thirty sir. They seem pretty desperate," the lieutenant replied.

Brandon nodded, "They would be. Wellington's got the Zadorra River impassable from Arinez to Trespuentes at last report. They're completely cut off from the rest of the French forces. They must be looking for supplies to hole up in the hills or to cut back around toward the Pyrenees."

He pulled his sword from its scabbard, whispering a prayer of thanks that he had it with him at all and wishing that Providence had thought to include a pistol with his equipage that day. "If we can hold them off for a bit and sell ourselves dearly, they'll either fall back to look for easier prey, or another few cartloads of injured will show up with a guard and they might be able to help."

Through all of this speech, the banging had increased in volume, along with a flurry of orders bellowed out in strident French. The ridiculous thing was, there were no food stores in the church, unless one counted some strong spirits used to knock some patients out during an amputation. He doubted he could convince the determined men on the other side of the doors of the truth of that fact.

"You and you," he pointed at two of the men on the edges of the creaking pile of flotsam barring the doors, "Go and guard the back passages of the sacristy and the side entrance. They're sure to send someone around in a moment." The men ran off and whipped past the cluster of surgeons, orderlies and Spanish peasants who had gathered toward the altar end of the nave. A splintering sound signaled the demise of the ancient church doors and with a cry of, "Avant!" The French broke through into the church. His blood boiling with tension, he ran forward into the melee, with his fellow soldiers at his side and some of the braver peasants wielding heavy iron candlesticks taken from the altar. Bloody minutes passed in a desperate fight. Thrust and slash, beating the French back to the threshold. Men dropped around him and still he continued. Blood and sweat ran into his eyes as he parried a thrust bayonet, the edge slicing into his thigh. He staggered and almost went down but he thrust up and made contact with the French soldier before him and Brandon could see the look in the boy's eyes as his life poured out of him through the wound in the gut. Horror shot through Brandon and he froze with inaction. The pause might have killed him but shouts, good British shouts, were heard behind them in the square and the French were surrounded by fifty English soldiers from a relief squad. The French wisely chose surrender over certain death and dropped their weapons.

It was too late for the lieutenant and three of his men. Brandon dropped to his knees, feeling for a pulse in the fallen men but they were too far gone from vital

wounds to the chest or gut. He was lucky. He closed his eyes and the face of the Frenchman he'd gutted flashed before him. It was driven away by sudden memory of Maria. Maria! He staggered to his feet, blood dripping from the gash to his thigh and stumbled along the wall of the church, searching for the side vestry chapels. He hoped to God that the Frogs had not come in through there and wreaked havoc. He grabbed open the door and started down the stairs but the world suddenly blurred. He thought for a second that he was losing consciousness but the world quickly righted itself. He paused and realized he no longer heard the sounds of the injured or the droning commands of the troops and prisoners in the square, or smelled blood and sweat. His thigh no longer pulsed blood. The air was cool and sweet and smelled of herbs. The light was soft and he heard giggles. *Giggles?* He descended the stairs and around a corner was the goal of his search, Maria.

He leaned against the wall, still breathless and watched three children pester the beautiful woman before him. They were in a stillroom, not that different from the one in which he remembered his mother working in long ago, when her duties about the estate allowed her. He remembered that she had said it was a wonderful change for a lady of her standing to be able to do something useful with her hands. She had enjoyed making the occasional cordial or tisane. This stillroom however, was much more extensive, with dozens of carefully prepared jars and flasks lining the walls and herbs and dried plants of every description hanging from the ceiling and in front of the tiny window, whose light filtered in upon the domestic scene he witnessed. *Where was he?* Had he just been killed and this was heaven? Or had he done the most unmanly thing and fainted? Was this a dream?

Suddenly his memory rushed back. Maria had not been in Spain, had never been at Vitoria. That was a memory that haunted him for months. It still haunted him. He had been dreaming. He was still dreaming. The soft light shone upon the lady's head like a halo, highlighting soft streaks of red among the warm brown. She was busy trying to grind a sweet-smelling paste with a mortar and pestle but two black-haired twin girls about five years old were pulling on her apron and a brown-haired boy, not yet two, clung to the leg of one of the impish girls.

"Mama, please can we have some honeycomb, please, please!" begged the girl on the right.

"We've been very good today, haven't we Johnny?" the girl on the left posed this question to the adoring toddler, who nodded his head emphatically.

"Hmm...perhaps if you can answer a question." The woman, his Maria, pondered for a moment, wiping her hands on her apron. "If you were to get a toothache from all these sweets you want, what plant could soothe the pain before we had to pull the tooth?"

The twins grimaced at the thought of tooth pulling but one soon piped up with the answer. "That's easy Mama, mint of course."

"Oil of clove would help as well," added the other.

"Very good, Bella, Caro. I suppose you may have some honeycomb." She reached for a large jar on a nearby shelf and broke off several dripping pieces. The twins grabbed it eagerly and scampered away and Johnny toddled after with his share. They passed him on the steps, whipping by with the speed and impetuosity of youth, giving him a quick wave and a mumbled, "Hello Papa!" around the honeycomb in their mouths.

Their mother called after them, "Make sure you wash up afterward!" She shook her head, then smiled at him, her eyes lighting up her face.

"Hello dear, whatever brings you down here of all places?"

He paused, looked down at himself, clad as a country gentleman at his leisure, with comfortable trousers and loose day coat, the wound in his thigh long healed. His gaze returned to his lovely Maria. Might as well make the most of such a delightful dream. He gave her a lazy smile and walked up to her, a devilish glint in his eye.

"Do I need a reason to seek out my lovely wife?" he leaned into her as she backed up against the work table, her hands clutching the ledge behind her. He crossed the remaining distance between them and placed a kiss under the shell of her ear, blowing air across her neck. He continued his kisses along the line of her jaw and he could feel her breasts brush against his chest. She let out a gasp at the contact. She tasted sweet and he caught the subtle smell of lavender and roses. He pulled back slightly to observe the effect of his kiss. Her breath was rapid and she tried to give a saucy smile but she counteracted the desired appearance of confidence by blushing prettily.

This may be a dream but she was not nearly as sure of herself as a wife would be. At least not as sure as would be implied by those three lovely children that had just run past. *It is almost as though she is an innocent.* He smoothed a stray curl behind her ear and watched her shiver with his touch. He suddenly had an image of the last time he watched her shiver so, on a moonlit night when they danced with the faerie and in a lecture hall surrounded by begowned students. *I am again a player in her dream. Her hero, even. Her husband?*

He fought a brief war in his head, desire fighting with honor but his gentlemanly instincts won through and he pulled back further, to give her the necessary space to gather her composure. She looked up into his eyes and although he could see trepidation in her eyes, he could also see desire. His own breathing became rapid and her eyes moved to his lips. She leaned forward and touched her lips to his in a sweet, simple kiss. The battle was rejoined, desire carrying the upper hand and he pressed her to him with fervor. The kiss deepened and he heard her moan, he hoped with encouragement. Her arms came up to clasp around his neck and in reply he opened his mouth slightly, teasing her lips open with his tongue and risked an exploration of her mouth. She started with shock and then seemed to melt into him, her tongue coaxed out to timidly begin its own explorations. His hands roamed up and down her sides, eliciting a gasp when he first brushed the side of her breast. She, unconsciously or not, nipped his lower lip and he pulled back and stared into her eyes, pupils dilated in passion.

"Maria, forgive me," he whispered and she tilted her head and raised an eyebrow in query, as though she had not heard him right. He smiled and bent to kiss her again, ignoring the voice of censure in the back of his mind, warning him that she was still an innocent and he should not be the one to teach her these things. But she was in his dream and so most likely a figment of his imagination. He could play out his fantasies if he so wished, for he would never find a woman her equal in the real world. With this justification he began again to kiss along her jaw and down her neck, where he could feel the rapid pulse beneath her skin. Her body pressed against him, her breasts pressed against his chest, her thighs parting instinctively to cradle him against her, his throbbing member strained against his trousers. His lips continued their caresses across her shoulder and he began to push the shoulder of her dress aside, to better access her delectable collarbone. His left hand swept along her ribs and brushed against her erect nipple. She gave a soft sigh and with that sweet sound he pulled away, breathing heavily.

She whispered, aching at the loss of his lips on her skin. "Please, Kelsey, please!"

She knew his name but not his Christian name. Not the name a wife used for a husband. She was not his wife, no matter how pleasant the dream. He could not continue. He stepped back and she whimpered in loss. He caressed her cheek and fled ignobly back up the stairs, the stairs disappearing into blankness under his feet.

Chapter Seven

January 1814

Anna awoke with a start, twisted in her nightgown and the bedcovers, filled with loss and sadness and not a little indignation. Why had he fled? She had certainly not wanted him to stop. A blush crept up her face at the wantonness of the thought. But she had thought him to be her husband, at least, until he had first kissed her. Her memories had flooded back with that kiss, the wonderful memories she had shared with him, as well as the terrible nightmare of blood and death that she had just escaped.

She lay there in the comforting morning light, her eyes wide open and let the dream wash over her again. Illness, she had experience with—fevers and broken bones, even the bloody slashes of farm implements. None of this had prepared her for the sheer mass of suffering, the sounds of moaning and the gasping for breath, the stench of unwashed, bloody bodies and the lingering tang of what must be gunpowder. She hoped that it was all the invention of her dark imagining, naught but a terrible nightmare. But it did not have the hallmarks of such, the elements of the fantastic that normally would pervade her blacker dreams when she was troubled. It felt real, grounded somehow in the true experience of war. It was as though she had been caught up in someone else's tortured memory, just as she had once attended a lecture she could not have heard, something she could not have made up.

Perhaps it truly was her suitor's dream and she was merely caught up in it. Even as the French had battered at the doors and she knew that she was about to die as she huddled behind a pillar of the chantry chapel, she rallied her courage with the memories she had of him, of his caress at the doorway of the church, his handsome form watching her as she progressed through a proper set at a ballroom in London. The wilder dance and the kiss they had shared amid the moonlit faerie revel. The tender way he had held her as she wept for her mother. She had risen from her hiding place, determined to aid the man she had discovered to be in charge of this field hospital by helping to comfort the sick she could hear calling out in helpless fear and had turned to open a door into the rectory to retrieve some clean bandages and salve. The world had spun around. Her eyes clamped shut in response and her gut clenched at the thought she had been hit by a stray bullet or falling debris.

She had opened her eyes as she heard the sound of a child's laughter. She was suddenly calm, her rapid pulse and shallow breathing replaced with a feeling of contentment and amusement, as her twin daughters stared up at her with pleading eyes, begging for a taste of her grandmother's special lavender honeycomb. Looking back on it now, she thought her mind must have recoiled so much from drama and tension of the battle that she had found refuge in one of her fondest dreams, a happy life here in Gladstone Abbey, sharing her knowledge and the fruit thereof with her

children. She dreamed often of children, with subtly different features, at different ages and almost always the twin girls and the one boy. This time, their features had been very clear, with some of her own nature to them and some of the dark good looks from their father. Somehow, she had never truly given a face and form to the father of those children, her as-yet-unknown husband. At least she had given him a name this time. Kelsey. It sounded vaguely familiar. He was a colonel no less, at least according to that nice Mr. Fergusson she had helped in that soldier's hospital. Always before her mate had been a blurry figure tinged with a hint of longing and in this dream the father of her children had become the mysterious man who so often had figured in her most powerful dreams of late.

She raised her hand to her lips and she swore she could still feel the pressure of his kiss, like nothing she could have imagined before. How her dreams could be filled with such knowledge—knowledge that no chaste young lady should have—she knew not. But Anna could not help it. She desired to be in his arms again. She closed her eyes and tried to think of his face but as with the faces of her children, the farther she was from true sleep, the more blurred the image became. The only memory remaining was the feeling of completeness she felt as he touched her, the sense that all would be well. Even in that bare church in Spain, death all around them, his touch had calmed her and yet filled her with longing for something she didn't quite understand. Hope filled Anna that someone she met in her upcoming Season inspired in her a tenth of the emotion she felt when Kelsey looked at her with those intense, almost black, eyes. She felt claimed almost, as though she would never be happy without this dream man of hers.

She flung herself out of bed, eager suddenly to get on with the day and not dwell on a fantasy and a fickle man who would run away from a kiss just when things were proving so very interesting. He couldn't even manage to get her name right, not that she'd tried very hard to correct him. Somehow, that fact that he had his own name for her made her feel ever more that he had claimed her. *Ah well, Aunt Harriet would never let me pine away for an imaginary love.* She had no doubt that Aunt Harriet would be descending upon her soon, eager for the chance to practice her skills at perfecting her niece's toilette. The assembly in Oswestry tonight was designated as a rehearsal for the greater stage of London in two months' time.

Mary entered, bringing with her a light breakfast and Anna dressed in a simple, sprigged muslin morning gown. She hurried down to the library, happy to have avoided Lady Harriet for the moment and managed to meet with Mr. Jamison for a good hour to discuss estate business. Mr. Jamison had just had some shipments of seed packages down from London, as well as a selection of books from Lindsell's Booksellers.

When Mr. Jamison took his leave, Anna found herself at her father's desk, staring at a neat little paper package of tiny black seeds and a book, *Essays on North American Botanical Explorations* by Thomas Drayton. After her awakening on Christmas Day, she had pondered a week before dispatching one letter asking for any samples of *Datura stramonium* to the plant nursery with which she often corresponded for her botanical

endeavors and another inquiry to Lindsell's for any publications by a Mr. Drayton with regards to New World plant species. She regretted the instant the letters had been sent and wished she could call them back. She knew then that she must be going mad and there would be two very confused merchants by the time the letters reached their destinations. Now, she had proof that there was no confusion and either she was clairvoyant, or somehow her Colonel Kelsey, the man she had dared imagine as the father of her children, might actually be real.

She reverently opened the leather-bound volume and was skimming its pages, searching for any information on the *Datura* plant, when the door opened and Aunt Harriet strode in.

"My dear, it is nearly dinner time and you are still musing over some book." She looked at the title. "North America? What next, the tree species of Timbuktu? You would be doing better to try that lemon wash in your hair or use some of your precious ointments on your own skin for once. You are positively brown my dear! How you get that way in January I will never understand."

Her opportunity to delve into the mysterious Mr. Drayton's work was lost for the day. Her aunt stayed bonded to her side, encouraging her to eat heartily at dinner, so that she could eat like a bird at the Assembly. Then, Aunt Harriet continued chattering on about the fashionable length of sleeves for at least three quarters of an hour. Anna did manage a moment's privacy with the excuse to check on the state of the guest room. Anna was completely confident in Mrs. Henderson to see to the needs of any visitors, so she used that time to check in on her mother.

Margaret was playing the small pianoforte, a last gift from Anna's father, when Anna entered and to Anna, Mozart had never sounded so enchanting. Her mother had made an excellent recovery from her Christmas illness and had begun regularly playing her beloved instrument, something she had done rarely in the years since George Sanderton had passed away. The piece came to a close and Anna applauded in appreciation. Her mother looked up with bright eyes and smiled at her daughter.

"Marianna, how lovely to see you! You need not applaud my silly efforts my girl."

"But Mama, it is so good to hear you play again. You are too modest."

Margaret pursed her lips. "But come now, you should not be here coddling an old woman's ego. You should be dressing for the assembly tonight. I'm sure dear Harriet is so eager for entertainment that she will gladly forego the fashionably late arrival. Will Miss Eversmith be returning with you tonight, my dear?"

"Yes, Mama. Isabella will be with us for a fortnight."

"That is wonderful, Anna." Margaret rose from the bench and took her daughter's hands. "I do worry that you do not get enough time to spend with friends and people your own age and engage in amusement, rather than all the responsibilities that you weigh yourself down with. You must get out to meet that young man who will find you one of these days." Anna could not suppress a blush and her mother raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Attempting to deflect any further questions on that front, Anna asked the question that had been plaguing her since the deliveries that morning. "Mama, I know that you are feeling so much better but I think that I have heard of a new preparation, something stronger, from the Americas, that might help more than what we've tried in the past..."

Margaret sighed and walked over to the settee and sat and thought for a moment, playing with the folds of her mauve day dress.

Anna continued, "I've yet to come up with a complete formulation, so it would be some time before I would be ready to try anything. I'm also worried that it might be rather dangerous and I might try a little on myself to make sure there are no ill effects..." Margaret looked up sharply.

"You'll do no such thing young lady! I remember your mamgu's lessons as well, don't you forget and if there is to be any experimenting going on, I will be a part of it. It is just...you have tried so hard Marianna, I don't want to disappoint you again."

"Oh Mama, you don't disappoint me. I only wish to help you."

"I know, poppet. You are such a wonderful girl and I wonder if I have simply been hiding in here and letting you take care of me because I am scared to face the world without your father."

"But this started before Papa..."

"I know but I have not fought it as much as I might have. I think I will like to try this new potion." Anna wrinkled her nose at the word. "Yes, potion, you know I only say it because it bothered both you and your grandmother so." Margaret smiled. "You work on it as best you can and maybe I'll feel fit enough to come to London with you and fend off the worst of Harriet's excesses."

Anna nodded emphatically, relieved that her mother had understood her unspoken plea. Margaret laughed, "All right dear, but I'm afraid that tonight you are on your own. You must go and get ready or the foundations will shake with Harriet's displeasure!"

Anna laughed and hugged her mother and made her exit. Mary helped her don a pretty checked muslin that had been dyed a warm peach, with matching pale peach gloves and helped arrange her waist-length hair in a simple chignon, with a few artful curls around her face. Anna felt she looked respectable. Besides, she could think of no gentlemen who would be there tonight whom she had not known since she was a child. As she descended the stairs, Aunt Harriet again clucked over the color of her gown, which was not the fashionable white and complained about the extra petticoats and thick stockings that she wore. It was January and she had no desire to catch a chill! Another minor tiff ensued over which pelisse was appropriate, Anna opting for the warmest wool over the fashionable silk and a frown graced Lady Harriet's face for the bulk of their carriage ride to the Oswestry Assembly Rooms.

The frown was replaced with a simpering smile as they were announced and Lady Harriet descended upon the other matrons of the local gentry to indulge in the latest gossip. Anna made her way about the small room, amazed at how hot a small ballroom

could become even in the midst of winter. She chatted with her neighbors and friends and when Lady Horatia and her party were announced, gleefully made her way to Isabella's side.

Anna gave a polite nod to Lady Horatia and the fashionably dressed woman accompanying her and then moved to greet Isabella. They embraced happily and Isabella blushed at the small attention they drew from the room. She drew Anna into a window alcove and Anna chuckled over the intense shyness of the daughter of one of England's consummate politicians, Sir Frances Eversmith. Isabella's mother, Lady Horatia Eversmith, was one of the accomplished hostesses of the ton. An invitation to one of Lady Eversmith's balls was as sought after by matchmaking mamas as a piece of prize horseflesh at Tattersall's was for the menfolk those mamas were hunting. The Eversmith's country seat was in Overton, some ten miles from Oswestry and Sir Frances had been a good friend to her father when he had been alive. Their daughters had been bosom friends since they were still in the nursery, Isabella being only one year Anna's senior. The girls had not seen each other since the prior winter and there was so much to talk about.

After the initial pleasantries were done with, Anna related her news of her upcoming Season in London.

"Isabella, I rely on you to help see me through it. I am quite sure I will end up giving Lady Jersey or some other noted notable some grave offense and I will never be allowed to cross into Almack's or dance the wicked waltz."

"Oh Anna, I am so happy. I cannot tell you how dreadful my first Season was for me. I so wished I could have had a friend like you with me. I'm sure I did not say three words together in public for an entire three months. Mother was livid with me. This next Season will be marvelous. Or at least, you might make me brave enough to speak with him. I mean...to speak with a gentleman." Isabella gushed, her pale complexion turning red with excitement and the proper white of her fine muslin gown making her skin glow pink. Isabella was a true redhead, with fiery hair inherited from her father in complete opposition with her timid nature. Her skin was ivory pale, with a sprinkling of unfashionable freckles that she despaired of at every opportunity. Anna had become her savior when they were thirteen and fourteen, when her calendula cream had managed to lighten some of the more notable specks.

"Him? Is there a particular gentleman who has caught your eye this past Season then?"

If possible, Isabella turned even more red, slowly approaching the color of her copper curls. "Well, at the Little Season, just last month, I met the nicest girl, Jane Bington. John, I mean...Mr. Bington, her brother, was very kind to me."

"That is wonderful Isabella! I cannot wait to meet the excellent gentleman who has captured your interest. He must be very special." Isabella gave a soft smile, her eyes glowing. *If only my beau was real, I could share that look with her.*

Knowing Isabella would need time to garner courage to discuss this Mr. John Bington, Anna thought a change of topic was in order. She glanced at the exquisitely elegant blonde who had accompanied Lady Horatia and who now was proceeding to look down her aquiline nose at the country assembly. "Who is that...lovely young woman who is with your mother? Is she a friend of the family?"

"Oh, Lady Patricia? Yes, she has lately become a bosom companion of my mother. They both enjoy the social whirl more than anything. I am surprised she agreed to accompany us here at all but I am afraid she wanted the excuse to avoid her husband's father, Lord Chester." With that name, Anna felt a prickling of memory.

"Lord Chester?" asked Anna, tentatively.

Isabella looked abashed. "Oh, I probably shouldn't have said that, should I? This is why I can never open my mouth in London. Mother only came here tonight because I had most particularly asked to and I never ask to go to a ball..."

"I'm afraid I've forgotten, what is the family name of Lord Chester?" Anna interrupted, a bit of desperation entering her voice.

"Oh...Kelsey, I believe. Edmund Kelsey is the Earl of Chester." And with that name Anna's stomach dropped and her heart clenched in her chest. Isabella continued, "He was going to be passing through Overton on his way to the family estate in Chester and so I believe Lady Patricia chose to accompany us, rather than risk his stopping to visit with Father. It is quite the *on dit* in London, how Lady Patricia and her husband Lord Harold are estranged. The earl is quite incensed." Isabella tittered nervously.

Anna paled considerably. A distant memory assailed her of the existence of Lord Chester and his son. *Married. He was married.* It was odd how she would never have thought his name would have been Harold. *Lord Harold Kelsey.* Was he in the war even now? Why would he be called merely a Lieutenant Colonel then? Was that some older memory? Had her imagination invented a Colonel Kelsey out of whole cloth, with the dim recollection of a nearby noble house to serve as fodder for her delirium?

She watched Lady Patricia move around the room and smile patronizingly at Sir William Barry, one of Anna's own on-again, off-again suitors, as he led her on to the small dance floor. She could not imagine her handsome soldier with such a cold, precisely formal woman. Not after the way he had kissed her, not with such passion simmering beneath the surface. Her color returned as memory of his touch ignited a fire in her belly and fuel was added by repressed fury at the idea that she was being toyed with. Somehow, she knew that this was no mere fantasy and that the Earl of Cheshire's son had spent four nights in her bed, in her dreams. She did not know how it had come to be but if the man was married, he was a reprehensible rake!

If Isabella noticed that her friend was not as talkative as usual she did not comment upon it. However, they both accepted several invitations to dance and when Anna was not engaging in surreptitious observation of Lady Patricia, she did notice that Isabella had acquired more confidence than she admitted, whether it was the Season in London

or the regard of Mr. Bington that had accomplished this feat. She was glad that her friend seemed a bit more comfortable in company.

The night passed quickly and Anna was saved from having to exchange more than the most basic pleasantries with Lady Patricia by the eagerness of her aunt to broaden her own acquaintance with this acknowledged arbiter of fashion. Lady Horatia and Lady Patricia made their goodbyes early, with the excuse of the long trip back to Overton and they left Isabella to the care of Anna and her aunt. In truth, Anna did not doubt that their departure was hastened by the fawning attentions of Lady Harriet but perhaps she was being too uncharitable.

The three ladies rode back to the Abbey swathed in warm blankets and surrounded by the comforting predictability of Aunt Harriet's revelations of the latest Shropshire gossip. Isabella was happy to be silent, soothing Lady Harriet with the occasional mild exclamation over such tidbits as the inability of the parson of Uxbridge to finish his sermon due to indigestion, or the horrendous expense of the chimneys that Mr. Knotsby had just had added to Glenford Cottage. Anna was thus allowed to sulk in silence, glaring at the almost full moon that shimmered over the snow-covered fields, illuminating the roadway.

It was the moon that had plopped her into this mess and she had no idea how to extricate herself from it. She was resolved to forget all about Lord Harold Kelsey, possible Colonel, certain rake.

Chapter Eight

February, 1814

Anna and Isabella had a very pleasant visit and Aunt Harriet was pleased to watch her niece engage in all the feminine pursuits with her genteel companion. For once, Anna paid attention to her needlework, to conversing over fashion, even to singing a little, while Isabella accompanied her on the pianoforte. Margaret made the effort to descend the stairs more often and the house began to seem more filled again, as it had not in several years' time.

"If only there were some gentlemen present, this would be quite the jolly country house party," Aunt Harriet declared one day and Anna was sure that her aunt had been indulging in some cordial to warm her spirits, for the weather outside was positively dismal.

Anna was very sorry to see Isabella leave at the end of two weeks' time. Her illustrious parents had made the side trip to Gladstone Abbey to collect her and had stopped only for tea, for they were to continue on their way to London to get an early start on the political wrangling of Parliament, which was the original purpose of that social necessity, the London Season.

"You promise you are coming to London in March, yes? I will be lost without you!" Isabella was for once quite emphatic.

"You would be lost without me? Well, I should be lost without you! I shall know barely a soul and I depend upon you for introductions to interesting people." Anna smiled and Isabella blushed at the thought of having to make introductions. "At the very least, you must introduce me to the Bingtons. I feel as though they will be great friends, as I am so familiar with them already." Isabella had spoken of John Bington very often during her time at the Abbey and Anna was thrilled with her friend's chance at a love match.

Anna bid a polite farewell to Sir Eversmith and his wife, as well as to Lady Patricia, who accompanied them to London. Lady Patricia had seemed a little cold and distant as the party had made polite conversation but with observation, it seemed to Anna that she was in fact rather forlorn. Perhaps she regretted the estrangement from her husband, or perhaps she regretted her marriage in the first place. Anna could not help but take an observant interest in her demeanor. Lady Patricia was incredibly elegant—thin and lovely, with pale golden hair and light blue eyes—the epitome of fashionable beauty. The distance and detachment in her gaze might have been sorrow, or it might have simply been in the makeup of her personality. It was difficult to ascertain on such a brief acquaintance. If that is what a man such as her Colonel desired, Anna felt she would have no hope of finding someone satisfied with her person.

As Anna waved an unladylike goodbye after the Eversmiths' coach, she felt a weight descend upon her. Isabella's lighthearted happy presence had dispelled the gloom that threatened her at every turn. Forget him she must. She had to break this cycle of dreams that tortured her. She had two weeks left before the next full moon and much to her aunt's consternation, she spent much of that time in her stillroom, wrapped up against the cold that pervaded the cellar in February.

Two projects were at hand to keep her thoughts occupied. One was simple, she needed an elixir to keep her awake on the night of the full moon. The other was more complex and she worked carefully with the small supply of *Datura* seeds, carefully creating a tincture with the smallest amount of the crushed seeds. After a week of experimentation, the small black kidney-shaped seeds had been infused into a solution with ginger and Anna was ready to see if it worked.

Margaret was willing to try and sipped at a small cup of the tincture. Anna waited patiently with her mother in her bedroom to observe the effects. They were having a pleasant conversation about one of her mother's favorite books, *Robinson Crusoe*, which they had been reading together to pass the time.

"It always seems like a good idea to read books detailing a warm climate when in the midst of an English winter." Margaret smiled and Anna gave an anxious laugh. Margaret often read books of travel and adventure, as a means of escape from a limited existence. Anna so hoped that this effort to find a cure of sorts would not prove to be yet another dead end.

"I do think that Mr. Crusoe must have certainly been warm, Mama."

"Actually, I'm really rather warm myself at the moment. Has Lucy added too many logs to the fire, my dear?"

Anna looked alarmed, as Lucy had not been in the room for a good hour and the fire was burning low. She reached across to her mother lying on the bed and her skin felt flushed and her complexion was turning a bright pink.

Margaret started to blink. "You best close the drapes my dear, between the fire and the harsh winter light, I feel a headache coming on, I'm sorry my dear. The light does bother my eyes."

Anna observed the enlarged pupils and rang for Lucy. Margaret rose from the bed and went to the pianoforte. "Perhaps some music will soothe my headache." She began with a soft lullaby but rapidly moved on to a frantic version of Handel's Hallelujah chorus. Lucy arrived and Anna sent her to fetch a towel cooled in the cellar, some cool water and syrup of ipecac.

Margaret rose from the pianoforte and began to dance slowly around the room. "Marianna my dear child, it's working! I do feel so much better. I haven't danced in years." Margaret seized Anna's hands and spun them both about, laughing.

"Mama, Mama!" Anna shouted and her mother slowed to a stop.

"Goodness, my heart is all atwitter. And I am so thirsty." She sat and stared at her hands, as if fascinated with them, bringing them up to her eyes as though to check if

they were still there. She looked up at Anna, whose eyes were glossy with unshed tears. Another failure.

"Marianna, I'm afraid that I'm not quite myself, am I?"

"No Mama, I'm afraid that you are not."

"'Tis a shame. It was wonderful to dance again."

A long night followed, where Anna induced her mother to purge the contents of her stomach, followed by sips of cool water. She wrapped Margaret in the cooled sheets that Lucy supplied.

By morning, Margaret had returned to something approaching normal, her rapid breathing easing into the restful cadence of sleep. Anna was by her bedside yet again, racked with guilt at having tried to push her mother too far, simply to assuage her own needs. Anna would simply have to be strong and face London and the Marriage Mart essentially alone.

As for Lord or Colonel or whomever-it-may-be Kelsey, she would definitely need to be rid of him in order to maintain her composure. As the full moon approached and February waned, Anna went on longer and longer walks through the countryside, alarming both her mother and her aunt, pushing herself to exhaustion in the hope of avoiding any dreams at night.

As night fell on the twentieth, the full moon found Anna pale and drawn, curled in the window seat of her room, fully dressed, with no intention of letting sleep claim her. A full candelabra graced a console table nearby and she determinedly plunged on through *Robinson Crusoe* for the rest of the night, blinking reddened eyes and sipping on a mixture of strong sweetened coffee with valerian and periwinkle to increase alertness. She refused to think of him and was incensed with herself at the number of times she began to picture herself trapped on an island with him and had started to nod off. She jumped from her seat and closed the curtains on the interfering moon. She walked in brisk circles around the room and paused in front of the bookshelf, seeking a less inflammatory volume.

Anatomy was no good, as she did not want to think of a male body in any form at the moment. Her herbals might not encourage temptation but they also might induce sleep. Her hand moved to a new acquisition, an account of the battle of Vitoria from the previous year that had just been published. She had shocked Mr. Jamison with the odd request of some books recounting the events of the war in Spain and when Isabella had been present upon the volume's arrival, she had looked at her friend as though she had completely lost her senses. However, after the experience she had partaken in, she felt connected to the events of the war. The connection remained, regardless of the ethics of the man who had inadvertently exposed her to it. She had not yet worked up the courage to open it but it would surely keep her awake.

The moon set and eventually dim pink streaks of dawn crept into the room but Anna read on. The account was riveting, bloody and exciting. It seemed a much more glorious conflict than the small brawl that had had her paralyzed with terror while she

hid in a tiny alcove. She suspected the author of this epic had plastered over the sweat and stench and fear in order to paint a picture of a noble struggle, neat and tidy and foreordained in its conclusion. She knew war was much messier. She knew that Kelsey – she could not bring herself to think of him as Harold – must have seen much more of the gritty reality of the fight. He'd been there to pick up the pieces. She knew him to be a doctor of some sort, so she doubted he was in the thick of the killing fields but he had endured so much.

How his wife could have abandoned his family and him, after he had been through such an experience she could not conceive. If something had harmed someone she loved, she would do everything in her power to care for them. Somehow, she knew that he was hurting and though she knew it was wrong, she wished she could be the one he could turn to in need.

Mary found her, curled on a settee by the banked fire, a book resting against her chest. Anna's face was peaceful, more so than it had been in a month and her maid didn't have the heart to wake her.

* * * * *

Papa was so good with horses but he never let them go fast when he took her to the village. She pouted at this and resigned herself to a sedate pace, trying to wheedle her father into letting her take the reins for a minute, *just a minute?*

Alas, all her efforts were to no avail, they were too close to Middleton, so as they arrived in front of the parsonage, Anna just sighed and slid down to the ground before Papa could help her down. Her dress gathered up around her knees and she landed with an unladylike thump. Papa shook his head and clucked his tongue but Anna didn't take too much note of that, instead running off to see if Sally could play, or at least, if Sally's mother Mrs. Carruthers had any more shortbread.

"Marianna, be back here in one hour!" Papa called after her.

"Yes, Papa, don't worry."

Sally was a whole three years older than she and at the ripe old age of eleven, seemed much more interested in talking to Billy the blacksmith's son than playing with Anna.

Anna was quite miffed but she walked away with her head held high. She decided to take advantage of the Carruthers' swing, even if Sally wasn't there to push her. She sat on the bench and tried to push off with her legs but the seat was too big and she couldn't pump her legs properly. This was a proper garden swing, a seat for a girl to sit demurely in while being pushed. She couldn't see the sense in that and missed the board swing Papa had built for her in the big oak. She sat, rocking back and forth as best she could and chewed on the end of a braid and contemplated the kitchen garden laid out in front of her.

"Grrrooooookkk!" A large, squishy frog landed in her lap and she couldn't restrain herself from a loud screech. She slipped off the seat and landed in the dirt, the frog leaping free. A loud guffaw greeted her as she got up and dusted herself off.

She looked up, hands on her hips, at a boy about her own age, with black hair and dark eyes, his mouth open in a wide grin. She raised an eyebrow, gave him her iciest glare and lunged after him. He took off at high speed and just made it around a hedge and past the stone fence ringing the yard before she caught up and tackled him. They went sprawling and before he could scramble back up and keep running, the frog managed to land on his head. This time, they both started laughing.

The frog leaped off and they remained sitting in the dirt path, eyeing each other warily. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Why should I tell you?"

She gave a snort and crossed her arms over her chest. "This is my village and my churchyard and I've never seen you before. If you are going to be dropping frogs on unsuspecting girls, I think I should at least know your name, so I can give a proper warning to the other females of my acquaintance."

He squinted his eyes at her, as though evaluating her trustworthiness. "I don't know why I'm here. Just am. Name's Kelsey. Who are you?"

"Is Kelsey your family name?"

"Course it is. I'm too big to be called by my Christian name. Papa says that at school next year, I'll be Kelsey, like my brother, so I'd better get used to it."

"Oh then, I'm Sanderton then."

"Girls don't use there names like that, only boys."

"Why not?"

He thought for a moment. "It just is."

"Well, I'll be Sanderton then, so there." He frowned.

"Suit yourself." An awkward silence followed.

He mumbled, "That's a fine horse you rode in on."

How long had he been watching her? "Garnet? She's Papa's favorite. He won't let us ride fast though. Mama doesn't really want me to ride with Papa at all, it's not very feminine."

"I don't think my Papa would let my sister ride with him. Of course, she's too little. He doesn't let us ride with him either." He got up from the ground and reached a hand down to help her up. Maybe he wasn't all bad.

He ran a hand through his disheveled black hair. "Listen, I'm sorry about the frog. I just...ummm..." He looked at her strangely and she felt a little flutter in her stomach. Maybe Sally had a point about boys.

"It's okay. Frogs aren't too bad. You could make it up to me by pushing me on the swing." She gave him a shy smile. They walked back into the yard, through the open

gate in the fence but the yard was different as they passed. It was bigger, the trees older, opening up on to wide fields Anna didn't recognize. She was scared but the boy took her hand in his and with the other hand brought a finger to his lips, stilling the question she was about to ask. His eyes twinkled and he pointed toward the swing.

It wasn't quite the same swing but it still rocked back and forth slowly and the sound of a lullaby filled the air. A woman sat with an infant in her arms, its tiny head resting on her shoulder and she moved slowly back and forth, humming a simple tune. She was lovely and warm, with brown hair pinned up on her head. The two looked so peaceful, Anna couldn't bear to think that anything could ever disturb them.

Anna glanced at the boy called Kelsey but he was a boy no longer. A man stood next to her, his hand still clasping hers. She too, was no longer a child but full grown. As a boy he had been her age, though in truth, he must be seven or eight years her senior. Dreams worked in odd ways and memories began to flood in. This man had kissed her, had tried to help her mother, had taken her through war, had thrown a frog at her. He had taken her heart. And he could not be hers. Tears formed in her eyes and she watched him gaze at the woman and child.

"Who is it?" she asked, daring to break the spell of silence over them.

He gave her a soft, sad smile. "My mother...and my sister. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For them. For bringing me here. They...they both died not too long after this. I was eleven. A fever took them and I could do nothing. I never wanted to be that helpless again. I...you always take me exactly where I need to go."

He reached up and cupped her cheek and she closed her eyes, reveling in the touch that had haunted her for weeks. But her thoughts caught up to her and she drew back, pulling her hand from his.

"I cannot, we...we cannot..." She turned and fled, desire chasing her back through the gate. Blackness crept in on the edges of her vision as she raced over the path and suddenly she fell and kept falling, with nothing to catch her but her grief.

Chapter Nine

France, February, 1814

It was coming to an end. The Battle of Orthez had broken Field Marshall Soult, who was on the run toward Toulouse. The Allies were whittling away Napoleon's defense of France. Lieutenant Colonel Kelsey stood across a desk from Arthur Wellesley, Marquess of Wellington. The command tent was only marginally warmer than the chill air outside. Brandon stood at attention, hat under his arm, stiff with the cold and with tension for the uncomfortable conversation to come.

Wellington laid aside the quill with which he had been writing and stared up at Brandon with expressionless blue eyes.

"Colonel Kelsey, I understand you wish to return home?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Although I am loath to lose someone of your talents, I'm afraid that your organization is so good, that you have removed the necessity of your position. I would have other jobs for you and I would eagerly use you anywhere I could. But I sense that your heart is no longer in the matter."

Brandon paused, surprised by the insightfulness of the man. "Sir, if I thought that I couldn't be spared, that I was truly needed..."

"I know you would do your duty, Colonel. I have surgeons aplenty now and more provosts than I know what to do with, now that we are on the winning side. I am surprised that you do not wish to stay 'til the bitter end but perhaps I am not that surprised. You haven't struck me as the type to gloat over your enemies when they are beaten."

"Death is never fully beaten sir, only held at bay." Brandon stared back.

"Too true." He gave Brandon a wintry smile, his intent face otherwise still around his strong, hooked nose. "Go home, Kelsey. Go home. I hope that I may join you soon." He flicked a hand in dismissal.

Brandon bowed and retreated out of the tent flap and breathed in the smoky air from a thousand campfires. It was evening and the Anglo-Portuguese forces did their best to hide from the February chill. He was struck by the fact that he would never see quite this sight again—the rows of tents and the small campfires, the men doing their best to stave off the mix of anxiety and boredom that accompanied troops at war. He was leaving, to save himself. To find himself, after years of burying everything under the sheer screaming need that was a battlefield.

He had lost himself and had begun to lose why he had wanted to become a physician. She had reminded him, as she had reminded him of so many things. He had

not thought of his mother and little Eliza in a very long time but they were always there, underneath everything else. He needed to find a new purpose and he needed to return to his family. She had run from him and he needed to find out why, he needed to find her, whoever she was. He needed to go home.

* * * * *

England, March 1814

Anna stared out the coach window and back down the lane toward the Abbey and the steps where her mother stood.

Aunt Harriet took her to task, "Marianna, bring your head back in this coach. You'll ruin your bonnet. You must learn to act like a lady if you are to have any success in London." Anna pulled herself away from the window and her home. She was paler and thinner than she had been in a long time. Her aunt was most likely pleased at her appearance but it was the result of sleeplessness and anxiety. Worry over Mama, and strange desires for a man who was out of her reach. Even though she had traveled to Shrewsbury with her parents and once to London as a child, she had spent most of her life in the comfort of Gladstone Abbey and leaving it for the months of the Season left a hole somewhere within her. Her confidence seemed to shrink further with every league they traveled toward the capital.

Anna told herself she need only put on a show for a few months finding what enjoyment she could in the metropolis. Then she could return home with a few engaging stories and resume the life she had always led. But this journey had become more than that. Anna wasn't sure if she could ever return to the life she had known. Not when her dreams had created such desires within her, turned subtle longings for a family into blatant need. The man she wanted she could not have and she did not know if she could ever find someone else to replace him. In truth, she did not know when the realization had come that she loved the man who visited her dreams with the full moon. But she knew now that escape was impossible. She wasn't sure if she even wanted to escape.

London was full of men and women who were engaging in a complex dance to find a mate, whether for comfort and security, to secure wealth and fortune, or that rarest beast, for the sake of love. She feared that in observing that dance, she would become undone and weep for what she could not have.

Rain spattered the windows, the shades drawn down and the horses struggled on through the mud. Aunt Harriet snored softly, her bonnet askew as she leaned against the padded wall of the coach. Mary hummed to herself, somehow intent on her mending, even in the uneven light of the coach lantern and the rough condition of the road. Emmaline, Aunt Harriet's maid, followed her mistress's example and dozed as well. There was a crack of thunder and her aunt snorted, while Mary let out a little shriek. Emmaline, started awake for a moment spewed forth a very improper declaration in gutter French. This made Anna titter with amusement and Mary look

askance at her colleague and then at her mistress with curiosity. At least Anna could now be certain that Emmaline was truly a French lady's maid, and not simply an English girl with affected mannerisms.

The brief levity had brightened her mood and she resigned herself to trying to enjoy what she could of the journey. She still might be able to find some happiness. Maybe find a kind, comfortable man who could chase away her dreams of black hair and black eyes that could pierce her very soul. Someone who wouldn't take her heart, for it was no longer hers to give.

* * * * *

The townhouse was spacious and comfortable, with an excellent staff and so Anna was quite pleased. The house was also in a fashionable enough part of Mayfair to suit her aunt and the first week was spent buried in fabric and lace, ribbons and bonnets and gloves and stockings at the best fabric warehouses and modistes. Anna was bored senseless but her aunt was overflowing with happiness and Anna could not begrudge her this and sometimes the results were surprising.

Anna stared at herself in a long mirror. A deep green tucked satin ballgown being fitted by a seamstress who kneeled below her, mouth full of pins. Even with her hair in a simple chignon and little jewelry to speak of, she was amazed at the picture she presented.

"You clean up well, my girl." Aunt Harriet smiled. "I wasn't sure about the color, so dark for a coming out. But I'm truly glad you talked me into it."

Aunt Harriet had blossomed with the air of the city and the excitement of social display. Anna wondered at the affection that her aunt displayed for her. She realized that perhaps Lady Harriet had felt out of her element and powerless at Gladstone Abbey, where she was a somewhat dependent relation. Lady Harriet had no purpose, other than what trouble she made for herself. In the city, Lady Harriet could truly be of use to Anna. This confidence brought the best out of her childless aunt, who lavished every attention toward making Anna a social success. For the first time, Anna thought that her Aunt Harriet truly did care for her, in her own infuriating way.

* * * * *

The third week of March found Anna and Lady Harriet paying a round of social calls to Lady Harriet's acquaintances, both close and distant and Anna was in a whirl of names and titles that she desperately tried to remember. A polite, demure smile had graced her features as a mask for so long she was afraid she would be forever caught that way, like so many of the other young ladies she had met during the week.

She was immensely relieved to find herself on the doorstep of the Eversmiths' London abode, smartly clad in fine spotted muslin and a dark vermillion spencer in the height of fashion. She knew she looked well, the vinegar rinses her aunt insisted upon

had brought out red streaks in her finely-coifed hair and her red bonnet heightened the effect. She wondered if Isabella would think her much changed.

After they peeled off their gloves and bonnets and handed them to the footman, the butler escorted them to Lady Horatia and Isabella and the room was already crowded with visitors. Isabella sat at her mother's side and Anna thought she was holding up well, all things considered. She did not seem to be nervously shaking, blinking excessively or any of the other traits that had marked Isabella's adolescence when she was in the presence of strangers. Anna wondered if that was due to the social conditioning of a Season in London, her mother's determination or the presence of the young man casting surreptitious looks at her from across the settee. Isabella noted Anna and Lady Harriet's entrance and joy suffused her countenance.

"Anna, you are here! I was so happy to receive your card that you had made it to town. I cannot wait to show you my favorite booksellers and perhaps go for an ice at Gunther's together." A becoming blush of excitement crept up her cheeks. "But where are my manners, I simply must introduce you around."

Aunt Harriet descended on Lady Horatia and a group of older ladies and Anna noticed with some relief that Lady Patricia was not among the assembled guests. Isabella proceeded to introduce her to several guests, in order of social rank, as was proper. Although Isabella kept glancing toward the young man with blond curls and hazel eyes who stared down at hands clenched nervously in his lap. At least, when he wasn't trying to catch glimpses of Isabella. Anna smiled between pleasantries, sure that her friend may have found her match in a man nearly as shy as herself!

Finally, Anna and Isabella sat down on the crimson and cream striped sofa near the Bingtons and Isabella made a shy introduction. "Miss Sanderton, may I present Miss Jane Bington and her brother, Mr. John Bington, of Kent." Isabella was blushing yet again, a slight nervous quaver to her voice revealing how very much this meeting mattered to her. "Mr. Bington, Miss Bington, Miss Sanderton is one of my closest friends in Shropshire. I'm sure you will all love her...I mean, I'm sure you will take to her very well." The blush intensified at her gaffe and Isabella mimicked Mr. Bington's position of a minute past, staring at her hands clutched in her lap.

Jane Bington was a lovely girl, perhaps three or four years older than Isabella and appeared as lively and engaging as her brother was reticent. Fashionable short blonde ringlets framed a heart-shaped face and an infectious energy was embodied in the smile she granted Anna.

"It is a pleasure to meet you both. Isabella has told me..." Isabella looked up at her, with a terrified shake of her head and Anna corrected herself, "I've heard such pleasant things about you and I do hope that we can become better acquainted." She gave them both a winning smile.

Anna meant what she said and these two did seem charming. Twins if she was not mistaken, their age and faces were mirrors, even if their personalities seemed opposing. Mr. Bington could barely meet her gaze and he was certainly going to need

encouragement to dare ask the imposing Sir Eversmith for his daughter's hand. Perhaps with age and experience he would improve. He must be just out of University.

"You both look like kind souls. You must tell me how best to survive my Season, as I will be dependent on my friends to learn every nuance."

Although a bit more forward than most refined ladies of the town, Anna's simple speech was in no way unladylike. Miss Bington smiled at her and began a most enjoyable, insightful and accurate description of some of the most judgmental scions of the ton.

But Anna's friendly speech had resulted in a remarkable transformation in the brother. Being painfully shy John Bington found it extraordinarily difficult to speak with members of the gentler sex, much more so than to converse with strangers of his own gender. Having a lovely young woman be so open with him was like a breath of fresh air. Thus, he transferred his attention to Anna and in his eagerness to talk with someone who actually seemed eager to listen, chattered on more in the next half hour than he had in the weeks he had accompanied his gregarious sister through the rounds of London society.

The conversation continued, touching on the weather, on their respective homes in Shropshire and Kent. Anna was surprised at the change in Mr. Bington, who had previously been so silent. He did try to make earnest conversation and her furtive glances at Isabella had revealed that she was a bit shocked to see him so talkative. Perhaps there was hope yet for the man and her friend need not pine for much longer.

The allotted time for afternoon calls at an end and tea consumed with gusto, Lady Harriet rose to go and Anna followed, bidding a warm goodbye to Isabella and to Miss Bington, now to be called Jane at her insistence. Mr. Bington brought up his courage to ask if Miss Sanderton and her aunt would be attending the Mistleton's musicale that evening and he smiled timidly when she replied that they would. Anna was troubled by the worried frown that marked Isabella's visage and promised to return soon for a more intimate tête-à-tête.

Anna was quiet for the short carriage ride home, her thoughts turning from Isabella and Mr. Bington to whether or not the full moon tonight would bring another dream when she was far from home. She was not sure how she felt about the possibility. Part of her wanted to pace about all night until morning was well advanced and she was free for another month from whatever spell plagued her. Another part of her desired nothing more than to pretend a sudden illness, lock herself in her room and fall asleep as quickly as possible so she could find herself in his arms again. Both courses of action would lead her to missing some event on her aunt's schedule, either tonight's musicale or the Italian breakfast at Lady Earley's on the morrow. Although her aunt was becoming slightly more manageable, she had no desire to see the return of the harridan should she express any desire not to participate in ton functions.

They returned to their leased Mayfair townhouse to prepare for the evening's musical entertainment. As Lady Harriet rested, Anna snuck down to the kitchen, where she felt most at home. The cook, Monsieur Guy, was excellent and guarded his art and

his domain closely. However, after having noted a pained limp, Anna had won her way into his graces with a salve of Spanish pepper and mint that had eased the pain in his aching joints.

The household had soon learned to respect Lady Harriet's demands but even more quickly they had learned to love the young miss's caring voice and polite manners. Jenny, the youngest scullery maid, had benefited from a few doses of angelica syrup after one of her yearly bouts with the March fog-induced hacking cough. The young girl's speedy recovery assured Anna a place in the staff's hearts.

As she arrived in the warmth of the kitchen, Monsieur Guy was tending to his precious stockpot. He turned as she entered and gave her a small smile.

Before she could ask he said, "*Mademoiselle*, I must zank you again for your marvelous concoction! Zee knee has not felt zees good since I was *un tres petit* apprentice."

Anna smiled warmly. "I am so glad. I will give a list to Mrs. Tipton for the next market day and I will be sure to make you up enough to last through to next winter."

"*Merci, merci*. Is zere anything you would like, ma petite? I have just finished some choux dumplings with poached pears and I must say, they are particularly magnificent." He lifted the lid on a tureen and the aroma of warm pastry and fruit tickled her senses.

She inhaled deeply and gave a sigh. "I'm afraid if I let you tempt me any more, I shall be unable to fit into any of my gowns and I shudder to think what Aunt Harriet would make me purchase during another round of fittings. No, I'm afraid I'll have to content myself with a serving at supper." She gave an apologetic smile, hopeful that the temperamental Frenchman would overlook the slight. "I'm afraid I've only come down to check on little Jenny. Is she here?"

The young girl in question poked her head out of the scullery and smiled a gap-toothed grin. "Hello, Miss. Thank ye kindly Miss but I does feel so much the better. Me own mother couldn't ha' done more."

"I'm just glad I could help. Are you sure you should be up and about already?"

"She's as right as rain, Miss. You shouldn't worry yourself so." Mrs. Tipton, the stern housekeeper, entered the kitchen and gave an unconvincing frown to Jenny.

"I'd best be getting back to me duties, Miss." The tow-headed adolescent scampered off after a sketchy curtsy, running back toward the scullery and Anna turned to Mrs. Tipton, whose expression had softened as the girl ran away.

"She's a bright one, that Jenny. Why in twenty years, she might even have my job." Anna smiled at the housekeeper, who wasn't half as imposing as she had seemed when they had first been introduced to the servants almost three weeks ago.

"Mrs. Tipton, you are just the person that I was looking for." The gray-haired, spectacled woman drew her expression back to one of polite attentiveness. "I would like to ask a favor, if you don't mind. I know it is not my typical habit but I think that being in town has bothered my sleep habits to no end. Mary isn't that familiar with the

house yet and I was wondering if it would be possible to have some warm milk sent up to my room upon our return this evening?" There it was, she had made her choice. She would sleep and leave it to fate whether he found her in her dreams or not.

* * * * *

On the Bay of Biscay, March 1814

The ship creaked around him and Brandon wished that he could have borrowed a sailor's hammock rather than be rocking on the small berth in the tiny cabin, which he had been assigned for the trip back to England. He had to try to sleep and the full moon winked at him as the ship rose and fell over the waves. He wanted it too much and as cruel fate would have it, those who want sleep too badly often cannot find repose. He hoped she would still be there, somewhere in his dreams. She had run off from him but he had once done the same. He had still returned a month later to find her in whatever strange reality that they shared. He unlashed himself from the berth, pulled on his boots and threw his greatcoat over his shirt and breeches. He walked up the steps under the quarterdeck and out under the sky. He was greeted by the soft sighing of the sails and the sound of low singing as the men of the night watch manned the sails, the wheel and the tiller and tried to keep themselves awake.

France was off the starboard bow and although victory had taken the British far into the heart of Napoleon's domain, the ship and her crew had not yet taken a breath without a little anxiety. The Navy had maintained a blockade against the French for nigh on a decade and the dominance and dedication of her ships was unequaled in the world. Even so, there was always some risk to sailing so close to an ancient enemy. The tension was slight though, and the air on deck was cleaner, the salt spray refreshing and the moon glinted off the ocean waves like the finest of diamonds.

In an out of the way corner full of coiled rope, he sat and looked out toward England, toward home. A bird, probably a night heron, flew lazily by and hovered a moment as if to look in his eye. Perhaps the bird was flying home as well. He leaned back against a barrel and tried to think of home and how he would approach his father once he returned. Before any resolutions could enter his mind, he was asleep.

* * * * *

He was going home. True, he was not in his element and the thick, cloying air of the sea weighed down his wings, coating his feathers with salt. He had been flying too long and his muscles were taxed to their maximum extent. The smell of land filled his brain, drawing him home when he thought all had been lost. Thick fog prevented him from seeing past the tips of his wings. He longed for safe purchase and the scent of lavender and roses drew him on.

She waited, not quite sure why or for what. She stood on a pier, her green cloak wrapped around her, listening to the sound of gentle waves lapping against the supports. Fog surrounded her, isolating her from the world and enveloping her as though seeking to embrace her in a world of her own creation. She heard the sound of wings flapping in the distance and turned toward the sea to face the sound. It came closer and a black form took shape through the mist. In a moment, it became a large bird and in another heartbeat, a raven had landed on the weathered boards at her feet, collapsing as though it had barely life left in its body. She held her breath, willing the bird to rise and it did so, though slowly. She looked into its face and instead of cold avian orbs, she gazed into familiar brown-black eyes. He had come home. So had she.

Chapter Ten

This would not do, not at all. Two more weeks had passed and invitations had poured in, thanks to the rounds Lady Harriet had made. Anna had acquired a small following of gentlemen, drawn more to her inheritance than her person. But she had resolved to have a good time, dancing and enjoying conversation more varied than that available in a small country village. Once it was known that she would rather discuss Milton and Dante rather than fashion or gossip, the ranks of admiring men had thinned somewhat. Unfortunately they still included one Mr. John Bington.

She had tried to tell herself that Mr. Bington was simply being kind to her as a friend of Isabella's but soon his attentions became obviously focused on herself. Truly, Mr. Bington seemed almost frightened to talk to Isabella or anyone else for that matter. She had to admit that things were looking glum. Isabella had increasingly become sullen as well as shy and barely spoke to anyone, much less to Anna. Lady Horatia was livid and whispers were starting to circle Isabella with regards to her inability to function in society.

Anna clacked her ivory fan open in a fit of pique and surveyed the overly warm ballroom at the Fenton's estate in Richmond. Anna thought it would be pleasant to get out of the heavy, coal-filled air of the city and out into the countryside. But in truth, except for the lavish gardens waiting out in the cold of late March, the routine was exactly the same. The night would be filled mostly with empty-headed chatter, too-rich food that was only to be pecked at by a proper young miss and a stifling, overcrowded ballroom.

At the moment, she was sitting out two sets and she had managed to maneuver Mr. Bington into dancing with Miss Hermione Fenton, the rather plain but immensely wealthy daughter of their hostess for the evening. The dear, sweet girl was besieged by impoverished fortune hunters at every turn and her mother insisted on dressing her in the most unbecoming shades of pale yellow and puce, which clashed horribly with her olive-toned skin. If she couldn't help Isabella, at least she could help somebody given her apparent powers of persuasion over Mr. Bington.

If only she could turn the constant glances that Mr. Bington sent toward Isabella when he thought no one was looking into concrete action! Get Bington to talk to Isabella as he talked to her, then there might be some progress! Instead, Mr. Bington danced attendance on her and every effort to get Isabella and Mr. Bington to talk, much less to get some time alone, resulted in nothing but a lot of stammering and blushing. It was enough to drive a woman to distraction.

Her eyes wandered around the ballroom to where Isabella sat with her mother among the gossiping matrons. Her friend's mood could only be described as forlorn,

with a touch of righteous jealousy. Anna's gaze roamed along the ranks of the assembled ladies and the so-called gentlemen. Men who attended in the hopes of capturing the hand of the ridiculously wealthy Miss Fenton and who didn't mind the stench of trade that accompanied her.

As she watched, a late arrival walked into the room and paused at the doorway as if to assure that his arrival was noted. Every inch the nabob, in a gold dress coat and brilliant red paisley waistcoat, the man quite captured the eye. Who else could he be but her cousin, Herbert Dalrymple, Lord Liston.

Soon after he struck his dramatic pose and sauntered into the room, Anna could practically see the wave of whispers sweep through the packed room. She wondered how such an annoying little man, peer of the realm though he was, could cause such a ruckus. Had he been involved in a decorating disaster? Was his coat too loose or too tight? Had the padding on his calves sagged to his stick-like ankles? She had observed no such criminal act on his part, other than his usual staged buffoonery.

He crossed the room, holding his quizzing glass at various chits who passed too near. He did look quite ridiculous among the Corinthians and the followers of Brummel's dictates on manly fashion, a garish robin in a sea of blackbirds. He joined up with a fast crowd of gentlemen who mingled at the entrance to the card room and struck another studied attitude in order to survey the room. His gaze settled on Miss Fenton and as the set drew to a close, he was making his way toward her with uncharacteristic directness. Apparently, Anna was not the only one who had followed his progress through the room and his beeline was halted bodily by Mr. Fenton, Miss Fenton's astute father. Mr. Fenton had a hushed but intense word with Lord Liston in the middle of the floor and Herbert paled noticeably and gave a funny little half bow, before retreating somewhat and taking up a new pose of blasé indifference against one wall.

Anna was amused and intrigued by such goings-on and took off in search of Lady Horatia, who was sure to be able to enlighten her as to the latest gossip surrounding her erstwhile cousin. Usually, Lady Harriet would also be numbered among those in the know but Anna thought that her opinions must surely be clouded in this particular case.

She searched fruitlessly past the ranks of superfine, silk and muslin for her quarry but could not identify the violet turban of Lady Horatia among the throng in the ballroom. Both she and Isabella were missing from the group of matrons where they had been just a moment ago. She was about to give up and move to the refreshment table for punch, as most of her small court were occupied at her behest with other young ladies. She felt a tap on her shoulder and she was suddenly ill at ease. Wonder of wonders, there was Herbert, giving her what she supposed he thought was a winning smile but was, in reality, a rather pathetic smirk.

"Hello, dear Cousin Marianna, so good to see you in town." He captured her hand and raised it to his lips with a kiss at her knuckles. She snatched her gloved hand back as quickly as she could and gave him a tepid smile.

"Cousin Herbert. What a surprise! We have been in town these past few weeks and Aunt Harriet has not received your card. She will be thrilled to see you." His smile curled a bit at the corners, turning into a bit of a grimace. She continued, "And we have not seen you at any society events! Where have you been hiding yourself?" She arched an eyebrow at him, pleased to be the source of his obvious discomfort.

He cleared his throat. "I have been busy, a country house party don't you know, quite exclusive. The Season is completely uninteresting until well into April and all the best of the quality know that." She rolled her eyes at the insult, while Herbert proceeded to remove a box of snuff from a waistcoat pocket.

She was appalled. The man might try to dress to the height of fashion but he had no proper manners. Partaking of snuff in the presence of a lady was beyond the pale. She searched for someone to rescue her from the conversation but it was not to be.

"Cousin Herbert, I'm quite sure you must have people you would like to reacquaint yourself with, if you have absented yourself from the social whirl of late..." Herbert gave a sneeze and several people turned to inspect the two of them.

"My dear Marianna, I can assure you that you are more interesting than anyone else to me at this moment." He wiggled a blond eyebrow suggestively and his gaze traveled down to her generous bosom above the bodice of her burgundy lutestring gown.

She blew air through her teeth in annoyance at his blatant evaluation of her assets. "I'm so sorry but I am afraid that Mr. Underhill must be looking for me, we are engaged for the next set."

"Ah, dear Mr. Underhill. I am so sorry to disappoint you dear but I just saw him leave with his sister, she looked quite ill. I do not think he will be able to escort you on to the floor." He snorted, clearing the last of the snuff from his nostrils, his intricate cravat quivering with the puff of air. "I would be most honored to take his place, however."

With no way out without giving unpardonable offense, she acquiesced and allowed him to lead her out. It was a cotillion and the intricate order of steps prevented any more conversation, although he still managed an uncomfortable evaluation of her person that made her very skin crawl. The half hour passed and it was with relief as the music closed for the set that she found Aunt Harriet coming to her rescue and swooping down upon Herbert to engage him in conversation. With a polite bow she excused herself and finally caught sight of Lady Horatia and Isabella, who had returned to the ballroom.

"Lady Horatia, Isabella, are you quite well? I was searching for you and I grew worried..."

"Nothing is the matter child, just a torn hem. Isabella was kind enough to mend it herself, although I'm sure a maid could have been fetched."

"Nonsense, Mama. It was much faster to do it myself." Isabella huffed. She might be shy but no one could question her sewing skills. The fine whitework of the fichu at her throat was proof enough of that.

Anna smiled at the interplay. If only Isabella could stand up to society as well as she stood up to her mother! Isabella then turned her ire on Anna. "I see you do not lack for dance partners." She motioned toward Lord Liston.

Anna shivered, "Lord Liston is a cousin by marriage and more of an obligation than a partner, I might add."

Isabella gave a small grin. "Is this your cousin Herbert then? Who stayed with you in the autumn?"

"None other. From his immaculate dancing slippers to the coiffed wig on his head, that is Herbert Dalrymple, Viscount of Liston." Isabella giggled and Anna smiled, warmed that her friend was at least speaking to her for the night.

"Tsk, ts, such talk is beneath you young girls," Lady Horatia chided. "Still I can think of no one who deserves it more. The man is a menace, it is quite galling that he should show his face in polite society!"

Anna was shocked. "Truly?"

"It is quite a shame that you even danced with him, my dear. No respectable young woman would. Still, I'll let out that you are a relation and we shall hope any chatter will blow over." Anna grew alarmed.

"Whatever has he done? He seems quite harmless, though somewhat ill-mannered."

Lady Horatia looked at her with shock. "I forget, sometimes, how little you've been out in society, my dear child. You seem so confident beyond your years. Herbert Dalrymple has ruined reputations and bank accounts with impunity. He has compromised at least two girls of good standing and is as poor as a church mouse, with creditors banging at his doors. How he manages to turn himself out in such style is a mystery. He has not shown himself in company for a year or more but he must be getting desperate for money and Miss Fenton must have lured him out of the shadows. I'm afraid he's not in for much luck however, the kind of blunder he would need to restore his fortune is so large that not even his title could attract it."

Anna was dumbfounded. That explained the awkward visit to the wilds of Shropshire. She was very glad that she had managed to avoid being alone with him and doubly glad that she had locked her door at night. Her fortune was not immensely large but an increasingly desperate fortune-hunter might try anything. She vowed to avoid him at all costs, regardless of her aunt's plotting. Once Lady Harriet got wind of this, she might give up altogether on the idea.

Suddenly, the entire enterprise of the Season seemed very depressing and Anna wanted nothing more than a few moments of peace and privacy. Between the sets that she danced, a plan was soon hatched in her busy brain. As Mr. Bington found her once again to claim a dance, she launched it. She bent from her seated position, examining the bottom cream trim of her gown.

"It must be the night for torn hems," Anna declared, seeking to excuse herself from the room. "Nay, pray do not trouble yourself, Isabella," she answered the unspoken

question in her friend's eyes, "Although your needlework is far superior to mine, I am still able to mend a hem unaided. I shall return in a trice. Mr. Bington, why don't you escort Miss Eversmith in the next dance, as I am indisposed?"

Anna was only too glad to escape from the stifling ballroom and the roving eyes of her cousin. Getting Bington to dance with Isabella was an unexpected bonus and she smiled at the success of that little stratagem. Herbert had exited the card room moments before her discovery of the "torn" hem and so she hoped that he had not seen her leave the ballroom to follow.

The air was cooler in the rest of the house and she wondered if she could maintain her escape at least for the rest of the set, until the supper dance. She wandered a bit through the private living rooms of the house, luxuriating in a bit of privacy and the small thrill of doing something not quite *de rigueur*. She found the door to Mr. Fenton's large library open and she made her way inside, enjoying the scent of leather bindings and oiled wood and thought to look for a book to enjoy a few minutes of peace before returning to the fray.

While she had just begun to peruse a shelf of Shakespeare and Marlowe volumes, she heard hushed but angry voices from behind a shelf at the far side of the room, which abruptly grew silent again. Curious, she crept up and peered around to find the source of the sound. There was Lady Patricia, being soundly kissed by a man, a man who was not Lord Colonel Kelsey, her husband!

The dark-haired man was similar but it was not the profile that had etched itself in her mind. It was not unruly black hair but brown. Aghast, her mind screamed for her to withdraw but she was paralyzed in place, sickeningly fascinated. Lady Patricia suddenly pulled back from the passionate embrace and gave the gentleman a resounding slap and glared at him with fire in her eyes.

He held his cheek, anger stiffening his posture, the blue merino stretched tightly across his broad shoulders threatening to tear. "I will not beg, Patricia, my dear."

"You have lost your right to call me that, you cad." She attempted to flee but the powerfully built man gripped the wrist of the hand that had struck him.

"You will learn to see reason and then you will come back to me."

"To your house, perhaps but not to your bed!" Anna cowered behind the shelf and Lady Patricia dashed around the other end, not seeing the girl spying on her lovers' quarrel. Anna was shocked and fled the room soon after, worried that the incensed giant of a man who had begun pacing like a caged animal would discover her presence and use similarly physical threats against her.

She tried to calm her breathing as she walked once again into the ballroom and looked around for any sign of Lady Patricia. Anger flared as she felt an odd sense of betrayal that Lady Patricia would cuckold her husband, who must still be off fighting the French, for she had heard no word of him. She wondered if he knew and if they shared another dream, could she keep the information from him? No wonder Lady Patricia tried to hide herself from Lord Chester, if she was playing his son a fool before

even providing a legitimate heir! She was unsure if she could ever keep her countenance politely placid should she be forced to engage in conversation with the woman.

Overcome with exhaustion, she looked for her aunt and pleaded a headache in order to return home, though it was not far from the truth. As the depths of available gossip had been plumbed for the night, Lady Harriet was not loath to leave and with the recovery of their pelisses and hats and their carriage brought forth, the two returned to the townhouse in relative silence. Anna covered her eyes with one hand, unable to appreciate the change from the darkness of Richmond to the streetlights of London in her agitated state. She was unsure what bothered her more, that Lady Patricia would enjoy such passion with a man who was not her husband, or that it seemed more and more likely that she herself would never have the opportunity to share such passion outside of her fantasies.

Chapter Eleven

He knocked on the front door of Kelsey House, the earl's spacious townhouse in London. He was not expected, for he had traveled faster than any letter alerting his family or the household of his return. The open shades and the knocker on the door indicated that someone of the family was at home, though he was unsure who that might be. His father rarely arrived in town until well after the Season began in earnest in April. So, either his brother, or his brother's wife, was making use of the townhouse. He doubted that they were both in residence at the same time. They had quarreled at some point in the past. He was not certain why. It would be necessary to face some member of his family somewhat sooner than he had expected.

Milton, the butler, answered the door and the pleased surprise on his face was rapidly tamped to reflect the expected emotional detachment.

"Master Brandon, sir. It is so good to see you. You were not expected."

Brandon smiled, happier than he could understand to see the ancient family retainer at his post. He glanced around at the sapphire and deep gold velvet curtains lining the entryway and the tasteful cut glass and beveled mirrors. It felt good to be in England, good to be home.

"It is good to be seen, Milton. I hope that I might be able to partake of the hospitality of the house?"

"There is little question of that sir," Milton chastised lightly. The old man leaned forward slightly and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I'm quite sure that the footmen are alerting Cook as we speak and you shall have a fresh treacle tart for supper."

Brandon, threw back his head and laughed, causing a maid passing in the landing above the front hall to jump and drop the linen she carried. His presence already began to lift the somber mood within the house.

Milton informed him that yes, Lord Harold was in residence, as was Lady Patricia. Brandon raised an eyebrow at that one but followed the old butler to the library to see his brother for the first time in three years.

The butler knocked and did not allow the grumbled, "Go away!" from within to deter him, opening the doors and waving Brandon through. The room was dark, the heavy velvet curtains drawn, the oil and leather smell replaced by tobacco smoke and spilled spirits. His brother sat slumped in a black leather chair, staring into the fireplace. At least Brandon didn't have to worry about the sad state of his own faded regimentals, scarlet coat turned a sad pink and pantaloons that had not been white in a good long time. Harold's cravat was askew, his coat discarded on a chair, stubble grew on his chin and it looked as though he had not moved from the chair in an age.

Lord Harold Kelsey bellowed drunkenly, "I said I did *not* want any... Oh, hello. Brandon?" A glimmer of recognition penetrated the alcoholic haze and Harold squinted at him.

"Dear brother, it has been years and you can barely see me. I didn't know that you had become so decrepit in your decline. Let me help you!" Brandon strode across the room to the windows and jerked open the curtains, allowing the midmorning sun to stream into the room, illuminating his brother's face.

"Bloody hell Brandon," he quickly covered his eyes and groaned. "You always were entirely too chipper in the morning. Give a man a break when he's been in his cups."

"Been? Or are you still?" He gestured to the half-full glass on the console table next to Harold.

"Don't start, not this time. I've got an excellent reason to be smashed, I'll have you know. But..." He rose unsteadily from his seat. "It's not everyday a man's brother returns from the wars. I believe we should pay some attention to you. Would you like to share in a glass, to celebrate your return," Harold looked him up and down, "And in one piece!" He lurched a bit and managed to enfold Brandon in a crushing hug.

Brandon returned the embrace, happy to be home, regardless of the inebriated welcome from his massive sibling. Lord Harold Kelsey was a bull of a man, tall and broad, with the brown hair of their mother and the imposing stature of their father. Brandon was a slightly smaller man, with a certain athletic grace to be had from their mother, while he had his father's black hair and intense eyes. Harold was a man of appetites, for drink, for fast phaetons and faster horses and the lifestyle surrounding it all. Brandon had thought before he left that marriage might have tamed some of that and his brother would have turned to some sober, upstanding pursuit. But his return to such a scene seemed to put that in doubt. He helped Harold back to his chair and took up the opposite one.

"So...has Napoleon died while I've been in my cognac-induced stupor? Perhaps next time I go in for a binge I shall not have to find the stuff on the black market. What, eh?" He grinned and tipped back the remainder of his glass.

Brandon grimaced, upset to see his brother in such a state, worse than he had been since University. "No, Hal, Boney is still kicking but Wellington's kicking back harder. I've sold out though. I've done my job." There was an awkward pause. "What's come over you man? This is more than just another night of revels. You don't drink alone."

"I do now. I do bloody everything alone. I eat alone, I sleep alone, damnation." He leaned forward and put his head in his hands. Brandon leaned forward, medical instincts kicking in to see if Harold was about to be ill, but Harold reared up and threw his head back and laughed hoarsely.

"Did you ever think I would be brought this low by a woman, brother? Much less by my own wife!" Brandon blinked, shocked at this latest outburst.

"Oh yes, Lady Patricia Kelsey, most perfect, coolest and loveliest lady of the ton, has captured the heart of her husband, the fool. And she has proceeded to stomp on it with her lovely petite heel." Harold took his head in his hands again and silence reigned for a moment while they both studied the vermillion and russet flowers adorning the rug beneath their feet.

"When? Father sent word that you two were estranged but I thought..."

"Yes, yes, a marriage of convenience, a uniting of great families. I thought it would make the old man happy for a time and I could go back to my life and not listen to his lecturing for a time. We attended events together and I did my duty as far as trying for an heir but she might as well have been as distant as the moon." He paused, his face lined with pain.

"That changed?"

"Yes, it certainly did. We were up at Acton Grange, I for a spot of hunting, Patricia because she said she wanted a bit of the country. I was surprised but took her regardless. There was an accident. Father wouldn't have written, it wasn't that serious, but I was laid up with a bad leg for a good two months."

"She stayed?" Brandon queried.

"She more than stayed. She played the nursemaid to the hilt. Seemed her calling, every bit as much as yours. She read to me, we talked. She has a wicked sense of humor, I don't think I've ever laughed so much. Before I knew it I couldn't imagine going through a day without seeing her for most of it. I didn't recognize it at the time but I was falling in love." He laughed, a cynical sound. "Most unfashionable you know, falling in love with your own wife."

"It might not be fashionable, Hal but it would certainly be a wondrous thing." Brandon whispered.

"It was. She's a very passionate woman, underneath the layers of ice. Once you break through, she could melt you." His gaze returned to the fire and he swirled the last dregs of liquor in his glass.

"Something happened."

"Once the leg mended and we came back to town, I...I was lost somehow. Scared, I suppose." A dawning comprehension seemed to flicker across his face and he sat up straight. "Silly isn't it, being afraid of a woman. It's fortunate that the brave one of us went off to the wars, or Napoleon would be knocking on the door and demanding his cognac back personally! Let us talk about you, dear boy. How goes the good fight?"

"Not brave? The man who holds the phaeton speed record from Pall Mall to Greenwich? Ha! The female of the species can be very intimidating, so there's no shame in a bit of healthy fear. Why, some insect females eat their mate after the act." Brandon could not help enjoying seeing his brother squirm a bit.

Harold turned a bit green. "Damned education of yours. How do you stand knowing such disturbing things!"

Brandon sank lower into his chair and eyed the cognac decanter. "That is far from the most disturbing thing I know, or have seen." Harold raised an eyebrow and poured him a glass.

"Here's to cognac in the morning and a speedy victory." Harold intoned.

"A speedy victory." Brandon echoed and took a sip.

An uncomfortable silence reined again, as both were quiet with their thoughts. Brandon was the first to speak, more willing to talk about his brother's peccadilloes than his experiences in Spain.

"What happened, when you returned to London from the Grange?"

Harold drew in a sharp breath and closed his eyes. "Nothing. That was the problem. I went back to my old life, barely seeing her for more than a few minutes a day. I thought she did the same, thought that it had just been a diversion from boredom for both of us. She's very good at masking any emotion. Since she never complained, never tried to stop my excursions, I got quite wild. Bad as a callow youth."

Brandon raised a brow at that.

"Ha," replied Harold, "You know, when you were gone I was not a completely useless fop. I had taken over the management of several of the estates and was even researching a bill for the Lords for Father."

"Bravo." Brandon inclined his head.

"Thank you, most kind." Harold rolled his eyes. "To continue..."

"Yes, yes, what was the cost of this descent into infamy?" Brandon crossed his legs, attempting to get comfortable while not succumbing to travel weariness.

Harold squinted at him in vexation. "Well, other than a night of passion with my wife that I cannot remember, not a great deal other than sorrow."

"Explain! Or do I wish to hear it?"

"I am afraid that alcohol loosens my tongue more than it should and clouds my memory when it shouldn't. Suffice it to say, I managed to seduce my lovely wife and then forget most of the encounter. Patricia took it to be a sign of our relationship warming and so when I attempted to leave the following day for my usual haunts, the club and such, she accosted me, wanting to know when I would be home. Overjoyed at the opportunity to get a reaction from her, I said I was visiting my mistress."

"You keep a mistress?" Brandon asked, surprised, as it was not a common habit of his sibling, certainly not after his marriage.

"No, I do not keep a mistress. I-I wanted to hurt her, to get any emotion from her. After we returned to Town, she had turned into an icicle again." He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I got a reaction. Within an hour, she had left."

"Left?"

"Absconded, disappeared, packed up a trunk and decamped." Harold ticked off the iterations on his fingers.

"Where?"

"She had managed to acquire quite a few friends, not to mention her family. She went from house to house throughout the country for the last ten months."

"But, Milton said she was in residence here."

"She is, or was until last night, I am not sure."

"Have you made amends?"

"Apparently not. I came back to town from Chester yesterday myself and found her in residence but out at a ball. I followed, trying to convince her to come home with me but I received a resounding slap for my efforts."

"What did you do during those ten months?"

"Brooded. Remembered what happened, with the help of my valet. Worked. Tried to reform."

"Did you search for her?" Brandon asked, puzzled that a man of passion and action such as his brother could be so reticent. Here he was, ready to search for a woman he was not certain truly existed and his brother seemed to have problems finding his own wife!

"I did not think that she wanted to be found."

Now Brandon rolled his eyes. "You just left it at that and then expected her to welcome you when you managed to work up the nerve to finally see her?"

Harold looked sheepish. "Well, she had returned to the residence. I thought she must have realized her mistake."

"Her mistake?" Brandon chuckled. "My dear, dear, misguided brother. Here you are, surrounded by the ladies of the ton and I on a battlefield with no female companionship to speak of and yet you know nothing about women!" Harold snorted. Brandon went on, "Have you told her you love her?"

"Why should I, when she goes running off and makes me a laughingstock. I've got my pride!"

"And that's all you've got. Hal, listen to some advice from your younger, wiser sibling," he stood, walking to the mantle and examining the portrait of their father and mother that rested over it. He turned back to Harold, "I have seen too much death and life is too short to throw your whole happiness away for the sake of pride. It is cold comfort. If doing your duty and marrying as Father wished has managed to bring you a bride that you wish to give your heart to, then you are the luckiest of men. Do not waste such luck by battling for honor or some twisted version of hubris."

Harold looked stricken and remained silent.

Brandon sighed. "I think I have said enough for now, enough to merit another two years with no letters."

Harold chuckled and looked embarrassed. "I was never much for correspondence but that doesn't mean I didn't think of you."

Brandon smiled fondly. "And I you." He walked over and slapped Harold on the back. "Now, pick yourself up, have some strong coffee and talk to your wife before it's too late. I, for one, can use some peace and quiet to recuperate. And a bath, most definitely a bath!" He strode out, followed by the sound of Harold's apprehensive mirth.

Milton was waiting for him, amusement evident in the slightest turn of the corners of his mouth. "Shall I show you to your rooms, Master Brandon?"

"Please. And I will need accommodations..."

"For Mr. Fitzhugh. It is already taken care of sir. He is arranging your bath as we speak."

"Excellent man, excellent. It is good to be home."

He took the stairs two at a time, eager to take advantage of the proffered bath but at the top of the stairs he was greeted by the arresting sight of his sister-in-law.

Lady Patricia was a cool blonde goddess in a pale blue muslin walking dress and a fashionable poke bonnet on her curls. She was pulling on her gloves and she seemed unsurprised when he encountered her at the top of the stairs.

"Hello, dear brother. I am so glad that you have come back to us safe and sound."

Surprised by this salutation, Brandon stumbled for a moment for words. They had never really known each other, as Patricia and Harold had married mere weeks before he had left for the Continent and their courtship had been accomplished more by family diplomacy than intimate acquaintance. When he did find the words to speak, he tried to make up for the pause with sincere appreciation of her effort at civility. "It is wonderful to be greeted when returning home, by such a vision of English loveliness."

She raised an eyebrow at his gushing complement and rewarded him with a wry smile. "You are too kind, sir. You could give your brother lessons."

Such an opening could not be left unused. "Perhaps and then perhaps not. He was just telling me how much he appreciates the refreshing atmosphere and loveliness you add to Kelsey House." Her eyebrow again went up, skepticism evident in her every feature. "It is true, I swear it." At least the sentiment was, if not the words. "If I may be so bold, will we have the pleasure of your company at dinner this afternoon? Harold did not seem certain of your plans but he expressed his desire for your company and I would certainly like to find a female presence at the table after years of nothing but officers in the mess."

Skepticism turned to questioning in her demeanor but she merely answered, "I suppose so. I had no other pressing engagements for the evening."

"Excellent, excellent. I look forward to regaling you with amusing tales from the front." Now, if only he could think of anything proper for a lady's ears and disposition, he wouldn't sound like a veritable idiot. She nodded, a bemused expression on her face and walked past him, on her way out for some expedition or whatever women did in town.

He sighed, hoping that he had helped, rather than harmed, his brother's campaign.

* * * * *

The robin's egg blue walls of the drawing room seemed determined to trap Anna with nothing but the inane chatter of acquaintances. She was caught between the tepid courting conversation of a gentleman not at all suited to her and the sullen unhappiness of her once best friend. It was the Eversmith's At Home day once again and so Anna found herself once again trying to turn Mr. Bington's conversation toward Isabella and vice versa, only to run smack dab into a wall of awkward stammering on both their parts. In her more scandalous thoughts, she wished she could simply lock the two of them in a linen closet for a good hour and be done with the entire enterprise. Unfortunately, the ruination of Isabella's reputation would have been the regrettable consequence. And she doubted Lady Horatia or Isabella would greet such actions with equanimity. Although, perhaps if Mr. Bington were better at kissing than conversation, Isabella might not be too upset.

She suppressed a giggle at her inane and outrageous musings. No gentleman had yet managed to touch her heart, or even warm her thoughts, regardless of the dozens she had met so far into the Season. She feared that her strange dreams had spoiled her for romance, creating an ideal that it would be impossible to live up to. Surely Harold Kelsey could not truly be communicating with her in her dreams. She truly ought to look around and find someone who might make a suitable match, give her comfort and maybe some children to pour out her love to. No dream man would ever be able to do that.

Lost in her thoughts, she was shaken when she looked up to see Lady Patricia Kelsey standing at the entrance to the drawing room, removing her gloves and bonnet for the butler to take. She was ethereally beautiful and Anna could not hope to compete with her. She felt a wave of dislike wash through her, that such a creature could behave so scandalously and cheat on her husband. Anna knew that the ton engaged in such games but coming face to face with such behavior left a cold metallic emptiness in her stomach. *Do not judge, you are not certain you would not do the same with her husband as your partner.* She pushed the thought aside violently and fought to maintain a calm demeanor as she tried to gain Aunt Harriet's attention from Lady Horatia.

"Aunt, I'm afraid we will be late for our appointment with Madame Claudine," Anna urged once Lady Horatia had risen to greet the new addition.

"Yes, yes, we do have shopping to finish, we must be going."

As they made ready to depart, Mr. Bington cleared his throat. "Miss Sanderton, I hope you remember our drive in the park three days hence?"

Isabella flinched with this revelation but Anna was forced to reply in the affirmative. "Of course, Mr. Bington, I shall expect you on Thursday." Anna sent Isabella a look of apology but Isabella would not meet her eyes.

Lady Harriet and Anna greeted Lady Patricia briefly as they said their goodbyes to their hostess and then they reclaimed bonnets, gloves and capes from the footman and went out into the early afternoon.

After they had gone, Lady Patricia gave out the interesting news that her husband's brother, the eligible Lieutenant Colonel Brandon Kelsey, had just returned from the front in France and speculation began as to whether or not he would be searching for a wife and settling down, now that he was back at home.

Chapter Twelve

Dinner was an odd affair, full of awkward pauses as soon as Lady Patricia had swept into the sitting room, where the two brothers had waited for dinner to be announced.

She wore a violet gown and amethysts at her ears and around her neck. Harold broke out into a shocked smile at the sight of her, which rendered him speechless. So, Brandon had had to fill in the compliments customary when a lady walked into the room.

The glances the married couple threw at each other through each course spoke volumes, with hidden meanings and layers of history that Brandon could only guess at. Lady Patricia had fingered her necklace at one point and Harold gave her a look filled with such heat that Brandon was quite embarrassed to be in the same room with the pair.

Patricia had returned that look with an artful smile and had turned the conversation toward Brandon, much to his consternation.

"Dear brother, I have related your return to several in town and I'm afraid that many young ladies are very eager to make your acquaintance."

"Truly?" He almost squeaked and resisted the urge to pull at his cravat, which suddenly seemed very confining. In truth, he had no wish to parade before the lovelies of town, when the object of his affections seemed more likely to be in the country.

"In fact, I am sure that Harold would agree that it is only fitting that we host a ball in honor of your safe return and to celebrate the coming victory of our fearless forces." She held a glint in her eye and Brandon didn't particularly wish to find out why.

Harold jumped at the opportunity to please his elusive wife and agreed heartily. A date was set for some two weeks hence, with absolutely no input from the intended honoree, nor any attempt to ascertain his opinion on the matter. Brandon blinked as his future was plotted out before him.

Harold was practically glowing, having spoken more to his bride in the last half hour than he had in the last ten months. As a consequence, Brandon did not have the heart to interrupt the machinations of Lady Patricia. If planning a ball in his honor would break the ice between the two of them, so be it. It would delay his search for the existence of a Miss Maria Sanderton but perhaps it would do him good to reacquire some of the polish of polite society before trying to woo and win a wife.

Dinner had succeeded remarkably well and at Harold's tentative inquiry, Patricia had surprisingly agreed to accompany them both to the theatre that evening, despite having little notice. She even seemed to ignore the fact that neither of the gentlemen

was appropriately attired for attending the theatre. Brandon took this as a breach in her defenses, or at the least an excellent sign of a probable truce between the two. Perhaps this would even lead to a ceasing of hostilities altogether, although Harold was not known for his skills in diplomacy. Brandon secretly laughed at himself. *A man who was generally a misfit in the army but now thinks of a romantic campaign in military terms.*

Lady Patricia retired upstairs to change her gown to something appropriate for attending Drury Lane, leaving the gentlemen to their port.

After the door closed behind her, Harold rose and began to pace. He rang the bell and when Milton arrived, dispatched him on a mission to find flowers, either in the conservatory or, "From any damned florist's shop you can beg, borrow or steal from". Milton did not flinch at this inelegant command but bowed and disappeared on his mission.

Brandon chuckled. "Are you certain you wish me to accompany you, or will this be a game best played by two alone?"

"Gods, Brandon, don't leave me now. I am quite sure that without you to act as buffer between us, she would have hied off to Bermuda by now."

"Surely only as far as Southampton, dear brother." Brandon shook his head, awed that his ever brash, ever daring older brother was tied in such knots. "I am afraid that I will not make the most scintillating chaperone this evening. Having ridden from the coast I am dead tired. I also have no fashionable attire and my regimentals are in a sorry state."

"I care not how you appear and I promise to send you to my tailor with carte blanche come the morning, but please Brandon," he implored, "don't leave me to flounder alone."

"Calm yourself. I think the lady would appreciate a reconciliation as much as yourself. I will make my tattered appearance if I must." With that, the two gentlemen made their own way upstairs and into the hands of their respective valets. Lord Harold's man Geoffrey had a simple task, attiring his master in the latest crack of fashion, in midnight blue superfine, buff breeches and a magnificent waterfall of a cravat, tied in the Oriental. Harold's natural brown locks trimmed à la Titus made the presentation of a Corinthian complete. His brother, however, was not so fortunate this evening. His hair was not so much styled as haphazardly trimmed. He wore a charcoal jacket from three years past that was too small and hugged his chest tightly with gray breeches a touch too large, for he had both gained muscle and lost weight on the long slogs through Portugal and Spain. Fitzhugh did his level best but the effect was not ideal.

Still, the pair of them together were striking and as they waited at the bottom of the staircase for Lady Patricia to descend, she gave a small sigh in appreciation of the view. Her husband was excessively handsome, large and imposing but unfalteringly elegant. His brother was handsome in a harsher sense, somewhat shorter but with broad

shoulders and a physique that bespoke a man who had not languished idly over the years.

"Finer escorts than these, a woman could not hope to acquire," she stated as she reached the last step and both gentlemen rewarded her with a small bow.

"You are a vision yourself, Patricia. One I could look on forever." Harold said her name like a caress and Patricia was not unmoved by the intensity of his regard. Brandon secretly applauded his brother's turn of phrase, though he had been forced to approve the words as Harold had practiced his pretty speech before her appearance on the landing.

Patricia was lovely, she had kept the amethysts, a present from her husband in the first days of their marriage. She now wore a deep purple sarcenet evening gown with cream ribbons trimming the bust and sleeves, which emphasized her small but stately figure. Long lavender gloves and a tiny tortoise-shell fan completed her ensemble. Harold presented her with a tiny posy of violets and she smiled at him, their eyes locking. Moments passed and Brandon began to wonder if perhaps it would be better to just encourage the two to decamp to a bedroom. Brandon cleared his throat and both Harold and Patricia looked away, a blush staining the lady's cheeks and Harold in high color as well.

The party made their way to the carriage bedecked with the Kelsey crest and set off for the theatre. Harold could not take his eyes from Patricia's face and she tried looking everywhere but back at him.

Nervous and trying not to show it, Patricia attempted to engage Brandon in conversation. "So, brother, I am afraid I am terribly ignorant about the current state of affairs in France. Other than the fact that things seem to be going well and perhaps we will not see much more of the Little Corporal pestering our shores, I am sadly lacking in news. Could you perchance enlighten me?"

Brandon gave a polite smile and replied with a brief account of the front as he had left it, with Marshal Soult on the run and the allies closing in from the East but in truth he had little desire to talk of battle and she had little desire to listen. He trailed off and he noticed her watching Harold from the corner of her eye and Harold gazing out into the night. Brandon took the opportunity to feign sleep, though in truth he was extremely tired. The smooth motion of the carriage through the streets was enough to lull him into a doze, when he heard Patricia dare a question to Harold.

"So, husband, what are you so eager to have me see at the theatre tonight?" Harold looked at her and gulped, for he was lost here, having no idea what might or might not be playing, or how the selection of play might cause Patricia to question his motives for the outing.

Brandon stepped in yet again to save his sibling. "I believe it to be Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*." He sent a prayer of thanks for Fitzhugh, who had mentioned it in passing during his rapid toilette. The man had remarkable resources and he had not yet been in the household for a full day.

Harold let out a sigh of gratitude and Patricia sat back with a bemused smile. Although Harold was far from Benedict and Patricia, though witty, was no Beatrice, the play seemed made to fit as a balm to old wounds. The title alone a comment on their relationship.

They arrived at the theatre and Harold escorted Patricia in proudly. A titter passed through the crowd, among those who knew one or both of the couple and were surprised to see them together. Brandon faded into the background and he was perfectly happy there. He hoped that his out of fashion and ill-fitting garments did not make him a quiz before the night was out.

They reached their box unmolested and as the curtain rose on the production, Brandon observed how Harold used every excuse to touch his wife and Patricia seemed either accepting or oblivious of this slight contact. Brandon gave a fervent hope to the idea that things would be much easier when he found a bride and that no such misunderstandings would keep them apart.

His thoughts wandered to contemplation of Maria and how much he was sure she would enjoy the production. The theatre was packed and they were fortunate to have their box to themselves. Edmund Kean had deigned to make an appearance in a comedy, having become a sensation with his rendition of Hamlet a few months previously. Kean was a dynamic Benedict and Brandon only wished he had both the rest and mental energy required to truly enjoy the performance. Instead, he daydreamed, picturing that the buxom brunette playing opposite Kean as the fiery Beatrice was instead his Maria, challenging him to race after her through the fields of Tuscany.

He did not know when he fell asleep with his musings but as the intermission began and the assembled notables began to buzz with conversation, he did not awaken. Harold whispered something in Patricia's ear and she let out a slight giggle in response, covering her mouth demurely with her fan. The two left Brandon to his sleep and went out to promenade among the crowd.

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Anna sat rigidly in her seat, relaxing only when Lady Patricia and her paramour had left their seat. She was very happy she had remained, claiming that she wished to review her program, rather than engage in repartee. Mr. Ostley, another occasional suitor, had obligingly left to find refreshments for the small party and her aunt had left in search of Mrs. Drummond-Burell, hoping to speed along their vouchers to Almack's that had been, "regrettably delayed" according to her aunt. Anna cared not a whit for entrance to the hallowed halls but she hoped her aunt was successful, if only to stop the constant worrying that her aunt engaged in on the subject.

And so Anna was left with naught but Mr. Ostley's widowed and deaf father, who had ceased to ask for Anna or the junior Mr. Ostley to repeat bits of dialogue after the first five scenes and was now snoring gently. Anna began to contemplate how she could

avoid Lady Patricia, when the woman was so forward as to bring her paramour to the theatre, for all to see! Twice today, she had been confronted with the woman and each time Anna longed to curl into a ball and escape the perfection of this paragon, who could lead multiple men around by a string.

It is true that the two seemed to have a chaperone of some sort, another man in the box whose face she could not see, as he was hidden in shadows but their behavior illustrated to all the most shocking familiarity. She was surprised that Aunt Harriet had not mentioned it, even though she was occupied with her effort at determining if the Princess Lieven's jewels that night were real or paste. Anna refused to bring it up, not wanting to call attention to something that would only bring her pain. For a time, she had lost herself in the performance, as Kean was not a player to be ignored. But her eyes were drawn again and again to the box across the theatre.

She longed to plead another headache and leave but she was not sure how long she would be able to use that excuse to escape, especially when her aunt seemed to be enjoying herself. So, she sat in sullen silence, thanked Mr. Ostley when he returned with liquid refreshment for herself, her aunt and his parent and returned her attention to the play at hand.

Thankfully, the crowd thronged the lobby after the performance and Anna did not encounter Lady Patricia and her companion. However, from that end of the theater, she did glimpse a profile that was heartbreakingly familiar and for a moment she swore that Kelsey was here, in the theatre! She almost started forward, to cut a path through the crowd to search further for that face but common sense returned and she realized that Lady Patricia would not be so bold as to attend the theatre with another man if her husband was in town. It was just her overwrought imagination at work.

* * * * *

Anna sat at her writing desk, finishing another letter to her mother and waiting resignedly for Mr. Bington to appear for the promised curricule drive through Hyde Park. She did not look forward to it and only wished that Mr. Bington possessed a larger vehicle and she could have brought Isabella and perhaps Jane Bington along as buffers between herself and her unwanted suitor. Aunt Harriet would have nothing of it, however and pushed and prodded Anna to accept Mr. Bington's advances, or at least his invitations for a drive. Anna hoped to be able to talk of nothing but Isabella and if that failed, perhaps to scare him off with talk of her work with herbs and the dirt beneath her fingernails come planting season.

She wrote a mere mention of her concerns regarding her suitor to her mother, not wishing to alarm her and certain of her ability to eventually turn Mr. Bington in the right direction. The bulk of this letter related, with much editing, a few of the odd dreams she had had and whether there was any history of them in the family. Even when the moon was not yet full, she was having dreams filled with the man she presumed to be Lord Harold Kelsey, though she did not relate the man's name in her

letter. To have glimpsed his face last night in a crowd made her concerned for her own sanity. She knew he must still be far away, either in the country or at the battlefield, otherwise Lady Patricia would not be so brazen in her activities and the ton so accepting. No, she related to her mother only a few scant details, with a query if mamgu had ever spoken of such vivid dreams. She hoped that it would prove to be something that passed and that the dreams would not plague her much longer. She feared for her sanity otherwise.

Anna heard the bell for the front door and hastily signed, blotted and sealed the letter. She picked up her favorite blue poke bonnet and kidskin gloves and started down the stairs to greet Mr. Bington. If nothing else, it was a fine spring day for a drive.

* * * * *

Brandon had taken his brother's bribe of a visit to his tailor on Bond Street and felt immensely better for the indulgence. Three days had passed since the theatre and Harold had made considerable progress with his reluctant bride. Although Brandon had had a report from Fitzhugh that the two still had bedrooms at the opposite ends of the house, conversation at dinner had improved and Harold was making tangible efforts to woo Patricia, with flowers and walks in the park and other marks of courtship. To escape from the lovebirds, Brandon had borrowed one of Harold's horses, a fine gray mare that had suffered much neglect of late and that seemed pleased to be out exercising on a fine spring day in Hyde Park.

Brandon cut a fine figure now, in a dark green riding coat, black trousers, polished Hessians and a smart curly-brimmed beaver hat. Fitzhugh had clucked over him like a mother hen with her brood and Brandon allowed him the luxury. He had collapsed into bed upon their return from the theatre and had languished on a real bed with crisp linen sheets for days, catching up on months of lost sleep and leaving the house only for the fittings with the tailor and to get a new pair of boots. This was his first sojourn purely for pleasure. It felt good to be out, away from the confines of the house and the necessity of acting as though he could take up a life of leisure again with no thought to his experiences. Harold was too distracted to have a serious conversation with him regarding his future, or his father's expectations. Of course, the earl was not set to come to town for a good month yet, as Harold had requested space and time to deal with Patricia.

He set his horse to a trot and the trees and carriages passed by as his mind wandered. Last night, on the way home in the carriage, under the new gas lamps that lit thoroughfares in the city, he had seen an injured soldier. A veteran of the 95th Rifles by the remains of his uniform, he had been begging on the street and being kicked by a passerby for his trouble. There would be thousands like him coming back when the war was done. Why had he fought so hard to save the lives of the injured, when this was their sad reward upon their return? There were the hospitals at Chelsea and a few others scattered throughout the country but not enough. He was unsure what to do but

he knew he had not left his duty behind on the battlefields of France. He had merely followed it home to England.

A curricule passed by and was almost out of sight before he regained his senses. The man looked vaguely familiar, a boy who might have been at University several years lower than himself. But the woman, it was her!

"Maria," he whispered, following the curricule with his eyes as it rounded a bend. He thought to spur his horse forward and follow but he was gripped with uncertainty. Would she know him? Would she hate him for the scene he would cause? Who was the fellow with her? He felt a surge of intense, unfamiliar jealousy run through him.

Perhaps he should join in making the rounds of society functions as Patricia urged. If she was in Town for the Season, he would be sure to find her somewhere. Suddenly, the upcoming ball that his sister planned was not merely a chore but an opportunity to find the girl of his dreams. He did not think he could bring himself to ask Patricia for help to find her. Not when revealing the basis for their connection would get him sent to Bedlam. But surely if he frequented enough of the events of the ton he would find her, or perhaps she would find him.

Chapter Thirteen

He supposed that if he was to begin to search for Maria, this was to be as good a place as any. He had thought it unlikely for her to be in London except in his dreams, for she seemed to love the country. But the glimpse in Hyde Park he had had three days previously of a girl so much like her had convinced him otherwise. If nothing else, he might have an opportunity to hear something of her family or relations. How such an opportunity would arise, he knew not. He looked around at the Asterlys' ballroom and he was struck by a sudden sense of intense *déjà vu*. Just as in one of their shared dreams, he was again discreetly leaning up against a wall, avoiding the looks of misses and matrons. He was attired in severe black and secretly bemoaning the heat caused by the surfeit of gentlefolk crowding the room.

There were some differences and for that he was grateful. The room was at least slightly cooled by some open windows, the potables were far superior to weak lemonade and the tasteful floral arrangements were not brazen, overpowering lilies but carried the soft, sweet fragrance of hothouse roses in peach and delicate pink. He closed his eyes and smiled, the scent reminding him for a moment of Maria. He half expected his green-eyed firebrand to appear in the crowd.

"A smile!" He opened his eyes. "Why, dear brother, the night must not be a complete and utter waste of time." Lady Patricia had appeared suddenly at his side and seemed to relish throwing his words back at him. She wore an expression that he could have sworn was a delicately repressed smirk.

He joined the battle of quips. "Ah ha, so, either my own brother has fainted dead away from heat and exertion, or you have tired of him already." In truth, the two had been dancing in each other's arms the entire night, causing titters of scandal to wend their way through the crowd.

She raised an eyebrow, unamused. "In fact, he sent me here expressly to lure his overly dire and serious sibling into partaking of some of the evening's entertainment." She turned slightly and sent a smile to her husband, who Brandon saw was stationed in a window alcove nearby.

Brandon did not miss this not-so-subtle cue. He gave her a gallant half-bow, extending his arm. "My lady, would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you through the next set?"

She gave another little wry smile and let him usher her onto the floor for the set. He had to admit, she was quite stunning tonight, gamine and graceful in ice-blue satin that complemented her eyes. Her honey blonde hair was stylishly arranged around her face. He was immensely happy for his brother to have possibly found love with such a creature, but his own tastes ran to rounded brunettes with eyes of jade. A wistful look

overtook his face and Patricia cocked her head slightly as they passed each other in the form, curiosity in her eyes. How ever would he be able to explain that he longed for a girl whom he had only dreamed of, that he was still unsure even existed?

Isabella looks lovely tonight, even Bington sees it. Isabella was wearing a pale peach confection of the finest muslin. A layer of fine netting over the skirt gave it a luminescent quality that made her pale skin glow. Anna thought herself to be nowhere near as lovely but with her rich brown hair in curls around her oval face and her dramatic deep green sateen dress, many would have argued with her. Together, Isabella and Anna made a stunning picture of opposites and in truth, as Mr. Bington crossed the floor toward them, his eyes jumped from one to the other, worry upon his face.

He had thought that tonight would be the night he would declare himself to Miss Sanderton and that with her usual manner of easing their conversation, she would be able to make him feel at ease enough not to stutter through like a fool. But the party was late and there was something about Miss Eversmith that drew his eye, a sweet loveliness that he could not ignore. But every time he had tried to talk to her, he was more tongue-tied than he could ever remember. She had barely said two words to him, so he was sure she did not return his regard. Miss Sanderton was comely and she was friendly and she always made him feel comfortable.

At Mr. Bington's approach, Anna steeled herself to be polite.

"Miss Sanderton, Miss Eversmith, I am d-delighted to see you. I was...afraid that you weren't coming." Mr. Bington blushed somewhat, as his gaze rested a moment too long on Isabella's downcast face.

Anna smiled, relieved at the inadvertent revelation on the part of Mr. Bington. "Thank you, sir. We are both happy to see you as well. I am sorry that we have arrived so late. There was quite a crush of carriages you see." In fact, they were late because Aunt Harriet had been primping for far too long and had even made the Eversmiths wait in the carriage so she could find her orange gloves rather than the plain cream that she had originally worn with the tangerine bombazine and matching turban. If Anna didn't know better, she would have sworn that her aunt had set her fancy on a gentleman, though she was unsure who.

Anna politely accepted Mr. Bington's request for the sixth set and reluctantly for the supper dance as well. She had to gently steer him toward Isabella to ask for two sets from her as well. When Mr. Bington had gone to fetch some refreshments, Isabella gave her yet another hurt look and turned toward an acquaintance, Charlotte Gingham, to initiate a discussion about the beautiful hothouse roses.

Anna bit her lip in vexation, trying to understand why her every effort to move Mr. Bington's attention from herself to Isabella met with failure. She was not intentionally trying to steal Mr. Bington, surely Isabella could see that!

Mr. Bington rejoined them and escorted Anna out on to the floor for the set and soon after Anna was engaged to dance for most of the remaining sets. As she turned

and bowed and moved gracefully through the set along the dance floor, she looked into the crowd, searching for something or someone. She felt a strange sense of anticipation, a fluttering in her stomach, as though she were a child on Christmas Eve. She had no idea why tonight should be different than any other ball.

She begged her next partner to allow her to rest. As she sat down and waited for Mr. Blithe to return with some punch she stretched her toes in the thin green dancing slippers and bemoaned the state of her feet after weeks of dancing for hours. As she glanced up to the set in progress, she gasped and her eyes widened.

He was here! Dancing with his wife no less. Regimentals nowhere to be seen, here was Kelsey dancing with Lady Patricia and engaged in pleasant conversation. Just as though they were not estranged, as though she did not have a lover, as though neither of them had a care in the world. Her chest ached, her breathing grew shallow.

He looked just as he had in their second dream, attired in dramatic black, a ruby stickpin winking in his starched white cravat as he turned in the dance. Together they were stunning—Lady Patricia the epitome of cool blonde loveliness and Lord Harold Kelsey stunning with blacker than black hair and a devilish smile.

She was seized simultaneously by grief and exultant happiness. Here was proof of the reality of the man she loved. Yes, loved! This man was not a figment of her imagination but a real flesh and blood man. But grief was there too, grief at the instantaneous loss of him. He was taken, out of her reach as surely as if he did not exist at all. If he approached her, if they did in fact share these strange encounters, then she would have to run, or risk utter ruin.

As they drew toward the end of the set, Brandon saw a flash of green seated on the edge of the room. He focused on it for some reason, intent on seeing the face that belonged to the gown. A fan moved slightly out of the way and there she was, staring at him, eyes agog, face paler than he remembered but still her. His Maria. He almost stumbled and Patricia noted his lapse and followed his intent gaze across the room.

“Do you know Miss Sanderton?” she quizzed.

He cleared his throat. “Not exactly.” The set came to a close and he was still riveted, though Miss Sanderton had looked away, staring at the ivory fan, open in her lap.

They stepped off the floor. Patricia hissed in his ear, “You are staring!” She tugged on his arm and led him toward the girl of his dreams.

“Miss Sanderton, how nice to see you here.” Patricia gave a small smile and the girl in green returned it with a tepid one. He could have sworn he saw a look of disgust pass fleetingly over her beloved face as she looked at Lady Patricia. She had not yet looked at him, her gaze seemingly fixed on his lapel, on Patricia, anywhere but his face.

“Maria,” he whispered and her eyes locked on to his. Time stopped for a moment, as brown eyes gazed into green for the first time and yet for the hundredth time. Joy and desire flashed through him, as he saw acknowledgement in her eyes. She was real, she was here and she could be his! But there was something else, something deeply sad.

He ached to hold her in his arms, to conquer anything that could cause her pain. He brought his hand up, as though he wanted to cup her cheek and she almost flinched.

Patricia broke the silence. "Marianna actually, I believe. Marianna Sanderton. Are you certain you two have not met before?" The intense look the two shared seemed to confirm her suspicion that the two knew each other extremely well but the entire situation was most puzzling.

Anna spoke hurriedly, coming to her feet abruptly. "I know who you are. Forgive me, Lord Harold, Lady Patricia, I feel unwell, I must retire to the powder room." She took off at a run and Brandon found himself frozen on the spot, unable to process what had just occurred, the sound of Patricia's laughter echoing in his ears.

Anna ran through the ballroom, not caring about the curious stares that followed her out of the room. She swerved to avoid Lord Liston, who had exited the card room and had raised his quizzing glass. She found her way into the house's main rooms and chanced on to a small sitting room, its soothing light green and cream décor comforting after the heat and strain of the ballroom. She threw herself onto the settee in an unladylike heap and held her shaking hands to her temples, rubbing them and willing herself not to cry. She had to make it through this. She had to maintain a pretense of detachment and try to escape.

She knew the look in his eyes, those brown-black eyes that she dreamed of every night. He still desired her, even though he was married, even though she was an innocent. She could still recall the feel of his lips on hers, his breath on her neck and she was not at all sure that she could withstand him if he chose to pursue her. She did not want to embarrass her mother, her aunt, her friends and create a scandal that would haunt her. She could run, escape back to Shropshire and home but somehow, she knew he would find her. After all, his father's seat in Chester was only some thirty miles from Gladstone Abbey, just across the border in Cheshire. Middleton would not be safe for her, not if he was determined.

The door opened softly and she snapped her head up, worried that he had followed her. Instead, Mr. Bington entered, a concerned look upon his face.

"Miss Sanderton, are you quite well? I saw your abrupt exit and I was concerned." He crossed the room toward her and knelt in front of her on the Aubusson carpet, taking her hand in his.

Such a sweet man. She gifted him a reassuring smile, thoughts whirling in her head. *If I was already taken, perhaps then Kelsey would leave me be.*

"Miss Sanderton, I... Since I find myself in this position, it would be most unwise not to make use of it." He smiled, a dimple evident in his cheek, hazel eyes shining. But it was still not the right smile, not deep brown eyes gazing into hers. She could not shake thoughts of her Colonel, even with another man on bended knee before her...oh dear, on bended knee? She grew alarmed.

"Miss Sanderton, I have found it...most pleasant to be in your company and I have found it easier to talk with you than anyone of my acquaintance..." He stammered on, suddenly nervous again. She hated to disappoint him. He was so sweet and so kindhearted. He would do his very best to make her happy and she was certain he would stay in the Abbey should she ask.

He went on, "I do think we would suit very well and I would like to ask the honor...of...your hand in marriage." He finished in a rush, staring not at her face but at the hand he had just requested.

He had plowed through the whole speech and he was inordinately proud of himself. He suddenly looked up at her, hope shining in his eyes and she wondered if maybe this was for the best. But no, not with Isabella, not with their differing personalities. He was too young and too easily molded for her tastes. Still, she did not want to hurt him and tried to calm her surging emotions to find the right words for her refusal.

She patted his hand and she whispered, "I agree that—" She was unable to finish.

He surged up to sit by her side, wrapping her in a bear hug. The hardest task of his life accomplished, he was exultant.

"Wait, wait, Mr. Bington!" She tried to push him away but he was too relieved by the accomplishment of his proposal to notice.

"Oh, my dear, you have made me the happiest of men!" The door swung open and they both looked up from their compromising position as two people stood in the doorway.

Lady Patricia Kelsey let slip another guffaw, her formerly cool countenance turning into a brilliant pink from all of the amusement she had had that evening. Although she truly did not want to find hilarity in the misfortunes of others, to see her sanctimonious brother-in-law get his comeuppance was truly more entertaining than it should be. She looked from the couple embracing on the sofa to the man standing next to her with murder in his eyes and then back again.

"Miss Sanderton, allow me to finish my introduction. This gentleman who you claim to know is in fact," she paused dramatically, "Lieutenant Colonel Brandon Kelsey, my esteemed husband's brother, just back from the war. Mr. Bington, I believe you have met Brandon before?"

Chapter Fourteen

How life could fall into such ruin with the passage of one short night, Anna Sanderton knew not. She lay still abed, though the hour was past eleven. Mary had creaked open the door twice to check on her in the past hour.

Three days, three miserable days had passed since the disastrous scene in the Asterlys' sitting room. They had gone by in a bit of a blur, with Anna retiring to her room at every opportunity to indulge in a bout of tears and to avoid her inordinately cheerful aunt. Unfortunately the drama of their discovery in the sitting room had not been kept silent and although it was still unofficial, she had had to accept congratulations from many well-wishers. Even Herbert, Lord Liston, had made an appearance, though she could not fathom a reason for it, other than the apparent pleasure it brought her aunt. They had tortured her with talk of wedding clothes and the arrangements for St. George's and she had kept silent, as she had through most of these congratulatory visits.

Mr. Bington and his sister Jane had been a constant presence in the drawing room and Jane had tried to draw her into conversation regarding the wedding, or anything at all, but had failed. Jane proceeded to fill the awkward silence with comfortable chatter. The pair would not be present today, as Mr. Bington had business to see to in Kent and Miss Bington was to accompany him for two days. Grateful for the respite, Anna had taken the opportunity to sulk in her room for the entire morning.

Though sullen and listless, Anna had had enough of her wits about her to prevent Mr. Bington, she refused to think of him as John, from having an announcement put in the papers until her mother had been told. Her aunt, being overly solicitous, had dispatched by express Anna's emotionless letter informing her mother of the engagement. Doom would soon find her in the way of her mother's response and Mr. Bington's return and she could not pull herself together enough to think of a way out of this fix. Yet she must find a way out without causing a scandal, harming Mr. Bington and especially causing pain to Isabella, who would feel rejected twice over. Not that Isabella was ever going to speak to her again.

She should be miserable from that alone but what took up most of her thoughts, blocking out any ability to scheme her way out of this undesirable predicament, was the look of intense pain upon the face of one Brandon Kelsey.

Brandon. It suited him much better than Harold. Lord Harold, the real Lord Harold, she had met when both he and Lady Patricia had come to call the day previously. Lady Patricia had carried a tiny smile of amusement throughout the visit. She had watched Anna most intensely, as though searching her countenance for something. Anna tried to project placid calm but the deep sadness underneath was sure to be evident upon

enough observation. Even Mr. Bington must have noticed it and had asked many times if she was falling ill. Lord Harold and Lady Patricia had left and Anna had berated herself repeatedly. She should have known better than to jump to ridiculous conclusions, for Lady Patricia was not a brazen hussy but really quite pleasant. At least if one took into account her tendency toward biting wit and a fair bit of subtle mockery. Lady Patricia could possibly be a very good friend, given the chance and Anna wondered what she would have to say about her cousin, Lord Liston. It would have been quite an enjoyable conversation but she doubted she would ever have the chance for such an unguarded talk. Leaping to fatalistic conclusions involving the Kelsey family may have cost her her chance at true happiness with a man who seemed heaven-sent.

At least he did in her dreams. In truth, she knew him little, other than those few shared moments in dreamland and what her heart told her. Lady Harriet had filled her in with all the latest information on the handsome soldier, just back from the front after selling his commission. He had trained as a doctor, which was “simply outrageous” according to Aunt Harriet. In the war, he had been in charge of treatment, care and transport of wounded soldiers, which, again according to her aunt, wasn’t half so interesting as a brave man who had led battles from the back of a horse. Anna thought differently and thought Brandon to be immensely brave. Lady Harriet had also mysteriously managed to probe his financial state as well and reported with glee that he was quite well-off with an inheritance from his mother’s side that made him quite the catch, for a second son.

But, alas, he would not be hers to catch, that was certain. He would never forgive her for the hurt she had caused, despite any surreal connection they might share. She had no doubt that the full moon due in a few days would bring no more vivid dreams. She ached with the loss.

She pulled the coverlet over her head and in frustration let out a great puff of air which billowed the fabric away from her face. She had eaten little in the past few days and her stomach let out a rude grumble. She whisked the coverlet back down and rose to a sitting position and rang for Mary, who entered before the bell tone had died.

Mary brought cold toast and tepid chocolate but at least it was food. She ate, hardly tasting the food. The faithful maid smiled at her as she busied herself laying out a mint green muslin morning dress edged in cream braid.

“Forgive me for saying so, Miss but it is good to see you eating something. You haven’t been taking proper care of yourself and the whole house is worried. Young little Jenny gave me that jar of blueberry jam from her mother in Devonshire, thinking it might tempt you.”

Anna smiled despite her low mood. “I am sorry to cause such worry, Mary. Tell Jenny that the jam is wonderful and she should thank her mother for me at the first opportunity.”

Mary bit her lip, afraid of overstepping the boundaries of her position but concern led her to forge on. “Miss, shouldn’t you be happy? We’ve all heard that you’re to

marry that nice young man, Mr. Bington. He doesn't seem a bad lot, that one." Mary blushed at her forwardness.

Anna sighed, "No, he is a very good sort Mary. I should be happy. I'm afraid the entire thing is a very long story. Don't fret about me." Mary nodded and took the empty tray outside, returning to arrange Anna's hair after a moment.

Fed and dressed, Anna girded herself to descend and encounter whatever ills the day may bring. More callers, Mr. Bington singing her praises, or at the worst, a reply from her mother.

She joined her aunt in the rose sitting room and as her aunt chattered away regarding her plans for the card party they would be hosting three days hence and worked on her own embroidery. Anna simply sat, her own needlework left untouched on her lap. She stared at the delicate roses entwined in the wallpaper bordering the room. The bell rang to mark a caller at the front door and Anna steeled herself for the unknown. Although it was not their usual At Home day, word of the engagement had resulted in a slew of unannounced callers. It could be anyone.

But it was Isabella and her mother. At first shocked, Anna greeted Isabella with a tentative but sincere smile and surprisingly received a smile in return. Lady Horatia and Lady Harriet engaged in a detailed accounting of the latest gossip surrounding Lord Byron and his courtship of Annabella Milbanke, the renowned bluestocking. Isabella and Anna were quiet for a moment, until both began to speak at once.

"Anna, forgive me!"

"I'm so terribly sorry Isabella."

They both laughed and Anna indicated that Isabella should go first.

"Anna, I've been terrible to you lately. I should be happy for you that you have found such a wonderful man to be your husband, not jealous. I should have known better than to question our friendship."

"Oh, Isabella, you shouldn't be sorry, it's a natural reaction. I know of your feelings for Mr. Bington and I am terribly sorry that this has occurred. I was so sure that he fancied you, that I had no idea that his feelings for me had reached this level." Anna drew breath and paled at her own language, unsure that what she had revealed would hurt Isabella even more.

Isabella looked at her quizzically, the freckled bridge of her tiny nose wrinkling in thought. "But, surely...you did accept him, did you not?"

Anna paused, unsure of what to say. "Not precisely. It is all such a muddle—I did not wish to hurt him. Still, I do not think we should suit." Isabella looked shocked. Anna rushed on, "That is to say...I believe that Mr. Bington thinks fondly of me and I do of him. Many marriages are based on less than that. I believe that he...he is comfortable with me. I am more like his sister, Jane. I do not..." Anna gazed meaningfully at Isabella, "I do not make him nervous, or bring to the fore any sentiments or strong feelings which might be difficult for a young gentleman to recognize or act on."

Isabella was quiet for a moment, reflecting on this surprising statement. A slow smile, more that of a woman than a girl passed over her features. "Is there any one of his acquaintance that you noticed might bring up such, uncomfortable emotions, that might cause him to be...uncommunicative?"

Anna grinned. "Most definitely. A very, very good friend of mine, in fact." Isabella returned the grin. "I worry that should she exert herself to woo him away from me, that my engagement should be over before it has truly begun." Isabella nodded, the message clear.

They passed a few more minutes in pleasant conversation, their friendship once again easy with united purpose. The Eversmiths took their leave and Anna was once again left alone with her aunt.

"It is good to see you in fine spirits again, Marianna." Her aunt smiled at her. "I was concerned that you had fallen ill. So easy to do, given this variable spring weather." Aunt Harriet was deathly afraid of illness and would manifest symptoms of anyone nearby with the slightest complaint.

"Thank you, Aunt Harriet. I am feeling much better now. I think it was all the rest you have allowed me."

"Rest is always the best cure, I say. Well, that and maybe some of your cordial." She looked thoughtful. "Perhaps I ought to rest myself before dinner, in order to stave off any illness. And take a mite of that cordial, as a preventative measure. I doubt that there will be any more callers at this late hour."

Anna smiled again. "Yes, that sounds like an excellent plan, Aunt. You should be careful to maintain your strength, you never know what gentleman might wish to ask you to dance."

Formidable Aunt Harriet actually blushed. Mr. Ostley—Mr. Ostley senior that is—had asked Lady Harriet to stand up with him for a sedate minuet the night of the Asterly's ball, as Anna had floated through the rest of her sets in a shocked and depressed daze. Lady Harriet had spoken of it several times since and Anna had wondered if there was something going on between those two. Aunt Harriet put away her embroidery and left the room, leaving Anna to her thoughts on a campaign to remove her fiancé and attach him to the proper girl.

Within a few minutes, the front door had been opened again and Anna arranged herself to receive another round of callers, most likely more gossipmongers, eager to see the Miss Sanderton who had been found alone with Mr. Bington at the Asterly's ball. The butler opened the door and finding her alone, raised an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, Miss. I thought that Lady Dalrymple was still with you. Should I tell the gentleman to return at another time?"

Gentleman? Whoever could be calling? Hopefully not Herbert. Perhaps Mr. Bington had not yet left for Kent, or had somehow returned early. "Can you fetch Mary? I believe she could act as chaperone. I hate to disappoint the gentleman. Show him in and leave the door open for now."

He had not thought that he would be so fortunate as to see her alone but nevertheless, fate had been kind. She sat on a brocade covered couch, sewing in her lap and she stared at him with silent shock as he came into the room. The butler left, leaving the door open behind him and the two of them stared at each other for a full minute, neither moving or speaking. Her brilliant green eyes softened as she gazed into his and he did not know how to describe the emotion that he found there. Was it pity? Regret? Love? He dared not believe the latter, or his heart would surely break.

Brandon stepped forward, wanting to reach out and touch her, her face, her beautiful brown hair, just to reassure himself that she was real. Her hands fluttered in her lap, as though she too wished to touch him, to confirm that he was not a figment of her imagination. Somehow, he found his voice, sounding gravelly with the emotion that he tried to keep behind a calm façade.

"Miss Sanderton, I hope that I am not intruding."

She blinked and shook her head slightly, "No, Bran— Mr. Kelsey, I am not occupied. Will you sit? Shall I ring for tea?" She indicated a chair to her left and he tentatively sat, placing the package he carried on his lap. He wished he could be closer but worried at his lack of self-control. Had she almost called him Brandon? What did that signify?

Silence reigned again for a moment and Marianna looked down at her hands in her lap. He rose from the chair, the package sliding to the floor with a thump and began to pace, it was easier to talk if he couldn't look at her. "Miss Sanderton, I know it is most irregular, I am not a friend of the family but I would like to offer my congrats—"

"Your leg. It's healed well," she blurted out, interrupting him.

He stopped pacing and looked at her again, her face turned up to him with wide eyes that he could fall into. "Yes, it was a minor wound."

"I wasn't sure, I didn't see..." She trailed off, unsure if she sounded insane, questioning him about a battle that she had fled in a dream after seeing him wounded.

He knelt in front of her, taking one of her small hands in his, relishing the contact. "Then you do know me?" He hoped his voice did not convey the desperation he felt.

She reached out to touch his cheek and he closed his eyes at the sensations such a simple act provoked.

There was a noise at the door and a maid peeked in the room. Marianna started back, pulling her hand from his. The maid smiled and stepped from the room, closing the door with a soft click behind her.

He turned back to Marianna and he thought he saw fear in her face. "Marianna, I would never hurt you. I understand that you are engaged...but I had to know..."

She gave a small laugh. "I am not afraid of you, sir. Quite the contrary, I am afraid of myself." He looked at her questioningly. She blushed, her eyes downcast, her long eyelashes brushing her pink cheeks. He did not know how he could go another minute

without pulling her into his arms and kissing her. "I am afraid that I will not be able to resist you. That I would not want to resist you."

That was all the invitation he needed, he leaned forward, brushing his lips against her forehead. She looked up and he captured her lips, in the sweetest kiss he could imagine. He backed away, though it took all his strength of will. Her eyes were closed and she slowly brought a finger up to her lips, touching them in wonder.

She opened her eyes and looked into his. "That was my first real kiss."

Jealousy flared through him, unbidden. He stood. "Bington hasn't managed yet, has he?"

Pain flashed through her eyes, followed by sorrow. She clenched her eyes shut again, tears leaking out at the corners. "You must hate me."

He could not stand to make her cry. He whispered softly, "I could never hate you, dearest." He paused and she opened her eyes, still filled with sadness. He sat on the settee next to her and took her hand again. "It is just, I wish to understand... Do you... Are you..." He huffed in agitation, unable to communicate the swirling thoughts in his head.

She filled the void. "I-I thought you were married."

He pursed his generous lips. "You thought I was Lord Harold." Would she only want him if he was to be an earl?

"I thought you were married to Lady Patricia. I..." She bit her lip. "I was... I thought you were too good to be true. I assumed... I assumed that you could not be for me. I never delved further to see if there were other Kelsey children."

He smiled sardonically. "And now?"

She looked away. "I-I do not know what... I do not know you..." She belied her words with her actions. She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and burying her head in his shoulder. There she inhaled deeply and then began to weep. He clutched her to him. It was heaven to have her in his arms and hell not to have her for his own.

He did not know if she cried because of the pain he caused her, or the fact of her engagement to another man. He only knew he wanted to hold her forever. He allowed himself the luxury of sinking his face into her glorious hair and inhaled the scent of roses and lavender. The two were so wrapped up in their emotional drama, that the world around them ceased to exist, even as the front door opened again and a new guest was greeted and shown in to see Miss Sanderton.

Anna clutched Brandon and poured out her grief at her predicament and her relief that he was here. He felt so right, so strong. She had held fast to the idea that she would never see him again and to have him here, comforting her no less, was a gift beyond price. They clung together, disregarding the staid precepts of respectability and each found themselves born anew with the other's touch. The ache in her heart eased

perceptibly. She had yet to tell him her engagement to Mr. Bington was a mockery and that her heart was free but for his own claim on it. She tried to find the courage to tell him the facts that would strip her soul bare to him, he who could cause her such pain. But she never got the chance.

The door creaked open and the lovers jumped apart, though Anna's disheveled hair and the tears on Brandon's umber riding coat and the rumpled state of his cravat left evidence to their inappropriate behavior. Anna raised her red-rimmed eyes to the door, waiting to hear the censure of Aunt Harriet but was shocked to find her mother standing there, a bemused and knowing smile on her face.

"Mama!" Anna jumped from the settee and flew across the room, enveloping her small mother in an embrace.

"Dear child, you will crush me in your enthusiasm! But it is wonderful to see you, Marianna." Margaret Sanderton looked into the tear-stained eyes of her only child and then over to the gentleman standing nervous across the room, who obviously wished he could disappear into the woodwork. "Was this gentleman making you cry, my dear?"

She stiffened, remembering the awkwardness of their position. "No, Mama... He was...he was..." She searched for words that would not come.

Brandon swept down to retrieve the package that had fallen to the floor. "I was here to deliver this, Mrs. Sanderton. It is a book that your daughter and I had a discussion over." He handed the package to Anna, his hand caressing hers for a mere second in the transfer but perhaps a moment too long for propriety's sake.

Anna gazed at him gratefully. Her mother gave him an appraising look and smiled once more. "Mr. Bington, I presume? Marianna, this is your affianced, yes?"

Brandon frowned but Anna answered, "Yes... I mean, no. Mama, this is the Honorable Mr. Kelsey, the son of Lord Edmund Kelsey, Earl of Chester, not Mr. Bington."

Margaret pursed her lips. "Pity." She gave him a longer look, her eyes running over his form and he almost felt as though he should blush.

"Mama!" Anna did blush.

Brandon arched an eyebrow and grinned. "Mrs. Sanderton, it has been a pleasure to meet you. Since you are here, I feel perhaps my book will not be necessary." Both Anna and Margaret looked at him quizzically. "I feel however that I am intruding on a family reunion and the hour is late. I should be going." He strode to the door, where the butler was already waiting with his gloves, hat and gold-tipped cane.

Anna called after him, disregarding the curious stare of her mother, "Bran—Mr. Kelsey, will you return at some point to continue our discussion?"

He looked at her intently and she felt her stomach flutter with the heat in his eyes. "Most assuredly, Miss Sanderton, most assuredly."

He disappeared toward the front door and Anna stood silently until the door closed behind him. Then, though her mother stood by watching with amusement, she tore into

the paper wrapping the package and came up with the book. It was a book already in her possession but it said much about the man who had delivered it. It was a copy of Mr. Drayton's treatise on North American plants.

Anna turned back to her mother, awed that she had not immediately asked. "Mama, it is marvelous that you are here but how? Do you feel ill? You look excellent!"

"That is an exaggeration, though it is a kind one." Margaret gave her enigmatic grin. "I am a bit tired but happy to be here. I could not let your engagement pass without some effort to meet the man who has captured your heart."

Anna paled somewhat with this statement but carried on with her original inquiry. "But, the dizziness, your nausea?"

"You are not the only one to benefit from your mamgu's lessons, you know. You were on the right track with the *Datura*, Anna. I recognized some of my symptoms to be quite similar to those from belladonna. The flushing, the blurred vision, the rapid pulse. All of it fit quite well with my experience when younger. Many girls once used it to make themselves more attractive, to give a flush without cosmetics and to enlarge the pupils. It is a powerful medicine though but toxic if abused. Mother said that the only remedy for such reactions was poppy syrup or laudanum. And she was right."

Anna gaped, her mouth falling open slightly. "You hate laudanum, Mama."

"Yes, well, the combination of a bit of your *Datura* syrup—Lucy had a terrible time trying to find it in that stillroom, I hope she didn't make too much of a mess—and a smidgeon of the laudanum seemed to counteract some of the more unpleasant symptoms of the *Datura*. However, the relief of my dizziness seemed to remain, at least for brief periods. I took several small doses when nausea threatened and I managed to sleep through most of the trip. I am heartily glad to be on solid ground again." She gave a weak smile. "I would only take such a concoction for travel and only for you, my dear."

Anna hugged her mother once again, tears coming to her eyes for the umpteenth time that day. She had never been one for fits of crying but she was making up for it in the last few days. "Mama, I am so happy to have you here. I have landed myself into a muddle and I need your advice to get out."

Chapter Fifteen

A full description of said muddle had to wait, as Emmaline had seen fit to inform the resting and now slightly tipsy Lady Harriet of the unexpected arrival of her sister-in-law, Mrs. Sanderton. Lady Harriet barged into the sitting room, eyes wide and black wig askew and took in the scene of mother and daughter in conference.

She smiled with unaccustomed feeling. "Margaret! What a delightful occurrence. It is wonderful to see you." She was sincere and Anna was surprised. Her aunt had continued to surprise her throughout her stay in town.

Margaret returned the heartfelt grin. "Harriet, you are looking in the first bloom of health. I heard all about the beneficial effects of life in town and I had to see them for myself."

Lady Harriet, not too easily fooled, rolled her eyes at this flummery. "I'll not ask how it came about but you do not seem to be at death's door and you are here in the metropolis, so I'll simply take it as a gift. Your daughter has been quite a bit to manage, dear sister, with a veritable flock of admirers. I'm sure with her engagement it will only get more difficult and I could use your influence to keep her under control."

Margaret turned her gaze back to her child with a raised eyebrow. "Marianna?"

Anna took a defensive tone. "Mama, you cannot believe that I..." Then she remembered how her mother had found her, alone with a man in the sitting room. A man who was not her fiancé, no matter how much she wished otherwise.

"You really must learn to know when we are teasing you, dearest." Margaret let out another laugh. It was a wonderful sound to Anna's ears, heard all too rarely in the last few years. Margaret raised a hand to her temple. "I am afraid the effects of that potion," Margaret paused and waited for the predictable wince from her daughter and gave a wink in response. "That very useful medicine is wearing off and I need some rest after such a journey."

Lady Harriet agreed vigorously, "Of course, of course. You must be exhausted, I'm sure the housekeeper..."

"Mrs. Tipton," supplied Anna.

"Mrs. Tipton, can arrange for your rooms in a nonce."

Mrs. Tipton had swept into action upon the news the footman brought regarding the arrival of Anna's mother and by the time Anna escorted her mother carefully up the stairs, they found waiting a beautiful room with walls in a pale mauve that Margaret approved of immediately. After a sponge bath to clean off the grime of the road and some tea and toast, Margaret smiled apologetically at Anna for their interrupted conversation and fell into a light doze.

Anna closed the door behind her and felt yet another weight removed, as she felt much less alone now that her mother was nearby. Perhaps it was still possible to rectify the situation to the benefit and happiness of all.

* * * * *

The next day found Brandon Kelsey standing outside the London residence of Mr. John Bington and staring at the front door. It was just as well that the butler had told him that the Bingtons would not be back until this evening, for he had no idea what to say to the man. He couldn't very well challenge him to a duel over Maria...Marianna. They were not animals to clash over a female in the wild, even though he may feel like one at the moment.

Brandon was at a loose end, with nothing to do. Kelsey House was no longer a refuge, as his brother and his wife had been locked in Harold's bedroom for days after the Asterly's ball and when they had come out, supposedly to call on Miss Sanderton for espionage on his behalf, they disappeared immediately after they had returned home and he had almost walked in on them in the library. He had been saved from intense embarrassment and a lifetime of awkward memories only by a well-timed and voluble moan from Lady Patricia. Apparently, as Harold had claimed, she was not at all frigid, despite appearances.

He was not sure if he was appalled at the impropriety of carrying on such activities in the male bastion that was the Kelsey library, or if he simply was terribly jealous and wished it was himself and Marianna who were so engaged. He smiled at the sudden image of her naked, ensconced in one of the leather armchairs that graced said library and swirling a snifter of brandy while beckoning him to her with one little finger. He shook the image away, suddenly all too aware of the revealing nature of men's garments and the uncomfortable prospect of riding home on horseback in a state of arousal.

He returned to the rear stable and took the reins of the gray mare that his brother had now bequeathed him. Harold being in a generous post-coital mood through most of the last four days. Yesterday he had been quite impossible. After returning from his revealing and yet inconclusive meeting with Marianna, he had tried to talk to his brother for a moment, given that the man was actually at his desk working and not in his bedroom.

Well, perhaps Harold hadn't been working. Mooning about, with a ridiculous grin on his face would be closer to the truth. Brandon had tried to ask for advice, although perhaps it had been a bad idea to begin with. Most of the drivel that Harold had espoused involved kidnapping to Scotland and a heavy dose of seduction. Not that Brandon would mind that terribly but he felt that Marianna and her family might have an objection or two.

He set the mare on the path back toward Curzon Street and Kelsey House and tried to think of another tactic, other than interminable waiting, which would allow him to

calm his racing thoughts. He felt that he must be mad, a part of him willing to run off and marry a girl he had only known for a day. It was like some insipid love ballad. But he had seen soldiers, even officers, marry a Spanish girl they had met between skirmishes after a day's or even an hour's courtship, because death was waiting behind the next bend. Some had been happy and some had been miserable but none of them were alone. Death may not chase his every step here in England but he could not deny the sense of urgency that filled him and would not leave until he could rightfully hold this woman in his arms and call her his.

Tonight was the full moon, tonight he would have Maria all to himself and he could try to convince her that they had to be together. He was not sure he could maintain his sanity otherwise.

* * * * *

Earlier that same day, Anna paced in the morning room, as she had every few minutes for the last hour, waiting for Lucy to come down and tell her that her mother was awake. It was very early for town, not yet eight. She alternated pacing with studying the woven pattern of her cream muslin skirt or an appraisal of the Greek Key emblem over the chair rail in the dining room across the hall. Anna had not slept well the night previously. She had been far too anxious to quell the thoughts swirling in her mind. A hundred schemes had formed in her head, from trying to convince Brandon to elope to Scotland, to the old plan of locking Isabella and Mr. Bington in a closet and hoping for the best. So far, nothing seemed feasible.

Most troubling was the reality that Brandon still wanted her. It forced a choice that she was not sure she was prepared to make. She was not sure that she could trust her rampant emotions and what they demanded she do to be with Brandon Kelsey. He was far from a safe choice. He was troubled with haunting memories of the war and he was no weak man who she could easily bring around to her way of thinking on any given topic. She did not know if he would want to stay with her in Gladstone Abbey, or would he demand they live in Chester, or in town, or journey halfway across the world. In truth, she knew very little about him, other than he caused her heart to tap a wild cadence. Both the lack of knowledge and her racing heart scared her more than she liked.

She knew that after all the deaths that had occurred, with her mother's illness and the responsibilities which rained on her head, she had maintained a certain distance from the world. That distance had allowed her to laugh in the face of conflict, to find humor in the actions of others and the caprices of fate. In her dreams, with this particular man, there was no wall present, no separation from the emotions that raged through her. It was exhilarating but terrifying.

She sat down with a huff, muslin billowing around her ankles and let out an unladylike yawn. Her needlework held no appeal, it rarely did. The spring planting that would normally distract her with its busy activity was going on without her, far away

in Shropshire, with Mr. Jamison's capable oversight. She bemoaned the fate of her herb garden and hoped that Cook would at least keep it alive. Could she give up all of that for a man she had met in person only yesterday?

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. When she opened them, her mother stood in the open doorway, concern evident in her visage.

"Mama! I was going to come up to you. Did anyone help you..."

"Good morning to you too." Anna blinked and Margaret took pity on her. "Lucy did offer to help me down the stairs but I seem to be fortunate today and I have no lingering effects from my speedy and impetuous journey." She closed the door and crossed the room over the floral Aubusson carpet. Margaret made much of an examination of the room, trying to ease the tension she felt in her daughter. "This is a fine house. Your aunt must truly have excellent friends to have recommended it."

Anna smiled. "She does seem to know everyone, or at least, manages to meet everyone with a remarkable rapidity." She looked down again at her lap.

Margaret took hold of her daughter's chin and raised Anna's face to meet her gaze. Anna's eyes were red, her color poor. "What is bothering you, my love? Your letter was singularly unenlightening, especially on a matter so important. Your description of Mr. Bington, who you had barely mentioned in any previous letters, was also unsatisfactory. I thought he was destined for your friend Isabella?"

Anna felt fresh tears gather and she sniffed in an attempt to keep them at bay. "Oh Mama... The dreams... And I thought he was married and then Mr. Bington proposed and I didn't mean to accept but Brandon walked in before... I've only known him for a day but he kissed me...and..."

"Wait!" Margaret said in a commanding voice. "I've never known you to dither, so I would ask that you don't start now." She lightened her tone and smiled ruefully and brought a hand to Anna's cheek. "Start at the beginning dear and let's go through the whole long story. Does this have something to do with those dreams you told me of?"

"Yes, it has everything to do with them."

"And Brandon, I presume is not Mr. Bington?" Anna shook her head. "Is it Mr. Kelsey then, who I met yesterday?"

Anna nodded an affirmative. "Brandon Kelsey is the man in my dreams." It felt good to get out the truth, to relate to someone else her personal madness.

"Interesting. I told you the moon was a powerful force. You told me you had been dreaming of this man since November?"

"October actually. You believe me?" Anna asked hopefully.

"Of course! You are my girl and I've never known you to lie. Who am I to judge? I am only your mother."

Anna gave a chuckle. "Thank you. Yes, Brandon Kelsey, although I didn't know his Christian name until very recently, has been a fixture in my dreams since last year. But I

only met him briefly four days ago, in a horrible scene that I will not relate and I only spoke with him at length yesterday."

"But you love him." This was a statement, not a question.

Anna sighed. "Desperately."

"Then how came you to be engaged to Mr. Bington?" Margaret pursed her lips in confusion.

Anna paused. "Perhaps I will have to relate the horrible scene then. I-I thought that Brandon was really his brother, Lord Harold Kelsey."

"Lady Patricia's husband."

"Yes. I thought, I thought Brandon was some kind of rake and then I thought that Lady Patricia was carrying on an affair and...oh, let us just say that I have a vivid imagination and fate conspired not to disabuse me of my fanciful notions until far too late." She closed her eyes. The narrative was painful to tell. "At the Asterlys' ball, I saw Brandon dancing with his brother's wife and thought that he must have returned from the war, which he had. But I thought he was dancing with his own wife. It-it was all very confusing." She paused again, breathing uncomfortably against oncoming tears. "He made his way over to me and looked at me with such longing, that I fled. I-I was unsure that I would not fall under his spell, regardless of whether or not he was married."

Margaret clucked her tongue and her mouth formed a small "o" of surprise. Anna paused again, blushing. Margaret bade her continue, "Go on, go on, then what happened?"

"Mr. Bington followed me and I was in a highly agitated state. He took this inopportune time to propose and although I was planning on refusal, I had not formulated my response in a strong enough matter and he thought that I had accepted him. Just as I was about to protest, Brandon and Lady Patricia arrived at the door and he stormed away before I had a chance to do anything. I-I have not been able to think clearly since." The threatened tears came and Anna could not stop them this time.

"I see. You poor girl." Margaret enfolded Anna in a much needed hug. "You are so young to have such burdens thrust upon you. Especially on your birthday."

It was her birthday. She had completely forgotten. April the twenty-second. She was eighteen. "I'm afraid with all the ruckus, I had completely lost track of the date." She let out a wry laugh.

"No girl should be forgotten on her birthday." Margaret reached around her neck and unclasped the locket that she had worn for twenty years. The silver locket was elegant in its simplicity. She held it in her hand and opened it to reveal two miniatures, one of herself at eighteen and the other of George Sanderton in his youth. Anna bit her lip, willing tears not to come again.

Margaret smiled wistfully. "Your father and I loved each other very much. Both he and I would want you to have the same gift." She took Anna's hand and placed the open locket there.

Anna looked down at the two pictures of her parents. "Mama, I am scared. Mr. Bington is a good man, a safe man. He would treat me well and I have no wish to hurt him." She drew breath. "Brandon, Mr. Kelsey... He knows me too well and yet not at all." She stopped, lost for words. "What should I do?"

"Only you can make such a decision, my dear. It is not easy to make such a choice but happiness itself is not easy to find. When you do find it, you need to seize it with both hands." She chuckled. "You have tried so hard to help others find happiness. It is ultimately your responsibility to find and keep your own."

Margaret inhaled deeply. "Now, my dear, this is far too much dire confession and deep conversation for so fine a morning. I expect I could use some breakfast, for the toast and broth last night were insubstantial and have long fled. My constitution seems improved, at least for the moment and I should like to go for a walk." Anna smiled and nodded her assent.

And so, Anna and Margaret spent a pleasant day together, with Anna able to put from her mind for a brief time her troubles and what might greet her once she fell asleep. Somehow, she would make her decision. Tonight, the full moon waited.

The two ladies were so pleased with each other's company that there was almost no thought given to poor Mr. Bington, who was informed by the butler on his arrival at eleven that Missus and Miss Sanderton were out and would most likely be occupied for most of the day in outings and the like. Perhaps the gentleman could call on the morrow?

* * * * *

Anna found herself curled in a ball in the center of a wide tester bed, soft candlelight leaving the edges of the room in which she lay a blur. The whole world seemed centered on the bed. An unaccountable nervousness plagued her and her stomach fluttered and bounced with each breath. She raised herself upright and scooted to the edge of the bed, the cold floor upon her bare feet shocking her somewhat. She looked down at herself. She wore her hair loose, not in its customary nightly braid and she was dressed in a soft, diaphanous lawn nightrail. She felt her skin rise in goose bumps, although the night was in fact quite warm. It was still full night and she could not decide whether she had been trying to go to sleep or had just awakened. But the coverlet was not turned back. She was waiting for something.

It came to her in a rush and a sense of dread gripped her as she realized it must be her wedding night. Her memory seemed to have evaporated. She could not remember any of the advice her mother must have imparted about what was to occur, although she could imagine what her aunt must have said, something about the act being "an unpleasant but necessary duty". Even Widow Granger's highly colorful tales had fled from her memory and for once she would have longed for the risqué knowledge the thrice-widowed matron had imparted. She could not even recall her wedding or the

wedding breakfast, nothing could get past the clawing fear in her belly that something was terribly wrong.

The door creaked and the birds flapping about in her midsection all took flight at once and her heart leapt into her throat. The doorway was cloaked in shadows, the only light the single candlestick on the bedside table. A tall dark form walked toward her and her breath caught as he came into view.

He had discarded his coat, waistcoat and cravat and a few open buttons on his shirt revealed a tantalizing bit of his chest. The triangle of warm exposed skin there held her gaze for several moments and the nervous twitches of her stomach seemed to alter themselves into something entirely different. She realized she had been staring and a becoming blush suffused her cheeks and she finally raised her eyes to meet the deep brown eyes of her new husband.

His expression was intent, almost wistful for a moment, as he gazed on her. She was glorious, her chestnut hair falling down her back in waves, the light of the candle teased bits of gold and red to shimmer throughout its length. Her skin magnified the rosy glow and the dusty pink of her nipples was evident through the sheer fabric of her nightdress, causing him to pulse with need for her. She was even more beautiful than the Marianna he had been chasing through his dreams for a week, beautiful and sensuous and always just out of his reach.

Tonight, she was right here, sitting and waiting on a bed no less, instead of running away into the mist. She felt more real than any dream had ever been. She was not an ephemeral maiden who would disappear any moment but a real woman. He had expected it tonight. It had been a month since the last dream and it was only the promise of her visit that had kept him from wanting to fall into a drunken stupor as he had been tempted to do every other night that week. This wasn't just a dream of his Maria, this was really Marianna Sanderton. They might be locked in a dream world but she was very real and she was an innocent. He had to remember that, even if his every instinct screamed to take her and make her his.

Silence surrounded them, not even the wind intruded into this haven. He could hear her every breath. He jumped when she whispered, her voice low, "Hello, husband." He closed his eyes. He could feel any semblance of control breaking. Again, she thought he was her husband? In his heart, this was in fact the case. His blood pounded in his head and his eyes clenched as he fought his inner demons, trying to find a way to not touch her as he ached to do.

He hates me. He cannot look upon me. Am I so ugly? She stared down at her hands in helplessness. She felt tears form, although she tried to hold them back. She knew she loved him, had loved him for what seemed forever. The pain of his rejection seared her heart, as it must have seared his. She had rejected him once, hadn't she? Fuzzy memories fought with despair and she began to sob quietly. She felt his hands on her

face and she opened her eyes. His eyes held concern and something else intense that she could not identify.

"I-I am sorry that I displease you so," she whimpered, hating herself for the weakness she was displaying. She twisted her face out of his hands and tried to stand up but she felt his arms suddenly go around her, trapping her against his chest.

He whispered in her ear, "You please me too much, my love. I cannot bear it, I want you too much."

She went weak with relief and seemed to melt into him. Inhaling his scent was a joy. He was warm and male—soap and a touch of something like bergamot—exotic and compelling. His broad chest encompassed her, made her feel tiny and feminine, something she never thought she could feel. She half expected the flutterings of fear to return at that thought but instead she felt wonderful, desirable. He wanted her!

His breathing was labored, as though he was going into battle. Was he nervous as well? *I suppose not every day is a man's wedding day either.*

"I think now would be a good time to kiss me, Brandon."

The sound of his name on her lips was too much and he groaned, a battle lost and he brought his lips to hers in a soul-searing kiss. Her lips opened under his tutelage and she gasped at the shock of his tongue battling with hers, soft caresses alternating with sword-like jabs. She felt excitement build to overflowing within her blood. Heat built within her, pooling in her loins and she felt his hands begin to caress her through the fine lawn of her nightshift.

Her lips were the sweetest fruit, warm silk upon his. She gave him every bit of her untutored passion in their kiss and he felt his arousal raging between them. Unable to help himself, he ran his hands over the thin fabric of her nightshift, her skin warm and pliable beneath the cloth, teasing him to distraction. She gave a soft moan and broke away from their kiss and he drew back, trying to pull back his betraying libido from the edge of reason.

She was certainly not helping his efforts to restrain himself. His eyes locked on to her long fingers as she slowly began to unbutton the tiny pearls that closed the front of the gown. Her head was bent and he thought her intent upon what she did, until she reached out suddenly and touched his arousal through his breeches.

He let his breath out with a whoosh and trapped her in his arms again, bearing her back down upon the bed, her feet suspended over the edge. She wore a teasing little smile and he responded with fire in his dark eyes.

"You do not know what you do to me, my love."

In response she arched her neck and the glorious stretch of exposed skin was too much to resist. He planted a long trail of kisses down from beneath her left ear to the top of her breastbone, lingering at the soft, sweet spot at the base of her neck. Hot, wet

kisses trailed down further and the nightshift fell away, parting under his gentle pressure.

She writhed under him, her hands buried in his hair and as his lips reached the gentle swell of her breast. She keened a soft cry of longing, sending spirals of heat through him.

It was too much and not enough. His lips felt like fire along her skin and she wanted nothing more than to enfold him, to become one with him. Nothing less could satisfy the emptiness that seemed to throb within her.

His lips brushed against the skin of her left breast and she lost the ability to breathe. His hand reached up to caress her right breast and as his fingers grazed her erect nipple she gasped in the air she had denied herself. She closed her eyes, seeking to capture every last bit of sensation, desperate for him, sure somehow that she could lose this, lose him and that she must hold on. His teasing would drive her mad, when she knew somehow that there had to be so much more.

He pulled aside the gown enough to expose her left breast and she finally felt some satisfaction as his mouth enclosed her nipple. She bucked upon the bed, the sensations overwhelming and she wrapped her legs around his frame, seeking to draw him closer. He suckled her breast and strummed his fingers over the opposite peak and with each thrum in his rhythm she saw stars flash behind her eyelids and warmth pulse in her womb.

She tasted like a flower must, sweet and heady, overwhelming his senses. He knew he had to stop, that she was not his to have but her body called to him and something deep and primal seemed to claim him. Each little sound she made pierced through him and only made him want to give her every pleasure. He thought that the taste of her breasts and her incredible response to him might sustain him but when she wrapped herself around him, his body cried out for release, telling him to bury himself within her and never let go.

It was that surge of longing that forced him back, forced him away and he scrambled back from her, off the bed, heaving with the effort. She stared at him, suddenly bereft, a hurt look in her eyes.

"My love..." he panted, trying to acquire both breath and some semblance of control, "you are the wife of my heart." She smiled and beckoned him back to the bed, her tousled hair and swollen lips almost more than he could bear. "But not yet my wife in the eyes of the law."

She raised a questioning eyebrow. She searched her memory again for a ceremony, the signing of a ledger, the wedding breakfast, any proof against this accusation but found none. Understanding dawned and full memory flooded in and with it, a sense of shame. She stared down at her exposed body and blushed. She pulled the gown closed

over her chest and crossed her arms over herself. She raised her haunted gaze to his and his eyes burned with passionate intensity.

"I'm... We're dreaming again, aren't we?"

He nodded.

She shuddered. "I-I know not what to say, Mr. Kelsey. What must you think of me?" Unbidden, tears formed in her eyes, as she was overwhelmed by longing turned to sorrow.

He smiled and stepped forward again. She drew back but he knelt in front of her and placed a hand on her knee. Her skin still burned for him beneath the thin fabric.

"My love, my Marianna, now that I've found you, I don't think I can let you go."

She drew breath, as if to speak but he raised a finger to her bruised lips, effectively silencing her. "Do you love him?"

"Who?" She was still befuddled from passion and the foggiest of their dream world.

"I think that answers my question." His finger caressed her lips and she could not help but kiss his fingertips. She observed his shudder in response.

She whispered, "I love you, Brandon. Only you."

He closed his eyes, breath whooshing out of him in relief. He took her hand. "And I love you. And I would like nothing better than to climb back into this bed with you and worship your delectable body for the rest of my life but I would like our first encounter to be more than a dream."

She blushed again and smiled. "Still, this dream has made an excellent and edifying birthday present."

"It is your birthday?" he asked, surprised and again assaulted with the knowledge of how much he had to learn of her.

"I am eighteen today."

"Gods but I feel veritably ancient," he quipped.

"But you cannot be more than twenty-eight?"

He winced. "Twenty-six, actually."

She replied nervously, "That is still very young for a man of the world, especially a soldier, to settle down." The implied topic of marriage was not one for ladies to bring up without preamble.

He smiled ruefully. "Apparently, not young enough. Other, younger men have beaten me to the punch."

The memory that she was engaged to another man intruded. "Poor Mr. Bington." Her heart plummeted.

"Exactly, poor Mr. Bington. What exactly is going on with poor Mr. Bington, if I may be so bold?" He gave her a wry smile, trying to cover up the worry that ate at him over her response.

"Oh, it was all a terrible misunderstanding. And then you walked in and I felt horrible..." Anna was flustered and her hands gestured as she spoke, letting the collar of her nightgown fall open again.

Brandon tried humor to distract himself from that alluring patch of skin. "I hope I do not always make you feel horrible when I walk in a room."

Anna stopped and then giggled, a sound he found utterly enchanting. Humor was not working to distract him from the delights of her body. "My dear, before we go any further, I suggest that you do up your buttons." He dropped his gaze to her throat meaningfully and though she thought that she surely could not produce another blush, nevertheless one crept up as she hurried to fasten the tiny buttons that she had so seductively opened a few minutes earlier. She hopped up from the bed and ran to a chair to gather a dressing gown that had conveniently appeared and wrapped herself in it. She returned to the bed and stared at him, eyes wide. Her legs curled under her, she sat on the opposite side of the bed.

"Have I sufficiently reduced any temptation?" she asked pertly.

He practically leapt at her, springing across the mattress like a panther and capturing her in his arms. He brought his mouth down on hers with unrestrained passion and she moaned in response, unable and unwilling to protest the incredible pleasure of his lips on hers. Just as suddenly, he broke away.

"No." She blinked and he backed a little farther away, breath heaving.

"No?"

"No, you have not sufficiently reduced any temptation. You could walk into a room in rags and a silly white matron's cap and I would still want to ravish you."

She smiled mischievously, happy beyond words. She felt more feminine and alluring than ever in her memory. She could hardly believe that this amazing man, handsome and funny and noble and smart and—oh yes—handsome, could actually want her as badly as she wanted him. She did not even know what such wanting was until this man had plopped her in front of him on a horse as they when riding through an imaginary landscape.

They may have only met briefly in the real world but she knew Brandon Kelsey better than most women knew their husbands before marriage. She knew that he wanted her, that he loved her and that he respected her. She loved him and she could not find a better match.

He recovered sufficiently to try to retrace the thread of their conversation. "Bington. Poor Mr. Bington. What is going on with Bington?"

She tried to erase the happy smile from her face but she couldn't. "Mr. Bington happened to make a proposal when I was in a very unsettled state."

"You thought I was Harold and heir to an earldom?" he asked, still worried that he would somehow disappoint her by being only Mr. Kelsey, an ex-soldier with no current avocation.

She rolled her eyes. "No, I thought you were married."

"Ah." He was relieved, although guilty that he would even suspect such superficiality from this amazing woman. "So, you accepted Bington because you were angry at me?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I was not that unsettled."

He took that as a challenge and prowled toward her once again. "Oh, so I don't unsettle you, then?"

She bit the corner of her lip and backed away toward the headboard at his advance. "You know that's not what I meant."

He ignored her capitulation and kissed her breathless anyway. It was infinitely harder to abandon her lips this time. Her cheeks were flushed and as she opened her eyes as he drew back, her eyes were darkened to an emerald green, the pupils huge. She desired him as much as he desired her and that knowledge took all of his willpower to fight to maintain control.

He pressed a chaste kiss to her nose. "What did you mean, dearest?"

She exhaled, trying to gather her thoughts again. "I never really accepted him at all."

"But..."

She held a finger to his lips and he nipped at it, causing her to shiver. "I-I made an error in phrasing and he jumped to the conclusion that I had agreed."

"And you didn't disabuse him of this notion?" he asked incredulously.

"I did not get a chance," she retorted. "You and your sister caught us together and others were hot on your heels with their congratulations. After that I was so discombobulated and disheartened that I had no idea what to do. I have no wish to hurt Mr. Bington but no wish to marry him either. Heavens, I have tried for the last month to engage his affections to my best friend, Isabella Eversmith."

"Sir Frances' daughter?"

"Yes? What of it?"

"It was she who Lady Patricia first recommended to me as a fine candidate for a wife. Especially if I had a yearning for politics."

"And do you?"

"No, I do not consider Isabella Eversmith—that was the redheaded chit, yes?—I do not consider Miss Eversmith to be a good candidate for a wife. I have someone else in mind." He hugged her close and she nestled in his arms with ease, as though she had always belonged there.

"No. I meant, do you have a yearning for politics? I would like to know. I mean, I have no idea of your plans, your likes, your favorite food, where would you want to take up residence?" That was the key question but she went on, covering up her nervousness with inanity. "Do you have a pet? I despair of being able to answer the

smallest question about you once we are en..." She stopped suddenly, appalled at her presumption of their engagement.

He smiled in response. "I have no desire for politics. I am not sure of my plans, other than perhaps something involving study or medicine." He paused. It was a good question actually, one he should give more consideration, once his every thought was not taken up by the woman in his arms. He continued, "I have a great liking for one Miss Marianna Sanderton. My favorite food is treacle tart, at least according to Cook at Kelsey House, but it is really fresh blackberries warm from the sun that we used to pick at Stinton Hall in the summer."

"We have blackberries at Gladstone Abbey," she said shyly.

"Then I shall like it there exceedingly. As far as my future residence, I am very flexible, as long as the location includes two important things."

"What?"

"My wife and her happiness." She beamed and gave him a quick kiss. He continued on his list. "I currently have no pets, excepting a fine, dependable gray mare. I did have a terrier as a child, who nipped at my brother's ankles, much to my delight. Does that answer your questions?"

She nodded. "Although there are a thousand more."

"I would say the same for myself. Do you have a pet? Do you like treacle tart? What potions do you brew in that stillroom of yours, the one with the three lovely children?"

"They are not potions! My remedies are greatly appreciated..."

They talked on for hours, trading quips and kisses and learning as much as they could about each other. Desire still flared occasionally and never fully died away but they were comfortable in their companionship and eager for more than just physical contact. Eventually sleep found them both. Anna nestled on his shoulder, Brandon's arms wrapped around her, holding her against him and a smile on both their faces.

Chapter Sixteen

Waking alone was more painful than Anna could have imagined. Still, she smiled at the memory of the feel of his arms around her and hoped that she would soon fall asleep in such a manner in truth rather than in fantasy. Although she had tossed and turned before succumbing to sleep the night before and the night before that she had barely slept at all, she felt refreshed and invigorated and ready to meet whatever challenges that her predicament would throw into her path.

She arrived downstairs at ten, after having Mary cluck over her and her improved demeanor. She wore a sunny, pale yellow morning gown, simple and comfortable, reflecting her inward contentment at the world. On a table in the hall, she was shocked and delighted to find a giant arrangement of daffodils, dozens of yellow daffodils, that brought the very sunlight indoors with them. Mrs. Tipton and two footman managed to observe her as she read the card, which carried a simple message of, "Happy Birthday My Love, B."

She smiled at his cleverness. The household would assume they were from Mr. Bington but she knew better. As far as she knew, Mr. Bington had no idea when her birthday was and would never be so bold as to call her "My Love". Only Brandon knew her love of flowers in season. Simple flowers that recalled the countryside, rather than expensive hothouse blooms. It had been one of the multitude of sweet nothings discussed between them and she reached out to caress a vibrant bloom, feeling it on her fingertips as though it was a kiss from her beloved.

She floated through the morning, conversing again with her mother and developing a bit of a plan to handle Mr. Bington, should the need arise. Fortunately, Aunt Harriet had provided an excellent opportunity for many of the key players in the drama of her life to meet that evening, at a long planned, "intimate" card party for twenty. Lady Harriet was hounding the servants and rushing about all morning and paid little notice to her curiously altered niece, being much more concerned with the state of the silver and the number of available card tables that could be begged, borrowed or stolen from the neighbors.

When the bell signaled a visitor at just past noon, Anna was raised from her pleasant musings over her sampler with a visit from Mr. Bington, just back from Kent.

"Miss Sanderton, may I say how lovely you look this morning." Mr. Bington was sincere in his appreciation, for she seemed practically glowing with happiness, a welcome change from the somber, pale creature he had worried about three days earlier.

She composed herself, thoughts racing as how best to tell him of her decision with the least harm done. "Mr. Bington, it is good to see you back. How was Kent? I hope your business concluded satisfactorily."

"It did, it did. Have you heard from your mother? I..." He cleared his throat and ran a hand nervously through blond curls, ruining the hard work of his valet. "I am most eager to have done with this process and have our understanding become official."

"Ah, yes. My mother has surprised us all." Alarm flitted across his features, worried that all his hard work and courage had come to naught. She continued, "My mother has made the trip from Shropshire, at much difficulty to herself, in order to support me through this time."

"I see." He suppressed a small shudder. He would have to ask Mrs. Sanderton directly for her daughter's hand. At least it was a woman who was Anna's guardian and not a terribly imposing father. Sir Frances Eversmith, to think of a random example. "Could I speak with her then? I should like to obtain her consent as soon as possible."

Anna bit her lip, wishing that she could get to the point rather than lead him on so. "I am afraid that it would be difficult. She suffers from an odd illness, of which I told you and the trip was very trying. She is still recovering I am afraid, though she arrived the day before last."

He let out a grateful sigh, he would have time to prepare...perhaps even to write down something in preparation. "That would be excellent."

"But then of course, there is the card party tonight."

"Oh." His confidence slipped. "That, that is perhaps too public a venue to air such..."

"I agree completely. Perhaps tomorrow?" She took a deep breath, "In fact, perhaps not even tomorrow would suit. I-I am very fond of you, Mr. Bington and I wish you well, however, I feel that..."

A loud clatter interrupted her speech and then the door to the sitting room flew open, Lady Harriet backed through with two footman in her wake, who were carrying a large yellow-striped damask sofa and puffing with the effort.

"Careful, careful. Don't drop it!" Lady Harriet decried in a tone of authority. She turned to look about the room for space to deposit the burden and gasped, "Mr. Bington! Marianna! I am so sorry. I had no idea you two lovebirds were in here. Such lovely flowers, Mr. Bington."

He blushed and wrinkled his brow in confusion. Lady Harriet continued on, "I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience but with the event tonight, the house is in a bit of an uproar. Ah ha!" she declared and Bington jumped in fright. "I knew there was another table in here!" She marched across the room and tapped on a mahogany end table holding a small bust of Nelson.

Anna thought she was free and clear, once her aunt was distracted but as the footman strained with effort, her Aunt's attention turned back to the couple. "I suppose you are here for Margaret, Mr. Bington?"

He gaped. "Margaret?"

"Mrs. Sanderton. Mrs. Sanderton is in residence. Have a question for her, don't you?" She smiled beatifically, happy in her success at finding a match for her charge.

Anna interceded, "Mama is indisposed, Aunt."

"Hmm...she seemed in excellent spirits last night. Pity." She turned to Bington and said, "Well, you'll have another chance tonight then, won't you? I'm sure she will attend to play at cards, it is a passion of hers."

Anna knew that her mother tolerated piquet with Lady Harriet in order to please her aunt, not for any love of cards on her own part. Mr. Bington rose, discomfort evident in his stance and Anna racked her brain for a way to delay Mr. Bington yet again, so she could finish their all-important conversation but it was too late.

"Lady Harriet, Miss Sanderton, forgive me but I must be going. I shall see you both this evening." And with that he swept out the door, around the footmen, who dropped the sofa with a clatter. The sound of Mr. Bington's exit out the front door was drowned out by Lady Harriet ringing a peal over the heads of poor Tom and Edward. Anna wrung her hands in vexation and hoped that another opportunity to end this farce would arrive posthaste.

* * * * *

Brandon Kelsey was whistling as he searched the library for another herbal, this one from India, that he thought Marianna might enjoy. Had she already received the flowers? The weather looked fine and he hoped that he could convince Harold to lend him his precious curricule so that he might take the lovely Miss Sanderton out for a drive this afternoon. He could not wait for the evening to see her again, though he had already made sure that Patricia had included him in those attending Lady Harriet's planned soiree.

Patricia had looked mildly amused at breakfast upon his further inquiry if the Sanderton party was going to be attending the ball in his honor the following night. He did not think that anything could darken his current mood, regardless of whether or not he appeared a lovesick fool to his brother or his wife. They themselves looked equally ridiculous. In fact, he could have sworn that they had been holding hands under the table over their eggs and toast. He would not at all be surprised if there would be an heir to the earldom within a year and he would be off the proverbial hook.

As though summoned by his thoughts, a great booming voice rang out through the ground floor of Kelsey House, announcing to all and sundry that the earl, thought to be rustivating in the country until May, had decided his presence was required in town. *There go any plans for a peaceful drive in the park.* Brandon paused in his perusal of the shelves. He was caught between a lingering desire to hold on to anger that had carried

him off to war and the knowledge gained in that conflict. The knowledge that his family were all he truly had. Resolute, he turned on his heel and walked out into the hall.

His father stood in the entry way, glaring up at Harold and Patricia who had come out of the upper floor landing, the sound of his voice reaching them in the music room long before the footman sent to fetch them. Edmund Kelsey looked upon his errant older son and his wayward daughter-in-law standing together and his face broke into a wide grin.

"I've given you two enough time alone then? I see you two have finally managed to stay in the same part of the country for longer than five minutes. Perhaps then we might have a little one to carry on the family name. Dare I ask to have a grandchild before I tip up my boots and join the Kelseys in Chester Cathedral?"

Patricia blushed, something Brandon had not thought possible and Harold drew himself up, ready for a retort. Then he stopped, shrugged his shoulders, grabbed Patricia's hand and called down to his father, "Yes, sir. Immediately, sir." And pulled a sputtering Patricia after him up the hall to his, now their, chambers.

Lord Chester let out a laugh that could surely be heard in Westminster and Brandon followed suit, chuckling at seeing his brother give up a chance at sparring with their progenitor. Harold and Edmund had managed to bicker constantly for years over minutia but Harold had acquiesced to most of the earl's major dictums. Brandon and his father had been more distant and when they fought, it had been a serious matter, leading to an estrangement only starting to heal with a few letters over the course of Brandon's service in the army.

Brandon's chuckle had not been completely lost in the ruckus that was the earl's rich baritone cackle. The earl's eyes found Brandon and he sobered and took in the sight of the son he had not seen in three years.

"It's good to see you, my boy. You've...grown."

Brandon had not grown in height but he had changed. The planes of his face were a little harder, his waist a little narrowed, his eyes had a depth of wisdom that belied his twenty-six years. "It is good to see you as well, sir. You look hale and hearty."

"Yes, well, I'm a bit grayer and a bit rounder than when you last saw me, I'm sure. Still, I'm not ready to shuffle off any mortal coils. At least, not until I've seen some grandchildren." The earl gave his son an assessing look but did not make any further comment.

The implied meaning was enough. He was home, he was whole, ergo he should marry soon. Brandon was quite aware of his father's desires on the subject. In truth, he was certainly not adverse to the idea, now that there was a suitable and much beloved candidate for the position of Mrs. Kelsey. However, he balked at the idea that providing a auxiliary heir to the ancient and hallowed institution that was the Earldom of Chester should be his only function in life. That such should be his father's only expectation of him rankled. An uncomfortable silence stretched between the two men.

"You must be weary, sir. Perhaps you would like to rest from your journey." The footmen had already cleared away the trunks and the two of them stood alone in the foyer.

"It was actually rather invigorating. And here I was, all geared up for a fight with your brother and his gallivanting bride and now I feel the wind fairly knocked out of my sails with a rapid victory. Perhaps I should celebrate. A drink, Brandon?" The earl arched a bushy black and gray eyebrow at his son.

"Certainly." Brandon stepped aside, allowing his father to precede him into the library and then made his way toward the array of decanters while his father sat in one of the leather armchairs. Brandon poured brandy for both of them. The cognac had been finished off by the combination of Harold in his wallowing over Patricia and then Brandon lamenting Marianna in the days after the disastrous Asterly ball. Brandon turned and walked to his father's chair, handing him the snifter and sat down in the opposite chair.

His father was a large imposing man and filled up the chair and the room, every bit as much as Harold did. Still, to Brandon he seemed smaller in reality than in his memories. Brandon couldn't say whether this was a fact or merely perception altered by the events he had witnessed. Edmund Kelsey stared at the amber liquid as though it held the answers to life's burning questions and silence reigned. Brandon looked down at his own drink and wondered how he would manage to repair a relationship that had been fragile ever since the death of his mother fifteen years previously.

"You are very like her, you know," Edmund muttered, his powerful voice muted and grave with fatigue or emotion.

Brandon jumped slightly, startled at the similar tracks their thoughts had taken. "Mother?"

Edmund nodded. "She too was sensitive and witty and brave." Brandon gaped a bit. Edmund looked up at his son. "Yes, she was very brave."

It was as close to an admission of pride or approval as he would ever get, Brandon thought. They had not spoken of Eleanor Kelsey in many years. "I always remember her as very kind and very happy. She made us all happy in turn."

Edmund closed his eyes, a wave of pain gripping him. "Yes. She did do that."

Brandon had never really known his father to show such emotion, for all his brash and outspoken ways. He realized that his parents must have loved one another. It surprised him, given the way the earl had pushed his eldest son into marriage.

Edmund continued, "I only ever wanted the same for you two, you know. To be happy. You are more difficult on that score than Hal, that's for certain. Him I understand. I'd hoped finding him a wife would settle him, give him the focus that it gave me. Maybe that'll come about, maybe it won't."

Brandon tried to ease a few of his father's woes. "They appear to be on the path of reconciliation, if that is what you are concerned about. And perhaps..." He paused, feeling a bit awkward still. "I think perhaps they will be happy together."

Edmund gave a wry smile, "I had always hoped. I'd known her father, the Marquess of Haversford, since we were at Eton. I'd thought she'd suit from when she was knee-high and didn't bat an eyelash when Hal had put a snake in her nursery when we'd gone to Haversford Castle visiting. She wasn't more than six and she was as smart as a whip. I thought there was a chit who could put him in his place, as your mother had me." He chuckled ruefully. Brandon wondered what the earl would think of Marianna. She would certainly pass any tests for spunk, if not for fortune or connections. Then again, perhaps that's not what had led to the match between Hal and Patricia either.

Edmund looked pensive again and pursed his lips. "But I am an old man and I don't know everything, regardless of how I might bluster on." Brandon was shocked at such an admission. Edmund faced his son again and held his eyes. "You are home now, for good? No going back to the front, no more heroics?"

Brandon thought of the soldier begging in the street and a sudden flash inspired him to be bold. "No sir, there is plenty of work for me here in England." He paused, uncertain of his father's mood. "I thought perhaps my skills might be more usefully applied to men who could no longer fight, who were not as lucky in the war as I have been."

Edmund stared down at his untouched glass. "Hmm...that would be a noble cause, certainly enough." Brandon took that as a good sign. There had been no instant rebuttal to the carefully phrased suggestion that he actually use his training and skills as a physician. But he was unprepared for his father's next words. "Perhaps you would allow an old man to help?"

Dumbstruck, Brandon looked up at his father and smiled. Perhaps this would be easier than he had feared. Conceivably he had earned the old man's respect after all. He leaned forward and began to lay out a plan that unfolded as he spoke, a plan for a future that began to look brighter by the moment.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a good thing that Lady Harriet had worked so diligently to uncover tables and chairs, for a party for twenty soon turned into close to thirty, as last-minute replies included an unprecedented number of additional guests. Sir Frances was surprisingly attending with his already expected wife and daughter. To add to that, he had requested the inclusion of two gentlemen who he knew in Parliament. Lord Liston had sent a note that he had altered previous plans and now intended to come. Lady Patricia was attending and now bringing both Lord Harold, her husband, as well as his brother, Mr. Brandon Kelsey. All of this spoke to Lady Harriet of her undeniable social prowess but it was all quite vexing, as it altered the sought-after balance between ladies and gentlemen.

Their townhouse, though well appointed and comfortable did not alas have a suitable ballroom. It was also difficult to host a proper dinner party without a gentleman host. As such Lady Harriet had pinned her hopes for a suitable social coup on this card party. She hoped to introduce a new fad and had created name cards allotting a seating arrangement for the guests, who were four to a table for the elegant and low stakes game of whist. Lady Harriet in truth had no head for cards and less for gambling. She thought if she set out all the attendees in proper groups with suitable amiable partners for lively and engaging conversation, she would not be forced to part with any great sum of her small resource of pin money in a game of chance.

And so, up until the last possible minute when it was necessary for her to dress, Lady Harriet stood in the large drawing room, examining the silver salvers with their tempting selections of oranges, early cherries and exotic pineapple and a vast array of cheeses from Leicester to Stilton to Wensleydale. A lovely French jelly jiggled slightly and glowed in the candlelight. The finest crystal stood ready for the port, sherry and wines that were stored in the small cellaret beneath the sideboard. She walked back and forth between the small tables, studying the name cards and occasionally switching one or more. Finally, she retreated to her rooms to finish her toilette, certain that all was well.

* * * * *

The guests began arriving shortly after eight. Anna stood in the receiving line in the entry hall with her mother and aunt and smoothed the teal silk skirt of her dress for the third time, anticipating the arrival of the Kelseys. Isabella had arrived with her parents early on and she was stunning in a russet colored sarcenet that turned her red hair to molten copper. It was not her dress or coif that was of most interest to Anna but the confident air that she bore. Isabella Eversmith was on a mission. When the goal of said

task arrived in the form of one Mr. John Bington, a new and determined Isabella had appeared at his elbow, sporting a brilliant smile that left Mr. Bington even more speechless than usual.

"Mr. Bington, I'm so glad to see you. Can I offer myself as your escort to the drawing room? I'm afraid Anna will have to stay here until more guests arrive." It was terribly forward and completely unheard of behavior for the shy Isabella. Anna couldn't have been prouder of her.

Bington responded with an awestruck smile and allowed her to lead him to the card room. The next arrival was much less welcome and Anna could feel her skin itch as Herbert Dalrymple, Lord Liston took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"I am so sorry that I have been unable to see your beautiful face as often as I would wish, dear Cousin." Herbert oozed insincerity, as he bowed in an exaggerated manner over her hand, an artful and false blond curl resting on his forehead brushing her thumb. His eyes, if she were not mistaken, rested fully on her bosom and she gritted her teeth in vexation. Thankfully, he moved on to her aunt and Anna exchanged a glance with her mother, who had also been the victim of his questionable attentions. Margaret sent her a look that spoke volumes and Anna wished for time alone with her mother to inform her of Cousin Herbert's sorry financial status and of the danger he presented to any reputable female.

And then, the door opened and all thoughts flew from her mind as a large and imposing gentleman she recognized from a dream entered the hall, the Lady Patricia on his arm. She was certain this was the Earl of Chester, Brandon's father. She found she was unprepared for the encounter with her beloved's remaining parent. The earl, dressed in severe black, much like his younger son was wont to do, stopped to speak to her mother. Her heart fluttered unsteadily until she caught sight of one of the two men entering behind the massive earl. Brandon's brown eyes locked on to hers and the rest of the world fell away. She did not notice the glance the earl sent her, nor the amused faces of Lord Harold and Lady Patricia. Brandon smiled encouragingly and she could not help but respond with a smile that could outshine the sun.

It was thus she greeted the man who she remembered bellowing down at her as though Zeus from Olympus. He seemed much more jolly than the daunting man she recalled and he, in turn, seemed charmed by the bright young lady, who Hal had told him Brandon was mooning over. Perhaps this pretty young thing would come to her senses soon and put his second son out of his misery.

"Miss Sanderton, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am terribly sorry about coming here unknown and unannounced but having just returned from the country, I did not want to miss having some time with my two boys. They did not want to miss this gathering, especially with such lovely hostesses."

Anna was prevented from answering by the interjection of Aunt Harriet. "Oh, my lord, please do not concern yourself!" She effused, "We are honored to have you here and do hope you enjoy yourself. We do not stand so on ceremony."

Embarrassed by her aunt's simpering, Anna blushed prettily. "Yes, Lord Chester, we are very happy you have come. It is a pleasure to have made your acquaintance." The earl moved aside and allowed Lady Patricia and Lord Harold their polite words of greeting and he watched with undisguised interest as his younger son greeted the lovely Miss Sanderton. Brandon took her hand in his and they barely said a word other than the most superficial greeting, staring into each others' eyes with an intensity that not even Lady Harriet could ignore.

Lady Harriet cleared her throat. "Marianna, perhaps you could show Lord Chester and his family to the drawing room? I believe most of the guests have arrived. Your mother and I will follow you shortly."

Anna broke her gaze from Brandon's, feeling the snap of breaking the connection like a small stab. She turned to Lord Chester with a flush of color on her cheeks, hoping that she and Brandon and she hadn't been too obvious in their mutual regard.

The earl smiled and held his arm for her to take. "I would be very pleased to have such a charming escort."

Anna inclined her head in acceptance of the compliment and led the way to the larger drawing room, feeling Brandon's eyes caress her from behind as though it was a physical touch.

The drawing room was ablaze with candlelight and loud with conversation. There were already too many people in the room and it was certain that the night would be considered a success, merely because of the number attending. The myriad small tables were laid out in such a pattern to allow free conversation and yet still allow passage to the sideboard for refreshments. Two footmen in plain livery stood at attention, ready to replenish glasses of wine or port.

The room was already warm and the windows stood open, the damask draperies drawn aside to let in the cool air of April. There was also a French door at one end of the room, leading out to a balcony. When the Kelsey party and Anna arrived, Sir Frances and his two friends were already standing outside, carrying on an intense conversation.

Most guests had already found their place cards and the ladies twittered over the novelty of the placements. Anna was sure that some last-minute changes had been made and would still be made, if her aunt had anything to do with it. Mr. Bington and Isabella sat together, for the first time actually engaging in conversation. Mr. Bington looked thoroughly caught up with his lovely companion and Isabella fairly sparkled. Anna could not help but smile, sure that her deliverance and the others' happiness would be sure to follow.

She helped Lord Harold and Lady Patricia to find their own tables and by the time she wondered what to do about the earl, her mother and Lady Harriet had arrived in the room with the last of the stragglers. Lady Harriet quickly appropriated the earl to her own table, along with the senior Mr. Ostley and the meek Mrs. Fenton. Anna briefly

wondered who had been replaced in that grouping but soon lost all concern as Brandon placed the lightest touch on her arm and motioned to a table nearby which held not only his name but hers as well. They were partnered with Mr. Fenton, who waited at the table but whose eyes were keenly watching the proximity of his daughter Hermione to Lord Liston and the few dandies that he had surrounded himself with on the other side of the room. Their other partner was absent, either one of Lord Liston's crowd, or one of the gentlemen on the balcony with Sir Frances.

Brandon pulled out her chair and she sat and his fingertips fleetingly grazed the backs of her arms as he removed his hands from the chair. He sat next to her and sent a brief look and a nod toward Tom, one of the two footmen standing guard at the sideboard.

Curious, Anna whispered under her breath, "Did you ensure this seat in some manner, or is this simply good fortune?"

Brandon cocked his head and gave a crooked smile. "Let us say I have ensured my own good fortune." He paused and said in a louder voice, "May I say how lovely you look tonight, Miss Sanderton? I am extremely happy to have such a delightful partner as yourself."

She sent him a small smile. "Thank you sir. Have you met Mr. Fenton?" Mr. Fenton turned toward the pair and blinked for a moment. "Pardon me, Miss Sanderton, I am afraid I have been inattentive."

"Have you met Mr. Kelsey, Mr. Fenton?"

"No, I have not had the pleasure." Fenton sent a brief glance toward his daughter, who he supposed was safe enough with Lady Horatia Eversmith, Mr Ostley junior and another young lady, who he did not know.

"Mr. Kelsey, this is Mr. Jacob Fenton, of Jackson Park in Richmond. Mr. Fenton, this is Lieutenant Colonel Brandon Kelsey, the son of Lord Chester."

The two gentlemen nodded a greeting and Anna took note of the approach of another gentleman. He introduced himself as a Mr. Thomas Edwards, in Parliament from the north, near Newcastle.

"Forgive my absence, Miss Sanderton. I am afraid that Sir Frances does not put aside any matter of government, even for an evening's entertainment."

She made as though to brush off the inconvenience. "It was no trouble, Mr. Edwards. If England has need of your time, then our game can surely wait." Attention was turned to the deck of cards and Mr. Edwards was nominated to be dealer, with the natural partnerships of Anna and Mr. Fenton, sitting across from each other and Brandon and Mr. Edwards. Mr. Edwards dealt and play turned to Anna at his left and the first two tricks were played. Neither of the two older gentlemen seemed to notice the little gasp that Anna emitted when she felt Brandon's fingertips graze her knee through her skirts and petticoats. Neither did they make comment as to her heightened color. She sent a scathing look at the culprit but the heat he held in his eyes left her breathless.

Neither of the pair made much headway in the game or helped their respective partners so Mr. Fenton and Mr. Edwards took most of the tricks. Mr. Fenton managed to win the game at five points up for himself and Anna but it was through little effort on Anna's part. Still, some conversation did pass and the gentlemen took liquid refreshment in the form of port. She declined Mr. Edwards' offer to fetch her a sherry as she felt intoxicated enough without the aid of alcohol.

She could not forget for an instant the strong presence of the man beside her. He was equally enthralled and the rest of the room and the constant buzz of conversation seemed simply a distraction from enjoying each other's proximity.

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Margaret Sanderton was thoroughly enjoying herself. Her daughter was two tables away, enjoying the company of her young man. Margaret was at a table with the other man with a claim to her daughter, Mr. Bington. But he seemed besotted with Miss Eversmith. All seemed to be going very well. After a few well-placed comments to the benefit of Isabella she felt she had served her daughter well. Anna had fretted that Bington would try to talk regarding making official their engagement but the disconcerted blond man at the table seemed to have eyes only for the lovely redhead at his side. The other member of the foursome, a Mrs. Ralston, who was a longtime friend of Lady Harriet's, was a very pleasant conversationalist. Yes, Margaret was very happy that she had made the journey into town.

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Lady Harriet Dalrymple was both pleased and annoyed. Conversation seemed to be flowing nicely and a majority of the guests seemed to be engaged in either enjoying the cold repast from the sidebar, imbibing the spirits provided, or in pursuit of winning the rubber at whist. Nevertheless, some of the place cards seem to have been moved. Hadn't Anna been meant to sit at Lady Horatia's table? But by far the most trouble had come from her bothersome stepson, Herbert.

She had been privy to most of the scurrilous gossip surrounding him but she felt that regardless she should have some family feeling regarding the boy. She could not leave him out of her guest list, especially seeing that he was a peer of the realm now. Perhaps with enough encouragement, she might still rate the Dower House at Liston Manor once his grandmother finally joined the dear departed. Lady Leticia Dalrymple had been a thorn in Harriet's side since the moment of her marriage and she would relish the opportunity to redecorate every single room in the Dower house and remove Leticia's presence utterly.

It seemed unlikely though, given Herbert's gambling behavior. There may not be a Dower House in the family much longer, or even a Liston Manor. She narrowed her gaze and pursed her lips in irritation as she witnessed Herbert lead several gentlemen and one of the ladies in a hand of unlimited loo. Mrs. Tedley, Mr. Rowley, Mr. Dalton,

Lord Haverston and even Sir Frances! Goodness, she hoped they knew what they were letting themselves in for. She had no desire to see any fortunes lost in a household under her guidance.

She returned her attention to flattery of the two very eligible men at her table. Though she had her sights set on the elderly Mr. Ostley as a possible means of escape from Shropshire, one must never give up on the least possibility of becoming the Countess of Chester!

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With a loud exclamation, Mr. Jeremy Rowley stood up from the tables that had been pushed together and walked out on to the balcony. Anna and Brandon glanced over at the commotion in time to see Lord Liston give a satisfied smile over the pile of coins and papers stacked in front of him.

Anna frowned, unsettled that Herbert had brought such goings-on into her home. Though their own game was unfinished, she started to rise from her chair, thinking that perhaps she could do something to break up the game that was beginning to draw the attention of the rest of the room and pulling spectators from the other tables. Brandon put a hand on her arm and motioned toward Lord Harold, who was in the process of taking the seat that Rowley had vacated.

Brandon whispered to her, "Have no fear. Hal is as great a gambler as any I have seen. He'll strip that viper of his fangs before he can do any damage, you'll see." Herbert was wearing a rather ridiculous coat in a vibrant green with a slight pattern in the weft that did give him almost a snake-like appearance. In a slightly louder voice, Brandon asked, "Who is he? I am sure I have seen him before. Though I think he had less hair at the time."

Anna suppressed a chuckle. "That gentleman is, unfortunately, my cousin by marriage, Herbert Dalrymple, Viscount Liston." She paused and cocked her head. "Perhaps you knew him in University? Or in town before the war?"

He shook his head. "No, there was no Liston, or Dalrymple at Cambridge. And I spent little time in town." His brow furrowed and he continued to look across the room at Liston.

Anna clucked her tongue in worry. "I do hope Lord Harold does know what he has let himself in for. Liston is a reprobate and gamester of the worst sort. I do not quite understand why my aunt invited him, other than he is her stepson."

"I have every confidence in Hal."

Mr. Edwards and Mr. Fenton had also joined them in watching the more exciting game in progress. Mr. Fenton suggested that they take a break from their own match for more refreshments and Mr. Edwards headed again toward his other political friend, Mr. Paul, to discuss affairs of state once again. Mr. Fenton went to observe the game in progress and see if in fact Lord Harold could give a thrashing to that scoundrel, Lord Liston, who had tried to compromise his daughter not two months earlier.

With the eyes of most of the room either on their own cards or the loo table, Brandon motioned toward the doors to the balcony. He rose and with careful nonchalance, walked around the perimeter of the room in a carefully haphazard fashion. Anna, bemused, followed his example in the opposite direction, stopping to say a polite hello to those at her mother's table.

"Hello to you all, I hope you are enjoying yourselves."

Mrs. Ralston smiled and offered a complement for the company and refreshments. Anna looked searchingly at her mother, concerned if she was getting fatigued. But Margaret simply smiled and flicked her eyes toward the open doors to the balcony. Anna glanced in that direction from the corner of her eye and Brandon was there, his eyes fixed on hers. He smiled and stepped outside.

Anna gave a distracted greeting to Isabella and Mr. Bington and turned to continue toward the doors. Mr. Bington, however, broke out of his contemplation of Isabella. "Miss Sanderton, I should very much like to finish our discussion of this morning, if...if you can find the time this evening?" He looked decidedly nervous, glancing again at Isabella.

Anna smiled knowingly. "That should not be a problem, Mr. Bington. Perhaps in half an hour, after the completion of your current match?"

He nodded and she left the table, making her way toward the sideboard as though to obtain a glass of sherry. She glanced at the room and saw that no one was paying her any attention and she stepped out on to the balcony.

Mr. Rowley, defeated by Lord Liston and out of blunt, was still staring out at the stars and gripping the railing. He did not notice Anna's emergence. She glanced around but saw no sign of Brandon. Frowning, she turned and walked toward the other end, where the balcony ran along the second floor, facing the little garden the townhouse boasted, with the mews and stables behind that.

Suddenly, she felt a hand reach out of the dark and cover her mouth. She gave a muffled scream and was pulled into the other set of doors, which opened onto the balcony. Drawn into the darkened music room, her heart pounding in fear, she felt the hand replaced with a warm pair of lips, as Brandon captured her in a scorching kiss. Fear turned to anger and anger to surrender, as first she pushed on his chest to obtain her release and then she wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him even closer. She opened her lips to his insistent tongue and they dueled with passion and longing. Minutes passed and finally their lips parted. Brandon placed an impudent kiss upon the tip of her nose and she felt her annoyance return anew.

"Mr. Kelsey, you scared the living daylights out of me! What gives you the right to manhandle me in my own house?" He laughed and leaned down once more, capturing her lips again and encountering naught but minimal resistance.

As she again surrendered to his kiss, he moved from her lips, placing tiny kisses along her jawline and whispering words between, "My dear Miss Sanderton..." He placed a lingering kiss on a soft spot under her ear and she gave a little moan. "I

humbly apologize..." The kisses moved farther down her neck and his hands moved around her back, supporting her as she felt her knees grow weak. "And I hope that I have not caused..." Her head rolled back, leaving him access to her throat and he trailed kisses to the notch of her breastbone. "Any undue discomfort."

Her hands came up and were buried in his black hair and she pulled his head up, locking her lips over his. His hands cupped her buttocks through her gown, pulling her against his length. Soft moans came from them both and they kissed until their lips were swollen. Anna felt a concentrated heat inside her and she longed for more of the intensely exciting contact they had shared in her dreams of the night before. She wanted his eyes upon her and his lips as well. Curiosity consumed her, she wanted to see his body and taste his skin.

Her kisses moved across his face, kissing his cheekbones, his eyelids, anything she could reach. She too trailed her kisses to his ear and she felt his hands clutch her harder against him, driving her lower body into his hips. She could feel the hardness that pressed against her and her hand sneaked between them to graze against it. He sucked in his breath and jumped back suddenly. He let go of her and stepped back, breathing hard, his eyes clenched shut.

She felt lost with his abandonment. "Did I hurt you?" she asked, confusion evident in her eyes.

He opened his eyes and it was desire, not pain, that she saw. Desire so strong it fed the heat within her. She stepped toward him again but he held up a hand. "No, you did not hurt me. Quite the contrary. But this is not the place for this." He sat down heavily on the stool of a pianoforte, placing his hands on his knees and gripping with white knuckles. He stared at the floor and tried to think of anything but how much he wanted to continue to kiss her, to kiss every inch of her, until he was as familiar with the planes of her body as he was with the back of his hand.

She flushed, embarrassed by her own wanton actions. "Of course. I'm sorry but I... You overwhelm me." She fingered the silver locket at her throat nervously, as though unconsciously seeking solace from it.

"And you play havoc with my self-control, my love." She smiled at the endearment. He continued, "We must talk. Do I yet have leave to pay my addresses to you in public?"

She sobered and sat on an ottoman that had been removed from the drawing room to make room for the card party. "I have tried to discuss with Mr. Bington the fact that we are not at all suited and to break off this charade but I was interrupted this morning. I have said that I will speak to him. Oh goodness, how much time has passed?" She had forgotten that she had promised to talk to Mr. Bington after the current match. And she had no idea what havoc her cousin may have wrought, or if her mother needed her. When she was with Brandon, she could remember nothing but how he made her feel. It still scared her a bit.

Brandon looked at her curiously, "I suppose we should return soon, or someone will notice our absence."

"I have told Mr. Bington that I will talk to him tonight but I am not sure I will have the opportunity to do so alone. It may still be a few days until..."

"No, it must be soon, my love. I can't stand the thought of you belonging to someone else, even if only he thinks so. My baser instincts tell me I should simply come to your window and kidnap you tonight and have done with the whole business. Do you fancy a trip to Scotland?" He gave her a devilish grin and not a small part of her was tempted to call his bluff and say yes.

"I think that my family and others might have some sense of disapproval over such actions." She gave him a wry grin. "Why, I think even your giant of a father might have some small objections, as it would not be the 'proper' behavior for a gentleman."

He frowned, ceding her the point. He had not been that serious in his suggestion. Suddenly, with a flash, he remembered where he had seen Lord Liston before. He chuckled.

Anna was nonplussed. "What is so funny about the disapproval of our families?"

"It is not that. You are right and I will try to be good. I have just remembered where I have seen your cousin before." She looked even more perplexed. "He was trying to burn you at the stake the last time I saw him. And he unquestionably had less hair."

She gaped for a moment and then let out a squeak of suppressed laughter. "I had not realized that was he." She bit her lip and smiled ruefully. "I had never subjected my dreams to analysis before our strange connection became evident. But it does make sense that I would cast him into a role of tormentor. In October, he paid Gladstone Abbey a rather unwelcome visit. He was a bit more interested in my person than I would allow and since I showed no interest in his advances, he did eventually leave."

Brandon scowled. "Did he cause you any insult?"

"Not truly. A few stray touches, a few inappropriate comments but no lasting harm. I thought him merely a mannerless buffoon but on reaching town, I have heard that he is actually quite dangerous. I am glad that I locked my bedroom door at night."

Brandon was incensed and he had a sudden urge to commit violence that had not been present even during the war. Anna seemed unperturbed though and instead simply ran her hands over her hair, seeking to determine if there were any stray wisps that would alert the party of her activities.

Except for her flushed cheeks, evident even in the moonlight that leaked into the room, she appeared perfect to him. "You are lovely, my dear. Fear not, I believe our secret is still safe."

She wrinkled her nose at him in impudence. "It is pitch dark in here and I am probably a horror. Still, I must get back. Mr. Bington will be looking for me."

He nodded. "You go. I will stay for another moment, so as not to attract attention. I wish you luck with Bington. Perhaps you could try to bring him to the balcony? I could

stand guard at the doors and make sure that you are not interrupted.” He did not add that he might be able to hear the resulting conversation.

She went to the door and gave him a parting smile, the pale moonlight glowing off her skin and stepped out cautiously onto the balcony.

Chapter Eighteen

Mr. Rowley had gone back inside and she hoped that she would not draw too much attention with her entrance from the balcony after such a long absence. She need not have worried. Most of the room was now congregated around the contest between Herbert, Lord Liston and Lord Harold Kelsey.

She rose on tiptoe for a better look and she could see little other than the pile of coins and promissory marks that had seemed to migrate from Herbert to Harold in a remarkably short amount of time. Thus were the vagaries of unlimited loo, when a betting pool could rise to immense portions in a matter of minutes, if the players were intent on their own ruin. Harold seemed to handle himself with aplomb though and Lady Patricia stood behind his chair, a calm smile on her face which was even more unnerving than her husband's casual concentration. Herbert definitely looked frazzled and Anna could not have been more pleased that her obsequious relation should be bested at the game.

Although most of the guests were drawn to the excitement, Mr. Bington and Isabella had remained at their table and were still engaged in what appeared to be deep conversation. Her mother had taken up a position near Aunt Harriet, whose face was pinched with vexation at the manner in which her stepson had made a spectacle of himself at the event that was supposed to seal her reputation as a hostess. Margaret was giving Lady Harriet reassuring pats on the arm to comfort her but her own countenance seemed mildly amused by the course of events.

Her mother did look toward Anna and tilted her head in silent askance as if to say, "And what were you doing on the balcony for such a long span?" Anna blushed in response but continued around the room toward Mr. Bington and Isabella.

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Brandon had made his own entrance from the French doors and the commotion surrounding the gamblers drew his immediate attention. Only Hal, Liston and one other gentlemen who he did not know remained, the minimum table required for a round of the dangerous game. As he had expected, Harold was doing quite well and Liston had a line of sweat upon his brow as he stared at his cards with intensity. The other guests seemed caught up in the action of each trick, though he caught a look from Marianna's mother that made him flush with embarrassment given his recent actions with her daughter.

Brandon had barely restrained himself from ravishing Marianna. Even now, when she was across the room, she drew his eye. The green-blue fabric of her gown seemed to make her skin glow and her hair shine with red and gold highlights. He wanted to feel

that skin again, as smooth as the silk covering her shoulders and back. He wanted to run his fingers through her rich hair and pull out each and every pin that kept it all in place but for a few stray curls that kissed her neck. Brandon knew that it would not do to be so excited in front of one's father, much less in front of Marianna's mother, so he tried to alter the dangerous course of his thoughts.

Averting his eyes, the other direction was not much better. His father stood next to the sideboard, a plate of pastries and cheese in his hand and a knowing look on his face as he smiled at his second son. Since the sideboard was not terribly far from the door, Brandon decided that his own parent was less fearsome than Marianna's at this moment and he approached Lord Chester with what he hoped was a calm demeanor.

"Hello my boy. Where have you been off to for so long? I wasn't aware that the view from the balcony was quite so engaging. Perhaps I should go out and see for myself?" Brandon searched his mind for an appropriate reason why this would be a very bad idea at the moment, especially as he saw Marianna leading a very uncomfortable looking Mr. Bington toward the balcony. The earl seemed to follow his gaze.

"Ah, perhaps then it is the company that makes the balcony so enjoyable then?" Brandon flushed like a schoolboy and he could not help but grin sheepishly. Edmund Kelsey let out a snort of amusement. "I wish you well my son, I wish you well." He moved off toward the players, striking up a conversation with Mr. Fenton and leaving Brandon alone to stand guard over the sideboard and its two footmen.

Marianna and Bington had almost arrived at the doors, when a loud gasp was emitted from the crowd around the remaining players. The last trick had been turned and not to Lord Liston's benefit. Brandon could see Harold, calm and still but with his size as intimidating as ever, stand and hold a hand out to Liston. Liston also stood, an expression of loathing barely held in check upon his pinched features. He stared at the proffered hand and took it with as little enthusiasm as possible.

Herbert Dalrymple had nothing left and Harold had acquired a neat stack of winnings. Brandon smiled and he could see Anna shake her head almost sadly, as though remarking on the inevitable rewards of such a life as Liston seemed to lead. She turned to Bington and seemed to mutter something under her breath and they made their way toward the balcony while the crowd's attention was still on the Viscount.

Liston backed away from the table, the crowd parting like a sea for his retreat. He turned toward Lady Harriet and made the most perfunctory of bows. "I am afraid that I must leave early tonight, my dear Lady Harriet, as I have an appointment early tomorrow that I cannot be late for."

Brandon swore he heard a muffled comment from a bystander from the assembled audience, "Aye, an appointment to run from your creditors no doubt." Liston too must have heard it, as he stilled and a tic appeared in the muscle of his cheek. He gave another cursory bow, accompanied by a smile that was more of a grimace than a grin and swept out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Brandon restrained a snigger. In the confusion that followed the excitement of a high-stakes match, the guests sought new entertainment. Brandon found himself a convenient spot on the wall to lean against near enough to the door that he might overhear some conversation if he were lucky.

Unfortunately, the luck of the Kelsey family seemed to have been completely tapped by Lord Harold for the match with Liston, as the noise in the room seemed to increase with the accumulated exchange of gossip regarding Viscount Liston. Whatever was happening on the balcony, he would have to wait to know the outcome.

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Anna hoped fervently that the uncomfortable and guilty countenance that Mr. Bington displayed was due to a change in his feelings and not to any plans he might have given the fact that Anna had made the highly inappropriate suggestion that they needed time alone. It was a beautiful night, warm for April and the moon, though not as full as the previous night, was still large and beautiful even in the hazy sky over London.

She ventured forth, determined to finish this as quickly as possible, while hoping to cause little pain. "Mr. Bington, I'm afraid that we truly need to talk frankly about our...arrangement?"

"You wish it to be formalized then? You wish me to talk to your mother tomorrow?" interjected Mr. Bington, his eyes quite sad. "She seemed quite in good health this evening."

"Yes...I mean no..." She was flustered. She had sincerely hoped that he was no longer interested in having any conversations with her mother, other than in polite company. She plunged forward, refusing to let misunderstanding rule the day yet again. "Mr. Bington, I do not think it will be necessary to speak with my mother at all." He looked perplexed but she forged on. "I have thought from the very beginning that you are a fine man, Mr. Bington. But I do not think that I am the right woman to be your match."

He opened his mouth but no words came. She could not read his expression, so she continued, rushing on in the hopes of making herself understood in as clear a manner as possible. "I am afraid there has been quite a bit of misunderstanding between us, Mr. Bington. I am sure that you hold me in high esteem but I am not as good-natured as you are, sir. I am afraid that we would not suit." She breathed deeply and delivered the coup de grace, "Also, I feel it is only right to inform you that for some time, my heart had been engaged elsewhere." At this, he shut his open mouth with a clack and seemed to suddenly relax. She hoped he would not faint or some such nonsense.

"So, then, you wish to break our engagement?" he asked and she thought she heard a note of hopefulness in his tone.

"I am sorry but yes. There should never have been one, I am afraid. But..." It never hurt to boost the man's confidence, even if it was a bit of a fib. "Your proposal was so

eloquent, that I was unable to think clearly for a moment. And amidst the confusion of the events immediately following, I could not bring myself to disappoint you."

He nodded sagely. "You have been most kind, Miss Sanderton. I..." He blushed and she gave a small smile in encouragement. "I must say that I hope we may still remain friends after this?"

"Of course." She waited, hoping for more.

He did not disappoint. His eyes shone in happiness. "I must thank you though, for releasing me. You are a remarkable woman, Miss Sanderton but I too have unknowingly had my heart captured by another. I have only just realized it possible that Isa...that the lady might return my regard."

"That is wonderful and it relieves my mind no end to think that you will soon find happiness." Anna was filled with a deep sense of relief, now that that was over and done. She was amazed that after all the angst and tears she had shed over this situation, it had been resolved mostly through simple honesty.

He looked nervous again. "Well, it is no sure thing. And I am not at all sure her father will approve."

Anna clucked her tongue. "Tsk, tsk, Mr. Bington, you value yourself too little. I am sure that everything will go as smooth as silk and if it does not, well then, I'm sure the lady is worth a bit of trouble."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "She is at that. In fact, she is quite priceless."

"Shall we return?" Anna indicated the doors and Bington nodded. As they left the balcony, neither of the two noticed the dark figure standing at the other doors from the music room. He had heard every word and weighed each one most carefully.

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Brandon was cursing the cacophony of gossip that had prevented him from hearing any of the exchange on the balcony, unless he was willing to make a spectacle of himself by standing directly at the door. Marianna and Bington had not spent five minutes in conversation before they returned and Bington escorted her to her mother's side, where Mrs. Sanderton had retaken her seat. Marianna had made no attempt to look toward him or signal him in anyway and he was tense with uneasiness. Mr. Bington sat down next to Miss Eversmith and it appeared as though the group was going to take up yet another game of whist. Marianna was facing directly away from his current position and he would have to pass through half the room again to see her countenance.

He gritted his teeth and wondered if Wellington had half so many problems orchestrating a battle as a gentleman could encounter trying to conduct an affair of the heart in the middle of a crowded drawing room. He began his trek along the wall, trying to avoid the inevitable encounters with guests who were happy to make his acquaintance. Or if they knew who he was, they wanted to discuss the intricacies of the war effort. As though he had some insight on either the thoughts of Wellington or

clairvoyance on the actions of Napoleon. Unfortunately, it was impossible to steer clear of the civil entreaties that buffeted him. He was now of interest, since the guests were intent on hobnobbing rather than on the vicarious thrill of watching gamers risk large sums on the turn of a card. Regardless of whether they considered themselves new or old connections to himself, it was required that he pass at least five minutes of polite conversation with each of them. It was excruciating and exasperating all at once and it took him nigh on an hour to make his way around to Marianna's table.

Positioning himself at the wall behind Miss Eversmith, he waited for Marianna to glance at him. He could not believe that she did not feel the same magnetic pull that he did when they were so close. Suddenly, she glanced up and gave him a small devious smile with an arched eyebrow as accompaniment. He hoped that was a good sign, for it seemed that she knew exactly how she tortured him with the dearth of information. Ha, what a little minx. Life would certainly not be dull. He returned her impertinent look with his own half-smile and a wink. He was about to saunter forth and engage the group in conversation. He needed to try to learn more and at least hear the rich sound of her voice as she spoke to him but alas, it was not to be. He found himself blindsided with a flanking maneuver from both his father and his brother, who seemed to have other plans.

"Ah, there you are son. Where have you gone off to this past hour? You seem to have been passing time with half of the room in deep conversation. Wasting no time in getting back into the whirl of society, yes?" The earl turned and interrupted the game to address the Sanderton ladies.

"Mrs. Sanderton and Miss Sanderton, I am sorry to leave such a delightful gathering so soon but I am afraid that the family has some pressing matters to attend to in the morning." The earl glanced at Brandon meaningfully.

Damn and blast, thought Brandon. He had forgotten how quickly his father could marshal his considerable resources and contacts throughout society. No doubt these meetings were regarding the ideas for a soldier's hospital that Brandon had spoken of early that afternoon. Of all the times to try to be useful.

Margaret and Marianna nodded in acknowledgement. Margaret replied graciously, "It has been a pleasure, Lord Chester. We are very happy that you and your family took the time to attend." She smiled and seemed to look especially at Brandon when she inquired, "I do hope that these pressing matters are not terribly serious?"

Harold interjected before Brandon could align his thoughts. "No, no. In fact, it is merely some family business. Is that not so, Brandon?" Harold gave him an arch look. Ah, so Harold wished to be involved in the project as well, eh? No doubt he would suffer some prank for not mentioning it earlier.

Still, he did finally manage to find his tongue. "I'm sure our business will be concluded satisfactorily." Though he spoke to Mrs. Sanderton, his eyes kept drifting to Marianna, who was still silent and wore her mysterious little smile. "We shall see you at the ball at Kelsey House on the morrow, isn't that so?"

Margaret Sanderton looked to her daughter for an answer. "Anna?"

Marianna spoke, her voice quiet but intense and he tried to read any trace of meaning hidden in the sweet soprano. "Yes, we shall be there. I'm sure it will be a lovely and memorable event."

It was not the place for such forwardness but he could not help himself. "Could I reserve the first set, Miss Sanderton?"

She gave him a little nod. "If we are not late, then it is yours. No questions asked."

Hmm...what might that little riddle mean? "Then the first set whenever you arrive, Miss Sanderton." He might as well announce their engagement rather than make such a love-struck fool of himself but he had to hold her in his arms again. Especially since his father and Harold had virtually guaranteed that he would not be able to call on her in the morning.

She smiled in response and he grinned like a fool at her, until he felt Harold literally tugging on his arm. "We must be going."

"Until tomorrow, Mr. Kelsey."

"Until tomorrow."

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Anna was not to find her bed for some time. It was another two hours before the last of the guests made their way home and then yet another hour after that to settle the household and to soothe Lady Harriet from any lingering ruffled feathers. Monsieur Guy required some calming that they had entertained and he had not been called on to make anything more complicated than a few patisserie and a grand jelly. Lady Harriet was incensed that one of the footman that was to have remained at attention by the sideboard had disappeared shortly after having been sent out to fetch hot water for tea and had been gone for a full half hour. It took all of Anna's powers of persuasion to not have Jack thrown out on his ear for his tardiness. It was not fair that a footman should receive the brunt of Aunt Harriet's anger when it was her stepson with whom she was truly angry.

The last emergency had been Mrs. Tipton's discovery of the furniture askew in the music room. Apparently, the music stool had been dragged across the floor in such a way as to damage the fringe on an expensive carpet and several of the maids were in tears over Aunt Harriet's reaction to this bit of news. Anna had not thought that either she or Brandon had moved that stool but her memories of the time were colored mostly by the feel of his lips on hers. She managed to deflect any speculation regarding what may have transpired in the music room and finally managed to get her aunt and her fatigued mother into bed. Mrs. Tipton could then take charge of the cleaning up as she was eminently qualified to do.

Alone in her room, brushing her long hair in front of the oval mirror that she had not quite become accustomed to after eighteen years spent at mamgu's dressing table at

home, she finally found the time to revel in her good fortune. The world which had appeared so bleak just days ago, now seemed filled with light and promise. She giggled at the memory of Brandon's perplexed look as she refused to reveal the outcome of her conversation with Mr. Bington. Perhaps she was tempting fate but she wanted to be able to tell him that she was free when they were alone and he could sweep her into his arms again.

She finished her hundred brush strokes and climbed into the warmed sheets. A flush of heat ran through her body as she thought that someday, perhaps soon, someone else would slide under the sheets with her. She wondered if Brandon's touch would set her on fire as readily in the real world as it had in those shocking dreams. Maybe it would feel even more blissful.

Although she knew that it was best to keep any arrangement between them a secret, for the sake of Mr. Bington. There was also the impropriety of the fact that in society's eyes she and Mr. Brandon Kelsey barely knew each other. This was worrisome, as she was not certain if she could restrain her urge to jump into his arms the very moment he walked into a room. She gathered from the oddly revealing conversation with Lord Chester and Lord Harold that there was some sort of family business that needed to be done in the morning, so she doubted that she would see him before the ball at Kelsey House. Although it would be a very long day without him, she could look forward to dancing in his arms for the first time outside of their mutual fantasies. It was the closest she could get to him and still respect all of society's rigid dictates.

She stared up at the ceiling above her lonely bed and sighed. After all that they had shared, she was very close to throwing over all of those rules and regulations to follow the dictates of her body and her heart.

Chapter Nineteen

It was the grandest ball they had yet been to. Kelsey Manor was aglow with lights and the crush of carriages in the street and people on the stairs were a glamorous sight. They had arrived on time for once, for nothing would make Lady Harriet late to this event and the carriage had not been forced to creep along the London streets, since Margaret Sanderton had felt very fatigued after all the excitement of the previous night and had declined the opportunity to attend.

"I am sorry Anna but I think I would just be a worry to you. I would hate to have a bad episode in your young man's...in Lord Chester's fine house." Anna had blushed in response to her mother's apology. She sat on her mother's bed, as Margaret, already comfortable in her lavender robe and nightgown was ensconced with a book by the small fireplace in her room. "I have every intention of having a comfortable, quiet night of relaxation. Besides, the small amount of shopping we accomplished did not include any gown worthy of Lady Patricia Kelsey's ball." Anna opened her mouth to retort. Margaret stopped her. "Truly, my dear, you seem so much happier now than when I arrived. I assume, the situation with Mr. Bington must have been resolved, as I received no visit from him." Anna felt a moment's regret at having read the day away with her favorite novels and the copy of Mr. Drayton's book that Brandon had given to her, rather than confide in the progress of events with her mother.

Margaret continued on, "If I were to go with you tonight, you would fret about me rather than enjoy yourself and then I would not be receiving a visit from Mr. Kelsey as soon as I and I'm sure you, would like." Anna had found yet another blush stain her cheeks. She had never thought that it was possible to blush as often as she had in the last few weeks. It was ridiculous and the resulting pink clashed terribly with the garnet colored saracenet of her ballgown. She had hoped to look pale and ethereally lovely in the dark color, despite the snappish comments her aunt had made at its purchase. Instead, her rosy complexion continued to make its presence felt.

Now, an hour later, she was standing in the impressive foyer, her russet pelisse being whisked off by a footman. She felt unequal to the grandeur around her. She hoped desperately that Lord Harold and Lady Patricia produced an heir to the Chester earldom forthwith, for she had no desire to be mistress of this grand house. Although it might be pleasant enough to visit. A brief question tickled her mind in regards to the lavishness of the bedrooms and what they might be like and she fought yet another blush from reaching her face with a few deep breaths.

Lady Harriet stood by her side, chattering in her ear with comments about the cost of the crystal chandelier and the richness of the velvet hangings. The crowd moved through to the ballroom and past the receiving line. Anna's heart beat rapidly knowing

that Brandon would be there, just ahead and she was consumed with an awkward nervousness that seemed strange after the repeated proofs of his affection. She cast her eyes around the hall looking for a safe harbor to rest her gaze upon and she noticed a flower arrangement on a pedestal that captured her attention. It was a lovely spring bouquet, full of late tulips and white narcissus and especially numerous were the bright yellow daffodils. They were stunning in their simplicity against the majestic backdrop of polished mirrors and oiled wood that made up the two story entryway to Kelsey House. She calmed, the artless beauty of those blooms steadying her.

Brandon Kelsey was the honoree of this lavish event and he stood between the hostess, Lady Patricia and his father, Lord Chester. Anna made every attempt not to stare at him but to make the proper pleasantries with Lady Patricia before moving on, though it took all of her willpower. But as she stepped before him, following her aunt in the line, she knew that anyone who looked at them in that moment would have to be blind not to see the sparks which jumped between them as he took her gloved hand in his.

* * * * *

His need to breathe seemed to have been suspended as he caught a glimpse of Marianna in the row of guests in the receiving line. He expected not to see her until later and so her early arrival was a treat that made up for the rest of the day, which had been spent with various friends of his father. The day had begun with Sir Frederick Rice, former Minister of War, and the meetings had ended with Lady Anne Sheffold, an influential member of the charity circuit. It had been a long day, full of endless repetition of his plea for funds to start a charity hospital for the war wounded. He had lost count of the number of times he had had to bite his tongue to refrain from making an indignant response to offhand comments regarding the low nature of the average soldier. Still, he had obtained sufficient support to make a good beginning and with the selection of a suitable site and recruitment of the right physicians, he could see a solid and rewarding future for himself. He felt like he had renewed purpose and he wanted to share his excitement with his Maria, the woman who would share in his new life and vocation.

She was resplendent in a dark red, and he wanted to devour her with his eyes. He forced himself to focus on the next few guests, making sure that he did not embarrass himself or his father and sister-in-law with ineptitude or rudeness. Finally, she stood before him, her eyes a remarkable shade of sea green, made brighter with the contrasting color of her gown. He could willingly drown in those eyes. Time stopped for a moment and not a word was said, until he felt a discreet jab from Patricia in his ribs and glanced away. Marianna moved on to the earl, charming the gruff old man with a sweet smile. As she walked away toward the ballroom where the orchestra was tuning up in the gallery, she threw a glance back over her shoulder. Another poke in his ribs, this time from his father, forced his attention to the next well-wisher.

The earl whispered in his ear, "She's quite a catch for the man who can keep her. Life would not be dull with that chit, that is for certain."

Brandon kept a perfectly straight face with his response. "Father, whatever gave you the idea that I longed for a dull life?"

At the first sign he read in Patricia's stance that he might not be drawn and quartered should he step away from his duties in the line, he excused himself and hurried into the ballroom. The room was larger than typical for a townhouse and Kelsey House was in general a bit grander than the abodes of most of the nomadic *haute ton*. Lord Wilfred Kelsey, the Tenth Earl of Chester and Brandon's grandfather, had preferred the fast life of Town and had built his house accordingly. A long wall of alcoves and French doors lined one side of the ballroom and torches had been lit in the main gardens outside to make the room seem even larger. The gardens had been the work of Wilfred Kelsey's wife. To bring a bit of the country to the city, she had insisted on some of the most extensive gardens in Town, and they still wrapped around the side and the back of the house.

Almost immediately Brandon spotted Marianna standing in one of the alcoves and staring out at the gardens. He made a beeline for her, disregarding the gossip that might follow in his wake, and went to claim her company for the first dance. She turned as he drew near and her brilliant smile soothed the ache that had built in his heart since their parting of the night before. He led her out to the floor.

The slow and formal minuet which opened the ball allowed them the privilege of dancing as partners for the whole set but it did not allow them to touch more than the tips of each other's fingers. These light touches were not enough and he schemed of a way to grab a minute alone with her. He had to talk to her, to find out what had transpired with Bington. Not only to make his own offer, but to kiss her again before he lost all sense of propriety and simply claimed her lips here on the dance floor. She must have caught him staring at their lush, pink fullness, for she made a pretty little blush and cast her eyes down. But not down in embarrassment, down at his own lips! Ah, what a wonderfully passionate woman.

When they were next bowing close to each other, close enough to chance a bit of conversation, he whispered his frustration, "My dear Miss Sanderton, I would request the supper dance but I am afraid that with that I would have partaken of my allowed two sets and we would set tongues a-wagging should we spend any more time together in public."

She pursed those lovely lips that he admired. The dance took them slightly apart again and after another turn she returned to curtsy toward him with her response. "To cause such gossip would not do sir, not at all. My aunt would not be pleased if we were to spend such an inordinate amount of time in public together. I am afraid that I might be quite fatigued as it is, by the time of the supper dance. Especially after the events of last night. I might have to go to the ladies' retiring room after the fourth set and rest my weary feet. My slipper does not quite fit properly and I must attend to the problem away from the eyes of others."

He smiled in response and hoped that he had correctly understood the code that she had invented. "I myself might find solace in a bit of rest after the exhausting fourth set. There is a rather lovely little sitting room just down the hall from the parlor set aside for the ladies' use. On the left." He had not the skill for being circumspect, not when he felt on fire for her. He hoped she forgave him for being quite so obvious.

"It is always a good idea, to have sufficient rest." This was her only reply. The set drew to a close and he gave her up reluctantly to Mr. Ostley. He would have to wait for three more sets, almost an hour and a half, until he knew if she would come to him.

Anna could not believe that dancing, an activity she usually adored, could be quite so dull or take quite so long. The minutes of each set ticked by with agonizing slowness. Not even a lively reel with Sir Ian Conally, who was a most excellent dancer and had partnered her on numerous occasions and made her laugh at tales of his little grandson's efforts to master walking, not even that could ease the tense knot in her stomach or make the time fly by any faster.

A small bright spot was the mutual absorption of Isabella and Bington, who had danced the second set and had sat out the others, choosing instead to sit together and talk, making up for all those times that they had been lost for words in each other's company. By the beginning of the fourth set, she had lost sight of Brandon, attired in the darkest charcoal gray and assumed that he must be waiting for her somewhere. Her heart beat a bit faster at the thought.

Finally, the fourth set was over and her partner, a Mr. Hadley, escorted her at her request to the group of matrons where her aunt sat, engrossed in discussing some juicy tidbit with Mrs. Drummond-Burrell, the Almack's patroness. Anna modulated her step, adding the tiniest limp to her stride, in case her aunt was feeling particularly suspicious.

She should not have worried. At her approach and after the usual pleasantries of greeting her chaperone and a pinnacle of the *haute ton*, Mrs. Drummond-Burrell took up conversation with another formidable turbaned matriarch at her side, while Aunt Harriet made a proud announcement. "My dear girl, I have had the best news. Next Wednesday we shall be able to attend Almack's after all! Apparently our vouchers had been placed in the wrong envelope and have only just been returned from Mrs. Drummond-Burrell's family solicitor, to whom they were mistakenly sent." Anna repressed any outward signs of her opinion that this story was quite ridiculous. Instead she tried to give an enthusiastic smile.

"That is wonderful news, Aunt Harriet." In truth, it was good news, as thoughts of this development would keep her aunt occupied for most of the night. She swallowed nervously. She felt as tightly wound as a pocket watch. Here she was, standing in front of her relative, willing to lie in order to find time to be alone in a crowded house with a man who was not her husband – who was not even her intended yet. It was completely wanton, utterly shocking and quite out of character, no matter how little weight she normally gave society's strictures.

But whatever force had brought her into Brandon Kelsey's dreams and him into hers, had changed her. It had opened a world to her, a world of violence and terror and love and passion. In this new world, she made the only choice she could.

"I am sorry, Aunt but my left slipper is giving me terrible trouble tonight. I have already made my excuses to my partner in the supper dance. I think I need to rest for a time and perhaps examine the shoe. Will you excuse me?" To examine her shoe and expose her ankle, it was implied that she would have to seek the privacy of a retiring room.

Lady Harriet looked appalled. Anna worried that her story had been unconvincing and that she would be exposed as a fraud in front of one of the most influential members of the ton. "My dear girl, that is terrible. Why, Messrs. Grimmald come highly recommended for their dancing slippers. I shall have to send them a complaint, or warn my friends that their standards have fallen."

Although she had no wish to damage the business or reputation of the Messrs. Grimmald, it was with repressed exhilaration that Anna limped from the ballroom. After a minute's search, she had found the little sitting room on the left side of the hall and an incredibly handsome man waited within, pacing with impatience. He looked up as she opened the door and strode forward, taking her hand in his and pulling her back out into the hall without a word.

* * * * *

Kelsey House was a large and complicated structure and Brandon knew every twist and turn. He strode purposefully through the house and she picked up her skirts to follow him at almost a run. They wended their way through the halls and out into the back garden.

The hedges here were higher than the formal garden at the side of the house, along the ballroom. This was private, sheltered. They came to a lovely pavilion, surrounded by boxwoods and cut off from the world, a secret hideaway in the midst of the bustle of London.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Anna breathed and sat upon a comfortable bench, winded from their journey.

"It was a favorite spot of my mother's. Father built it for her, to escape from the city occasionally."

"I can understand that. I miss the country every day." She looked down at her hands, perversely not knowing what to say after having been desperate to talk with him, to tell him of the conversation with Bington. Was he angry with her for her little game last night? That she had not told him immediately?

"Are you chilled, my dear?"

"No, it is a lovely warm night, for April." She could not yet bring herself to look into his eyes, afraid of what she would find there, or not find there. She felt him place

his coat around her shoulders, ignoring her earlier protest that she was warm enough. She could smell his unique scent in the fabric, and pull it tight around her.

"Anna," he whispered, kneeling in front of her.

She looked up at him and cocked her head. "No, Maria."

"But your family..."

"You have called me Maria from the beginning. It is your special name for me." She blushed. "It makes me feel that I am yours."

"Are you? Are you mine?" he demanded, eyes pleading. He hoped that her refusal to indicate the outcome of that damned conversation was simply yet another form of teasing, rather than truly bad news.

She glowed with her answer. "Completely." It served no purpose to prevaricate further. She was committed to him whether or not he intended to ask for her hand. They both smiled. "Mr. Bington looks to be trying to woo another as we speak."

In moments, Brandon had enfolded her in his arms, kissing her cheeks, her nose, her eyelids. She laughed but her nervousness returned. Did he truly want her as she wanted him? She could not live any longer with uncertainty and she dared steer the conversation in a perilous direction, at least while her wits had not been completely swept away by the little kisses that had progressed to her ear. "Does your previous position have a particular meaning, or are your feet merely tired? Do you have a question for me, sir?"

She felt him smile against the skin of her neck and he altered his course and kissed her mouth, long and hard, leaving her breathless. Then he took up his former position, kneeling before her and captured her hands in his. "Marry me? Be mine for all the world to know?"

She felt the knot of tension in her unfurl. Joy flooded her and a smile lit up her face. But his phrasing left something to be desired. She sighed and frowned just a bit. "I will marry you but not yet for all the world to know, I'm afraid."

He furrowed his brow, a look of pain flashing across his features.

She hurried to explain. "I think it best that we keep our engagement quiet. I should not like to offend Mr. Bington and Isabella any more than I already have. A few weeks' delay, at the most."

He grumbled, "I have waited for you since October, I suppose a few weeks more will not add undue hardship." He rose from his knees and paced back and forth along the whitewashed wood floor of the pavilion. Moonlight glistened off of his exposed sleeves and white cravat and shone from his black hair like a halo. Her heart turned over with longing. He stopped suddenly in front of her and ran a finger across her jawline. She closed her eyes and leaned into his palm. He sat beside her and kissed her, a whisper against her lips.

"I'm not sure if I can stand it, my lovely Maria. I want you so much I ache with it."

She breathed deep and forged ahead, throwing all caution to the wind. Her body fairly sang with awareness of him, of the strain they both shared, the holding back. "Then do not wait, and end both our suffering." She looked into his eyes, the fire of desire burning there. She leaned forward, sealing her lips to his and they were lost for minutes, hours, in a kiss filled with heat and longing.

He broke away, tearing himself from her and rising to his feet, leaving her momentarily bereft. He turned away, staring out into the black sky, tension evident in his frame. "You don't know what you are saying."

She rose from the bench and stood, his coat slipping from her shoulders to the ground, hands clenched at her side. "I know exactly what I am saying. Although I have not any experience in...worldly matters, I believe I have the same aches as you. You have shown me too much in my dreams for me to be completely ignorant."

He turned back to her and could not take his eyes from her full lips, from the white column of her throat glowing in the moonlight. He could not help taking a step toward her. He stopped, his face inches away, his eyes searching hers. "I am sorry to have compromised you in such a manner. I should have controlled myself better."

"In your own dreams? I hardly think so." She smiled and reached up to her own shoulder, her hands shaking. She pulled aside the tiny puffed sleeve of the garnet silk, baring her creamy shoulder to his gaze.

"I long to feel you against me in truth." Her voice shook and she was amazed at her own audacity. He stood so close, she felt his breath hot against the skin of her cheek as his breathing grew labored.

His control was snapping. He should not take what she offered but he could not stop himself. Her eyes were downcast, the long lashes outlined against her cheeks. He could not find words. His entire being was caught up in the struggle not to touch her, not to kiss the shoulder she had exposed so temptingly.

Her voice was low and she gave voice to feelings that matched his own. "The memory of your touch haunts me every night." She took a long breath, willing him to say something, to act. "I don't think I can go on much longer without you."

He was lost. He captured the hand still poised at her shoulder with one of his and wrapped the other arm around her waist, pulling her tight against his long frame. She fitted him perfectly and he bent his head to lay soft kisses along her shoulder and up her neck to below her ear. She moaned in response and gripped his shoulder forcefully. He moved again to her lips, tasting their sweetness and filling his senses with their reality. The taste would stay with him for a lifetime, not just fade with a dream. He wanted to make a million memories with her and share just as many kisses.

Unbidden, his finger traced a line just beneath the neckline of her gown, teasing the warm skin with the coolness of his fingers and the heat of her reaction. The fashionably low décolletage resulted in his journey taking the tip of his finger across the skin of her nipple and that bud rippled and puckered in response. Her knees weakened with the

force of her reaction and they found themselves in a tangle upon the bench as she fell, his head at her bosom, their legs entwined.

She laughed, a trilling sound and pressed her hands to his head to keep him there. He looked up into her face and saw her desire and her acceptance. He drew the fabric of the dress down slightly, to expose the dusty pink skin beneath. His lips caressed her there and warmth flooded through her.

He was burning as well. She felt his hardness pressed through his breeches and her skirts against her thigh. Her skin burned with the echo of such contact. To be wanted as much as she wanted him – this was a revelation, a gift not to be taken lightly. With that thought her hands strained for more contact, pulling at his waistcoat and shirt, seeking and finding contact with the warm skin of his back. He lavished his tongue's attention on the opposite nipple, caressing the abandoned one with his fingers and making fire sing in her veins.

He wanted to give her a perfect night, with silk sheets and a roaring fire and champagne. But he could not control his frantic need to make her his, to taste and touch her. To merge the fantasies he had clung to with the reality of the woman moaning in his arms. Her every sigh, every shudder that he brought forth from her magnified his own need. As she stroked her hands over the skin of his back, he lost the last of his sanity. He had to touch her, he had to feel all of her.

Petticoats and skirts were pushed out of the way and his fingers found her core. She ached for him, wanting a release from the longing she had felt for months on end. At his first gentle touch, she felt exquisite pleasure and superb pain. The pain of wanting more. She whimpered with need and he did not leave her in such a state but brought them both higher.

He could not believe how incredible she felt, warm and pliant and how her body showed him how much she wanted him. The thought of how she would feel wrapped around him made him throb painfully and she seemed to sense this. She pushed at him and brought her hand down to the hardness that had pressed against her only through proper clothes. With trembling fingers, she impeded more than aided him undoing the buttons of his breeches and he guided her in an exploration of his body, until she brought forth moans of need from him. Her simple strokes drove him mad and he could not wait another moment to bury himself within her. Still, he tried to be gentle. He paused at her entrance, ready for a supreme act of restraint should he see fear in her eyes but there was naught but need and desire. Her warmth welcomed him, lush and tight and he thrust home, making their bodies one.

There was pain but it was fleeting and pleasure swept her up and magnified with every movement. She could not think, only feel and then shatter as lights danced behind her eyes and ecstasy overtook them both. He captured her cries and his own with a searing kiss and poured his very essence into her. It was not a gentle coupling, not the prim and proper act done between crisp sheets in a darkened room but a wild and untamed act, perfect in its expression of raw need.

The moon shone down upon the entwined lovers, adding its own silent blessing to a union of souls.

Chapter Twenty

They lay together for some minutes, breathing deeply of each other's scent and the fragrance of the night around them, whispering sweet sentiments and words of love and gratitude that they had found each other. It was not a dream and one or the other would not run off and disappear into thin air. But the sounds of the orchestra playing light music to accompany supper and the clank of china and crystal on the far side of the house intruded and logic returned full force.

"I'm afraid neither of us can return to the ballroom as such," Anna quipped, almost giggling, despite the seriousness of their situation. Brandon rose up above her and inspected her swollen lips and magnificently disheveled hair and thought he'd never seen anything so beautiful. Her naked breasts glowed in the moonlight, her skirts and petticoats were rumpled past repair, rippling around and between them. Desire flashed through him again and he didn't think he would ever be able to get enough of this glorious woman. He wanted nothing more than to carry her up to his chamber and ravish her for a week—the ton be damned—but he didn't want to damage her reputation any more than he already had.

He had fared only marginally better in his attire than she. His shirt was untucked, cravat impossibly askew. "I...I am so sorry..."

She held a finger to his lips, a serious look of ire on her face. "Do not apologize, do not dare apologize." She relaxed into a blissful smile. "This was magnificent and wonderful and real. Too real to be another dream. I know now that you are mine and I am yours."

"Yes, you are mine and I am yours," he repeated and swept down for another kiss. He felt his blood rise again and tore himself away before he would completely lose his senses in her again. He rose and looked down at the small patches of blood on her and on himself and looked to her face.

A shy grin was her answer. "You did not hurt me, my love." She tried to sit and he held her down gently, taking a handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and gently cleaning her, his intimate touch sending shivers through them both. He adjusted his clothing and she lowered her skirts and smoothed the hopelessly wrinkled fabric over her lap.

He reached for her hand, she gave it but she could not yet meet his gaze. She looked down at her lap and the mess of creased silk, blushing as embarrassment finally seemed to catch up with her. He laughed and stood and pulling her up from her seat, enfolded her in his arms again.

"I love you and you are magnificent, do you know that?" It was the right thing to say and she smiled into his shoulder. "I believe I shall spend the rest of my life looking

for reasons to make you blush, for you are incredibly beautiful when you do." She blushed even more and giggled in response, hugging him to her more tightly.

Brandon grew serious, as a sudden thought strayed in to disrupt his bliss. He stepped back from their embrace, looking into her flushed and lovely face. "Maria, my love, I know you wish to wait to marry but I'm not sure that we can afford to do so any longer." His hand reached up, grazing her abdomen lightly.

"Oh," she whispered, realization dawning. "A child." Her brow furrowed, as she made a rapid calculation. Mamgu had taught her many things that not many young girls were privy to. Widow Granger had expanded upon that knowledge, whether Anna had wanted to listen or not. "I do not think we need to worry, it was not the right time." She was surprised that she had not given such a thing the slightest consideration. She had been caught up in such passion that her normal nature, the careful plans that had heretofore ruled her life, had been discarded in the tumult of her need for this man.

He drew her close again and cradled her head in his hands, stroking her hair as though in comfort. "Regardless, I should like to have you Mrs. Kelsey sooner rather than later, so that we might not worry over such a happening but rejoice instead." He smiled at the thought of the three beautiful children running past him on the stairs. "If I remember correctly, you wanted to have three?"

She laughed and nodded. "But perhaps we should enjoy each other for a little while first."

He gave her a look filled with desire. "Yet another reason for us to marry and soon. Now that I have tasted such delights, I do not think I can hold back from enjoying them at every opportunity."

He leaned in for another kiss but the orchestra struck up a loud and boisterous reel and the bright music shook them out of the moment yet again. Brandon plucked his discarded coat from the ground and took her hand, pulling her with him toward the house.

"I cannot be seen like this!" she whispered at him as they sped through the garden.

"I am afraid I cannot be either. Still, trust me, I have a plan."

He led her in through a garden door and into the conservatory and sat her on a bench under an orange tree. He raised a finger to his lips to silence her and he crept out of the room, leaving her nervously trying to restore some order to her hair.

He returned in a minute, a smile on his face. "Help should arrive momentarily."

She arched an eyebrow at him and his mysterious pronouncement. He captured her face in his hands and her lips with another kiss, until a voice intervened.

"Pardon me for interrupting but I assume you have need of me or you would not have requested my presence?" Lady Patricia laughed as they jumped apart.

Brandon grinned at her sheepishly and Anna blushed prettily. "Patricia, may I present my fiancée?" Anna gave him an arch look and he amended, "Although for propriety's sake we are keeping the news a bit quiet for the moment."

"I sense that is your only concession to propriety this night." Patricia surveyed the rumpled state of the couple and neither of them could quite meet her appraising stare. "I have to admit, it was a bit vexing to try to explain the absence of the guest of honor during supper." Both Anna and Brandon paled. Patricia went on, skewering Brandon with a look, "I'm afraid that you have still not recovered completely from some illness that you picked up on the Continent. I doubt that you will make another appearance in the ballroom tonight, as you need your rest."

Brandon broke into a grin and bestowed a peck on the cheek of his brother's wife, who rolled her eyes in response. "I suggest you take your fiancée home." Anna opened her mouth to speak. Patricia raised a hand to finish. "To any who inquire, Miss Sanderton, who I found alone in the conservatory, was feeling quite ill. I sent her home in our carriage."

"Thank you, Lady Patricia. You are very understanding." Anna glanced at Brandon, who recaptured her hand with his own.

Patricia shook her head. "Alas, young love. I only wish to help. If my husband and I had come to such an...understanding, before our marriage, we would have avoided months, nay, years of grief."

Brandon nodded. "But you are happy now."

Patricia smiled. "Yes, thanks to a bit of a push from you, I am to understand."

"Well, your discretion now pays back any debt."

Patricia clucked, "Tsk, tsk. I'll send a footman to the grooms. Go out the back to the mews. Begone before anyone else thinks to use this room for a tryst." She waved her hands in a dismissing motion and swept out, gold embroidered muslin swishing as she hurried back to her duties as hostess.

* * * * *

Anna lay on her bed, hugging her pillow close and trying to keep the happiness brimming inside her from pouring out in joyous laughter. Thoughts of Brandon swirled in her head and she thought that she would never be in the same room with him without wanting him to kiss her senseless. She was unsure now, in the silent loneliness of night, of her resolution to keep their engagement a secret between them and her mother. But Anna owed a small delay to Mr. Bington and Isabella, to let any hint of a scandal blow over. It would not be long though, after looking at the way Mr. Bington had paid court to Isabella tonight. She smiled into the darkness.

There was an odd noise at her window, a queer sort of scratching. Her room faced the tiny rear garden of the townhouse and she often enjoyed the sight of spring flowers blooming in the April sunlight. The moon still shone through her slightly parted curtains although it was close to setting. A wave of gratitude flashed through her for whatever power that moon had brought to bear in her finding her Colonel. The scratching came again.

Being so secluded from the street, she wondered if Brandon would be so daring as to try to visit her room. Their parting in the carriage had been passionate and he had been very reluctant to let her go. She doubted she had the mental strength or desire to turn him away. She almost shivered in anticipation. Or perhaps, it was simply the wind and she shivered from the cold and wishful thinking.

She rose from the bed and put her feet into slippers and tied her dressing gown firmly around her. If he was here to plunder her virtue, again, she should at least make an obstacle for him. *A small obstacle. Very small.* She giggled. The scratching continued, louder now, most insistent. She moved toward the window and reached for the latch, when, with an audible clack, it slid open, revealing not her affianced but a big brute of a man who leered at her, revealing that his face held more scars than teeth.

She backed away and a scream rose in her throat, only to be interrupted by the sounds of a different man clearing his throat. Her eyes darted to the door to her room, where she was greeted by the sight of her ignoble cousin, Lord Liston, brushing his knuckles on the lapel of his coat, one hand hidden behind his back.

The ruffian at the window was forgotten. "What do you think you are doing?" she hissed.

"Why, eloping with my lady love, of course!" Herbert gave her a sickening grin.

She opened her mouth to try another scream only to have it silenced as a grimy hand clapped over her mouth and she was seized by clammy hands. Herbert smiled. "Meet my accomplice, Mr. Bunt."

"Just Bunt, no fancy Mister." She felt a harsh breath at her ear.

She started out of her shocked paralysis and began kicking and biting her assailant but he wrapped his arms around her and they spun in a strange dance and she lashed about, reaching for any weapon that would come to hand.

A loud rasping sound echoed in the room. She paused in her fight and glanced toward the source of the sound. Her ridiculous cousin still stood in the doorway, holding a freshly cocked pistol.

"You see my dear, it is not a good idea to fight, as I could kill you easily. Or your maid, or your aunt, or your dear mother. So it is best not to scream." Anna's eyes widened in terror and desperate thoughts raced through her mind.

"Now, I suggest you cease your struggle and allow Mr. Bunt to restrain you more comfortably." She felt Bunt's grip on her arms lessened slightly. "Remember, do not scream, or the consequences would be most unpleasant." Bunt released his hand from her mouth, only to stuff in a grimy kerchief, whose last location she did not want to think on. Her hands were trapped behind her and she felt them being secured tightly with rough rope. She glared daggers at Herbert, who examined his fingernails as this process went on. Bunt pulled her back and forced her to sit on the settee by striking the back of her knees.

"It's fortunate for you that I did not break a nail fiddling with that accursed ladder to the balcony, or I might let Bunt here have some fun." Bunt stepped in front of her

and leered once again. She shuddered at the big ape of a man. He moved off toward the window, looking to see if anyone was about who would raise a hue and cry over the ladder propped up against the balcony and resting against a third floor window.

Herbert turned back to her and perused her form with a long, penetrating look. Her ankles and feet were exposed beneath her nightdress and robe and she felt as though she were completely naked. It was not at all a pleasant sensation in his presence. "Not too bad, a bit on the plump side for my taste but perhaps I can starve you a bit up there in that horrible country estate of yours." She arched an eyebrow.

"Oh perhaps we should just sell it and buy something much closer to town." He knew just how to get under her skin and her nostrils flared, her eyes flashing with anger.

"But that's all for later. Now it's for Scotland, I'm afraid. I do so detest travel. Shall we make our way to the carriage, my dear soon-to-be wife?"

She gave him the haughtiest look she could, given the gag and her hands tied behind her. His eyes narrowed, his perfectly groomed eyebrows furrowing. "My dear, I'll have you know that your precious lover is at this moment being held at gunpoint in a dark cellar not two miles from here. If I do not send word of our successful departure for Scotland, he will be summarily shot. I suggest you accompany me without protest."

Her heart leapt to her throat. Brandon was in danger! But...somehow this just did not ring true. She doubted that Herbert could have come up with a plan to capture Brandon, much less subdue him easily. He may not have been a fighting soldier in the war but years in the Peninsula did not make one an easy mark. Besides, hadn't he gone directly home in the carriage after escorting her home? Still, she couldn't bring herself to take the risk that Herbert was lying.

She gave a brisk nod. Herbert motioned to Bunt, who pulled the gag from her mouth. She licked her teeth behind her lips, trying ineffectually to remove the taste of the gag. She glared at Herbert, "I suggest, dear cousin, that you might want to untie me and allow me to dress. I think that if you parade me through the streets in my night clothes, even in Gretna Green, we might attract some unwanted stares."

Herbert pursed his pale lips, the moonlight streaming through the window causing him to look pallid and sickly. "You have a point, my clever girl. Feel free to dress but I'm afraid Mr. Bunt will have to supervise." She paled. "After all, we can't risk you getting a fit of nerves and running off from our nuptials, can we?" She gritted her teeth again and stood, holding her hands behind her toward Bunt, who after receiving a nod from Herbert took out a wicked looking knife and cut through the bindings.

She stripped off the rope and rubbed her wrists, then walked toward the dressing room. Followed by Bunt who had a grin plastered on his ugly face. *Think Anna, think!* Was there weapon here or something useful she could pocket without Bunt's or Herbert's knowledge? Bunt loomed in the doorway, the stench of his unwashed body and foul breath made her want to gag. She hurried to pull on a traveling dress directly

over her nightgown, to the accompaniment of Bunt's rude catcalls of disappointment and slipped her bare feet into half boots.

She had to try to escape, or alarm the household somehow. A note didn't seem possible but surely there was something? Stalling for time, she made a convincing effort to search for a cloak, while she heard odd sounds from her bedroom. She made quite a mess and pulled down quite a few dresses in an attempt to alert Mary at least that something was wrong. Her eyes fell on the blue plaid walking dress she had just discarded, when an idea struck. She was unsure if Mary would understand but it was better than nothing. A bright green wrap came off the shelf and with Bunt's eyes staring at her derriere rather than what she did with the pile of clothes on the floor, she wrapped the green scarf around the bodice of the blue plaid, securing it with the remains of the tattered rope that had secured her hands. The message was obscure but perhaps someone could decipher it.

There was a small crash and a round of profuse swearing from Herbert. She prayed the noise would arouse the household. Grabbing an old woolen cloak from a hook in the back of the closet, she marched past Bunt into her bedroom. The remains of her jewelry chest were scattered across the floor and Herbert knelt on the carpet, stuffing anything he could into the inner pockets of his greatcoat.

"Blast it, woman, can't you keep any diamonds on hand?" Viscount Liston held up a garnet cross with a look of disgust. She closed her eyes to hide her fury and took solace in the fact that he looked utterly pathetic. A peer of the realm scrambling on the floor for a country chit's collection of baubles. Opening her eyes, she realized that the pistol was tucked under his arm. Flashing a glance at the door, she knew she should make a run for it but she could not risk the chance that Brandon could be hurt and bleeding somewhere while some associate of Bunt waited for word from Lord Liston.

She took a calculated risk and asked in a pitiful voice, "Where are you keeping David? Is he safe? Can I see him?"

Herbert grunted and starting searching through the remains of the chest. "David is perfectly fine, as long as you cooperate fully. You wouldn't have any cash secreted away in here, would you?" A thrill ran through her, Brandon was safe.

"Sorry, my lord. Do you not have enough for the journey?" She hoped that Bunt was listening.

He was. "Ye promised me a fair penny, sir. If this 'ere job is 'aving pay in jewels, I'd best be getting some of that." Bunt walked around her and stooped on the floor to pick through the earrings and ribbons arrayed there.

Anna picked up her foot and shoved it in Bunt's backside, knocking him into Liston. She ran for the door, intent on escape but after a life on the mean streets, Bunt was too fast and grabbed her ankle, tripping her. She let out a scream but Bunt punched her hard in her ribs and pulled himself over her, clapping a hand over her mouth.

"Struggle all you like, missy. It feels ever so good when you do."

She froze and Herbert stood over her, the pistol leveled at her head. Silence reigned as all three listened for footsteps but the house was quiet. Herbert smiled and reached into his greatcoat for a flask.

"You shouldn't have tried that, my dear bride-to-be. I'm afraid you'll just have to sleep through the whole trip and miss all the excitement." He put the pistol in his pocket and unstopped a flask.

"Mr. Bunt, hold her nose please. I'm sure she won't partake of this willingly."

Anna struggled as best she could in wide-eyed terror, the heavy form of Bunt atop her and his hot breath burning her skin. He pinched closed her nose and Herbert stuck the flask between her clenched lips. She could taste a trickle of sticky sweet liquid numb her lips and tongue and she knew the flask contained laudanum.

"Go ahead, Marianna," she hated her name falling from Herbert's detested lips, "Take a sip. You need your rest." She held her breath and refused to drink, the red-brown liquid running down her chin. Bunt took his other hand and punched her stomach and she could not help but gasp, the liquid flowing into her mouth. Herbert chuckled and she did the best she could, trying to pool the liquid behind her cheeks and managed to merely pretend to swallow.

After a minute, she fluttered her eyelids closed, trying to feign the drugged stupor that would still overtake her if she could not rid herself of the liquid she still held in her mouth. She felt Bunt rise off her and Herbert mutter something indistinct. The miscreant's hands gripped under her back and legs as he lifted her and threw her like a sack over his shoulder. The numbness of her lips grew worse and she cracked open an eye, staring dizzily at the floor. Herbert had opened the door and was looking down the hall for any sign of servants but it was well after three in the morning and she doubted any rescue now from that quarter. She dribbled out the remaining liquid, which splattered noiselessly on the hall carpet as they hurried down the hallway.

Still, enough of the nasty stuff had gone down her throat that she felt lightheaded and weak and paralyzed with misery. She tried once again to scream but her lips and throat would not obey. The night had gone from the heights of bliss to the depths of despair and exhaustion hit her with incredible force. She closed her eyes and succumbed to blackness, her last thoughts that at least the man she loved was safe.

Chapter Twenty-One

Brandon sat in a rocking carriage, dread and nausea warring for supremacy in his gut. No, he was not sitting, he was lying on the uncomfortable seat, his cheek pressed against rough fabric, his mouth tasting foul. His vision was blurry, as though he was trying to search for something through a thick fog. He closed his eyes rather than subject himself to the bizarre view. The carriage slowed and then stopped. If he had felt the desire to move, it was not possible, for his limbs were leaden, skirts twisted about his legs. *Skirts?* What foolishness was this? How did he even fit on this damnable seat? He would have been folded over double along the length of any seat in any carriage in the country, even the mail coach.

He felt odd, detached, as though this body was not his own. Perhaps this was some ridiculous prank of his brother's and he was the victim of tomfoolery and too much alcohol. But this did not feel like the result of excess spirits. He felt tremendously nervous, as though he had had the fright of his life and his breath was forced but even, as though he was trying to appear to be asleep. An eye was cracked open and his vision had improved. In the dim light of early morning, he saw a pinched-face blond man, quite nattily attired for such a rattrap of a vehicle. The man was talking out of the carriage window to a huge, sallow skinned and pockmarked ruffian who looked thoroughly disgruntled. He strained to hear the conversation.

"Ya said that you's 'irin' me on as far as the Green and fo' a pretty penny as well. Now ya want to drop me nowheres, in the middle o' the Nor' Road, with no bit o' cash blunt, jus' some flashy rocks? I hope ya ne'er find yerself in a dark alley in Cheapside or Seven Dials yer Lordship. They'll be no Bunt to back ya there."

The blond fop swallowed and for the first time Brandon noticed the pistol held tightly in the man's right hand. "Mr. Bunt, thank you for your services. I am sorry at the sudden change in plans but I am certain I can handle any further trouble that the young Miss could offer. Once she is my wife, I'm sure she will be much more pliable."

* * * * *

Oh God, it's Liston. He has Maria! He bolted awake, almost tumbling from the chair he had fallen asleep in. The fire was low in the library grate and the clock on the mantle read half past four in the morning. He had not been able to sleep, not after having made Marianna his. His bed had looked vast and lonely. He had dismissed Fitzhugh and had taken refuge in an untouched glass of brandy and his memories. The scent of her still lingered on his clothes and his skin and it was a comfort that he would not yet forego.

It had only been a dream. Nothing more. His rational brain insisted that he go to his chambers and find repose in a comfortable bed. But it was impossible to dismiss a

dream so vivid, not when his life had been altered utterly by such dreams over the past months. He had found the love of his life and she had rescued him from an abyss of frigid apathy. The merest possibility that Marianna might be in danger compelled him to ascertain her safety.

He hurried through the cold and dark house and rang for Fitzhugh. Searching for his boots and a heavier coat and hat, he was surprised when his man appeared within moments.

"You rang, Colonel...sir." Years of military discipline could not be removed from the man in a month.

Brandon chuckled. "Always ready for the good fight, hey Fitzhugh. You do the army credit." He was rewarded with a slightly bleary smile. Then Fitzhugh saw the mess his master was making of his wardrobe and an indignant frown made a brief appearance, before lapsing into the cold impartiality that all male servants aimed to project.

"May I assist you sir?"

"Where in heaven's name are my damn riding gloves?" He had managed the boots alone but he was a poor enough rider with the proper equipment, much less without.

"The top left drawer, sir." He stepped forward and produced them in a moment. He paused, unsure whether further help would be rejected by his obviously frazzled master. Colonel Kelsey had just not been himself in weeks, traveling between happiness and despair with barely a break between. Fitzhugh decided to risk censure. "Is there anything else I can help you with, Col...sir?"

Brandon paused, his greatcoat swirling about him as he reached the door. "Yes, Fitz, if I'm not back in an hour, have one of the carriages readied and tell the younger groom, Peter, I think it was, that I'll need him to drive up the North Road toward Birmingham. He'll need to look for my gray mare either on the road, or more likely at an inn along the way." He paused in thought. "Most likely a very inexpensive, sorry looking inn at that."

Fitzhugh was completely nonplussed but answered merely, "Very good, sir." Brandon turned to go but Fitzhugh cleared his throat. "Sir?"

Impatient, Brandon swung back. "What is it, man? I've got to hurry."

"Shouldn't you be taking your pistol, sir? This all sounds a bit havey-cavey, sir."

Brandon looked at the box on the dresser, which held a gun that had never been used in the war, or at all other than in practice. He had no doubt that Fitzhugh kept it cleaned. Recalling the pistol held in Liston's hand, Brandon nodded. "Perhaps that would be a good idea, Fitz. A very good idea."

* * * * *

"If you don't stop this carriage at once, I am going to be sick." Anna made her mumbled announcement in a croaking voice. Enough of the laudanum had trickled

down her throat to numb her from lips to voice chords. Herbert glared at her and she must have looked sufficiently green to convince him of her veracity, for he banged his cane on the roof and the driver soon pulled to a lurching stop. The door opened and she stumbled out quickly, not waiting for Herbert to deign and open the step.

She limped on unsteady feet for a few yards and then she fell on her hands and knees, an undignified position to be sure but one that allowed her cloak to conceal the fact that she was not in truth retching. Though the sounds she produced seemed enough to convince Lord Liston, who withdrew into the carriage. She considered her surroundings. They were stopped just on the outskirts of Town and the area was in no way suitable for a woman alone. Although there was a tiny splash of woodland around them, there were rough and tumble trading towns on either side. Besides, Herbert still had his pistol, even if she doubted it was loaded. She turned her head back toward the rickety carriage, where a bored driver looked on.

At least Herbert had rid himself of Bunt, who had frightened him more than he had frightened Anna. To Liston, Bunt had served his purpose and Anna had observed Herbert pay him off at the edge of Town with a garnet cross filched from Anna's jewelry chest. She felt the loss deeply, as the pendant had been given to her by her father on her thirteenth birthday. If she had not still been groggy and half asleep from the laudanum, she would have protested vehemently. *Curse Herbert for a grasping, reprehensible fool!* She would think her way out of this, somehow.

For a moment, as she had awoken from bleary, drug-induced sleep, she had sworn that she had felt Brandon's presence with her. She knew it was an impossibility, that he was probably safe and sound, ensconced in a warm bed in Kelsey House. But the thought had cleared her mind and suppressed the panic that had threatened to erupt upon finding herself at the mercy of her avaricious cousin.

Anna turned her eyes to the ground before her, instinctually examining the plants around her and an old friend glinted at her in the predawn light. The first small white flowers of field pennycress poked up on tall stalks and the smell was unmistakable. Hiding her actions as best she could, she stuffed the pockets and lining of her worn cloak with the plant, better known to most Englishmen and women as stinkweed. She prayed that this would give her the means to delay their progress toward Scotland even more.

Rising to her feet, she made a great show of wiping her mouth. If the driver had noticed anything odd, he raised no hue and cry. Herbert's irate voice emerged from the gloom, "Make haste woman, we've got miles to go."

Did the driver charge a fee by the minute rather than the mile? Liston made no move to help her climb into the sad excuse for a conveyance. The driver applied the whip and the door slammed shut as Anna fell to the threadbare cushions with a thump. Herbert chuckled. They were off again, on the North Road toward Scotland with a lurch and a groan. There were no springs to speak of and her bones rattled with every league. She glared at her reviled companion, who smirked at her in return. His eyes appraised her form and as ridiculous as she must look with her dress loosely hanging from her body

and her nightgown buttoned to her chin underneath that, his gaze was not solely one of derision but contained an unwelcome heat. The lack of stays and petticoats did allow some of her true form to be evident through the lines of her outer garments. She drew her cloak more tightly about her with a shiver, feeling cold and somehow unclean after having his eyes on her so.

He smiled even wider. "I think perhaps I shall enjoy our marriage more than I had thought. Especially our wedding night." Her blood ran cold. "It is a pity that you are so afflicted with a sick stomach, otherwise, we could have enjoyed a delightful preview."

For the first time, she felt real fear. His leer made her wish she had purged the contents of her stomach, for she felt bile rise in her throat at the thought of his hands on her.

* * * * *

There were quite a few lights on in the house for such an early hour. He went to the back kitchen door, hoping to find a groom or a footman already awake and eating an early repast. The kitchen was in an uproar however, with several women in simple robes weeping and an excitable Frenchman swearing long and loud in his native language. The footman he had engaged to assure his seating at the same table as Marianna two nights past, Tom, was holding a young girl in a mobcap. She was crying and screaming insults at another young man, who lay stunned on the floor, a red mark on his cheek indicating he had been the recipient of a well-aimed slap.

"Pardon me for intruding," Brandon started and all the heads in the room swung to look at him, "but, has there been some kind of trouble?"

The shock of finding a strange gentleman in their midst held all silent, until a familiar looking maid spoke up, "Oh, it's Miss Anna's young man. The one she really likes." Then the young woman paled noticeably. "Why are you here? Where's Miss Anna? Why aren't you on the way to Scotland?" She clutched an odd assortment of clothes in a bundle in front of her, what looked like a green scarf, plaid skirt and a bundle of twine.

He blinked in confusion. Then fear flooded his heart and steel entered his voice. "Where is Marianna? Miss Sanderton?" The upstairs maid sniffled, overcome with her emotions.

The young firebrand in Tom's arms answered, "She's gone sir. If she ain't with you, like we'd hoped, somebody's taken her. Jack here," she kicked at the leg of the man on the floor. "He says some dandy paid him a half-crown to leave the door to the balcony open tonight."

An older woman with an air of authority, who Brandon assumed was the housekeeper, looked up from the kitchen table at this. "And how, Jenny Ann Thompson, would you be knowing that?"

The girl, Jenny, blushed crimson. "Well, I were gettin' the kitchen ready and...Tom comes to visit, to keep me company."

The housekeeper let out a loud, "Humph!"

Brandon wanted no more delays, "Go on, go on!"

Jenny swallowed and went on, "But Jack was here when I got down and he was tryin' to get me to go somewheres with him on my half-day, seeing as how he's come into a bit of ready cash." She frowned. "I thought he'd stolen it and he got real mad and told where he'd got it. That still sounded terrible dishonest to me, so I says I'm Tom's girl and Jack didn't take to that and was getting a bit forceful on the matter."

"Hence the god-awful scream?" The housekeeper raised an eyebrow.

Jenny looked sheepish. "Ma always did say I could call loud enough to get Pa in for supper iff'n he was in the next county."

Brandon was impatient. "I'm sorry for your troubles, Miss Jenny but that still doesn't explain why you think Miss Sanderton is missing. Is she not in her room?"

The maid, Marianna's personal maid he surmised, sniffled loudly at this and held up the odd bundle of cloth. "No, sir. She's not. I woke up and went to check on her and her door was open. Her bedchamber and dressing room are a shambles and I found this," she indicated the plaid and green fabric, "tied up as neat as you please."

Understanding flashed through him and he was impressed with Marianna's cleverness. "Scotland. Gretna Green."

Tom, who had been silent up until now, "And there's a ladder propped against the house, sir. I seen it when I was running from the mews to get to Jenny."

"And just what were ya doin' there?" Jenny looked at him.

The maid continued on, as Tom and Jenny began a quiet, intense discussion of his whereabouts. "Her jewel box was broken and...I think I saw bl-blood on the floor outside her door." Cold fear gripped Brandon, he felt frozen.

The kitchen door swung open, admitting Mrs. Sanderton, who had a steely look in her eye and Lady Harriet, who was wringing her hands with worry. Everyone leapt to their feet at the ladies' entrance and Brandon made a little bow. Margaret took in the sight of Brandon but turned to face the maid. "Mary, it wasn't blood, it was laudanum. She was drugged." There was a shocked gasp and Margaret walked up to Brandon, gazed at him with eyes filled with anxious tension. "I had clung to some small hope that she went with you sir. But as you are here and I doubt you would need a chemical aid to gain her acquiescence, someone has taken her."

"I still don't understand any of this. Are you sure it was a kidnapping?" Lady Harriet was hopping from one foot to another with worry, a ruffled robe gathered about her like a suit of armor. "Would Mr. Bington have hied off with her? He seemed such a nice young man."

Margaret rolled her eyes. "I doubt it was Bington, Harriet, the man hasn't got that much nerve."

Brandon shook himself out of his stupor. *The dream was real.* Marianna was gone and he had to bring her back. He walked to the footman still lying on the ground and

bent over him, a threatening cast to his features. "Jack, I presume. If you value your health, I suggest you tell me what you know of the gentleman who paid you to leave open a door."

"Zees gentleman might leave you your 'ealt but I vill not." The Frenchman, who Brandon thought must be the chef, hefted a frying pan with menace. Brandon shot him a quelling look and then returned his intense gaze to Jack.

The skinny, sniveling man on the floor whimpered slightly and rubbed his bruised cheek. "I'll talk, I'll talk. Bloody lost my job as it is I suppose. He was a right smart fellow, dapper as they come. He's been here a time or two before, in the house. Some relation or other of the old hag." He jabbed his head at Lady Harriet, who let out an indignant gasp. Jenny gave him another kick.

"Liston." Brandon spit out the name, his hands clenching into fists, anger burning through him. He turned and bit off rapid fire words. "I'm going after them, he's bound for Gretna Green on the North Road." He held the eyes of Margaret Sanderton and gave a solemn promise. "I will bring her home."

She nodded stiffly. "I know. I shall be proud to welcome you to the family."

He paused briefly and returned the solemn nod, then hurried out the door. He ran through the garden to the mews where he'd left his horse. There wasn't a moment to lose.

* * * * *

A rotten, sulfurous smell filled the carriage and Herbert, his senses near ruined by years of taking snuff, finally began to wrinkle his nose in distaste. Anna hunched over in her seat, trying to appear as sick and helpless as possible. Her cloak was drawn about her but her hands were busy, crushing the precious leaves from the pennycress between her fingers, sending waves of the nauseating smell into the air.

"Don't tell me you've been sick again!" Herbert held a gloved hand over his nose, muffling his annoying voice. "What a vile stench!"

She shrugged her shoulders and closed her eyes, hoping to appear as ill as possible. "Perhaps I picked up something on my shoes while heaving up the contents of my stomach."

Herbert began to look a bit green himself and drew out a handkerchief, perfumed she had no doubt, and covered his nose. "They must go, immediately!" He commanded, the sound muffled through the cloth.

She raised up a boot, making a show of examining the bottom. "They appear clean. And it would look quite odd to have me parade through the streets in bare feet. Someone might get suspicious."

"People can be paid to forget what they find suspicious," he whispered ominously.

She swallowed the trickle of fear that crept into her throat. "Do you have enough cash on hand to make sure of that?"

Herbert looked daggers at her but she held his gaze. He thumped once again on the roof, with surprising force and the carriage came to a halt once again.

"Smitty," Herbert called, still through the handkerchief. "Get down here at once. I've got a task for you." He raised an eyebrow at her and looked down at the offending footwear. "Off with your shoes, madam."

She sat unmoving and glared at him, with no intention to cooperate. His eyes flared with anger and with only that warning, the hand holding the pistol whipped out and struck her across the jaw with a crack. She fell hard across the seat.

Anna saw stars and pain flared in her jaw. She hoped to God it wasn't broken. Her cheek had been cut on her teeth and she spat blood. Herbert laughed wickedly.

"Oh, my dear, we are going to have such fun. Now, off with the damned boots and be quick about it."

Time, she thought as she reached for the buckles on the half boots. *At least we are wasting time.* It was completely illogical but somehow, she knew Brandon was coming for her. She only needed to give him time.

* * * * *

The road seemed endless, the distance between them longer with each mile. He needed a fresh horse but he felt driven to continue on, that time was of the essence and time wasted to bargain with an innkeeper for a fresh mount might be too much. The gray, Patience he had named her, she seemed to feed on his urgency and she did her utmost to continue the punishing pace that he set.

"You're a good girl," he patted her neck. "When this is done, I promise you'll get as many apples as I can steal from the kitchen."

They passed the multitude of wagons and carriages entering London for the start of the working day and he only hoped that they slowed Liston's equipage more than he on his lone horse. He needed every advantage he could get.

* * * * *

The driver folded out a sorry-looking step and Herbert descended, helping her down while touching her far too much for her liking. Courtesy of a scrubbing by Smitty, the sullen coachman, her feet squished uncomfortably in her wet, ruined boots as she stepped onto the muddy inn yard. She glanced up at the carriage for the first time in full daylight and was struck by the motley collection of boxes and trunks balancing precariously all over the top, barely leaving room for the sniveling driver. It appeared as though Liston's every possession was strapped to this sad transport.

"You do seem in much finer fettle, my dear girl." He leered at her once again and her stomach clenched in fright. Her jaw still throbbed from the blow he had given her with the side of the pistol. She shuddered to think what he might do if she disobeyed him again.

She looked onward, toward the inn at which they had stopped after a half-hour of her complaining about her empty stomach. Perhaps this had not been the best plan, even if it had gotten them off the road again. The hovel at which they had arrived did not deserve the name "inn", for it was in truth little more than a tavern with what looked like a few attic rooms and a tiny, skeletal youth acting as a groom should anyone want to rest their horses. There were no fresh horses to be had, not that Herbert could have afforded them without sacrificing more of Anna's jewelry. The tavern promised little in the way of creature comforts and Herbert was obviously more fastidious about his clothes than his vittels, if he expected them to eat in such an establishment.

"I am still weak." *You dolt*, she added in her head. It would do her little good to antagonize him too much. Although despite the threat of violence, it was difficult to resist the temptation. "I will faint dead away from hunger if I am not fed soon." She sniffed and found curious strength in acting against her nature, trying to rankle her captor with an attitude of pretentiousness and disgust. "This place hardly looks fit for a pig, much less the esteemed Viscount Liston." All right, it was just too difficult to resist. He wouldn't dare strike her in public. "Or perhaps the two are not so very far apart."

He sneered and grabbed her arm, pulling her into the dim, rank and smoke-filled common room. Herbert had tense words with the landlord, a huge, pox-scarred man in a greasy apron. Anna looked around for an opportunity for escape, as she was quite sure that it was a very bad idea to be alone with this reprobate for another moment. Especially in what passed for a private chamber in this wreck. The male patrons looked at her with greedy eyes and the barmaid had the flat, listless gaze of a woman who had seen far too much of the seamy side of life and no longer cared what befell her or anyone else. There would be no help from that corner.

Herbert pulled her through a narrow stairway and up to a cramped and dusty "parlor". The door closed with a dull thud and Anna stared daggers at Herbert, her hackles raised and every sense alert.

"Unhand me, you braggart. I am not yet your wife." She did not add that she would never be, even if she had to throw herself from the moving carriage. She wrenched her arm from his grip and walked quickly to the grimy window, placing a dim hope on the tiny chance that she might be seen by some savior in the courtyard below. She faced Herbert with a haughty glare and met pale blue eyes that held not a trace of warmth, only calculation. Shivering she drew her cloak tight about her yet again.

He narrowed his eyes. "Will you sit, madam? Food should come soon enough."

She looked out the window. "I am content here. I have been sitting for hours." It was also beneficial that hers was the position farthest from both him and a door leading to what she presumed was an equally squalid bedroom.

He smirked and she knew she had made an error. Turning away for a moment, he locked the door and then began to remove his heavy greatcoat, lying it carefully over one of the faded chairs. She swallowed reflexively as he stared at her.

"I think that it is high time that I introduce you to the pleasures possible as my wife, dear Marianna." She paled and remained utterly still. It flashed through her head that the pistol was in his coat pocket and he was weaponless now but she still felt terrified as he slowly stalked forward.

Though he was no taller than her, he was not a complete weakling and his willingness to use brutality against a female meant that she would be in quite a bit of trouble were she the typical helpless female of her class.

She bit off a tart reply, "I seriously doubt that there is any pleasure involved with you, sir."

He pursed his thin lips in anger. "Then I am not the first then. Your David," she laughed and he grunted, "or whoever the hell he is, certainly managed to get under your skirts quickly. I suppose he's not the only one. I'll have to keep you locked away from all the footmen I suppose."

Anna hissed at the insult. He had closed most of the distance between them and she raised an arm to slap him but he grabbed it, pulling her toward him and forcing his mouth down on hers. She kicked and twisted away as best she could, letting out an epic scream of rage and fear.

Chapter Twenty-Two

He'd finally stopped at a pathetic looking tavern when he'd spotted a sad-looking carriage overloaded with boxes. As he slowed, he'd caught a glimpse of the figure of a woman in the window and that had sealed it.

Brandon had no real idea if this was the right vehicle or if the woman was Marianna but poor Patience was lathered beyond endurance and something about the wretched inn and the sad-looking carriage seemed to fit his dark thoughts of Liston.

An emaciated boy came up to him as he dismounted in the courtyard. "'Old your 'orse, sir?"

"Aye, boy," He tossed the sorry lad a penny. "There's more if you can give me a bit of information. Did you get a look at the man who has that carriage?"

"The fancy man and 'is lady are inside, sir. Prolly upstairs by nows, though she don't seem to like 'im much."

Brandon felt a rush of unfamiliar battle rage fill him. *She must be here. Pray God he was not too late.* He flipped the boy an additional half-crown and ran into the common room. A scream, muffled through the floorboards, ran up his spine in icy tendrils.

A huge greasy man stepped before him. "What'll you have, a fine gentleman like you?"

Brandon, fear and anger lending him inhuman strength and a deadly resolve that would not be gainsaid, grabbed the innkeeper's shirtfront. "Where is she?"

The man did not try to pretend that he didn't understand. "Up the stairs and to the left. Can't miss it."

Brandon took off at a run, the innkeeper calling behind him, "Try not to break the ruddy furniture, man. Or bloody the place too much." The man twisted his apron in his beefy hands. "'Tis a nightmare scrubbin' blood from the floor, a nightmare."

"Scream all you want, you tart. No one will come to your aid." He threw back his head in a laugh and she used the opportunity to scrape her nails across his face, leaving bloody welts across his cheek. He slapped her again, hard enough that she fell to the ground and he pinned her beneath him. He held her hands above her head with his hand and the other hand began pulling at her skirts. She froze for a moment, eyes wide.

"Ah, eager for it now, are we? All your protestations just add spice to the act." He leered and she felt physically ill. She gathered her wits, even as he drew her skirts upward. Widow Granger had taught her a few things about men that were very useful.

He had to move up for a second, to move her skirts out of the way and as his weight lessened, she brought up her knee with as much force as she could muster. He screeched and rolled off of her, curling into a ball.

She moved as fast as her shaking legs would take her, toward the door. Herbert made a weak attempt to grab for her ankle but she kicked him away and in a moment she'd flipped open the lock and flung the door wide, only to see the most welcome sight of her life. Brandon Kelsey standing before her, pistol drawn.

Thank the Gods, she's safe! She flung herself into his arms and he'd never thought to feel anything so wonderful in his life. A minute passed as she embraced him with surprising strength and her rapid breathing returned to normal. He clasped her to him fiercely and knew that he would never let her go again, even if he had to finish the abduction Liston started and drag her kicking and screaming to Scotland. Beyond the doorway, Liston lay curled on the floor, frozen in the act of crawling toward the door.

"He's got a pistol in that coat, don't let him near it." Marianna had looked up from his shoulder, where she'd buried her head a moment previously and she stared imperiously at the viscount.

He trained the pistol on the pathetic lump on the floor, who had bleeding scratches on one cheek and was obviously still in pain. "Well, I'd thought I'd have to come and save a damsel in distress but it looks as though my services were not needed."

She shuddered. "No, no, believe me, you have superb timing, my love." She turned her face up to him with a shaky smile and he saw the series of ugly bruises that were forming on her face. Boiling anger filled him and his eyes flew back to Liston. It took all his willpower not to pull the trigger of the loaded pistol and put the bastard down like the vicious dog that he was.

"He's not worth the trouble, love." She put a hand to his cheek and turned his head toward her. "He did nothing with lasting damage. He's lost everything, has creditors at his heels, he's harmless." She brushed his lips with hers and he felt his rage lessen slightly with her soothing caress.

"How very touching," Herbert, Lord Liston, croaked out in a high-pitched voice as he sat up. "I suppose this is your lover then, come to save the day?" He started to pull himself up to standing.

Brandon handed the gun to Marianna and closed the space between himself and Liston, throwing a good solid punch that knocked the man back several feet. "I'll have you keep a civil tongue around my future bride, you degenerate scum."

A few more punches were thrown by Brandon and Liston crashed through a small table, leaving splinters of wood in his wake. Anna gasped and Brandon readied himself for a further fight but Liston merely cowered on the floor, his blond wig askew enough to cover his left ear and reveal the balding pate he took such pains to conceal.

A masculine voice called out from the doorway, "Ha, bloody coward only thinks to hit women, then? A likely story, tsk tsk."

Brandon turned and there stood his brother Hal, his arms folded across his chest. Marianna leaned against the doorframe, wearing a tired but vaguely amused expression, gun held awkwardly in one hand, Liston's greatcoat draped over her arm. Brandon abandoned Liston on the floor and made his way back to his lady's side, enfolding her in his arms once again.

Over the top of his head, he cast a curious glance at his sibling, "How in blazes did you manage to get here? How did you know to come?"

Lord Harold shrugged his massive shoulders elegantly. "The man owes me money, dear brother. Someone in the family must have a head for business."

Brandon rolled his eyes and Harold relented. "Actually, I needed an excuse to get away from the house. Patricia's dear mother has decided that it was high time for a visit, now that she's received word that we are living in the same house. I must get away for the day or risk having to talk to the woman for more than five minutes. Your excellent man, Fitzhugh, told my even more excellent man, Duncan, of the odd circumstances of your early morning departure and instructions for the head groom.

"Duncan, knowing of my eagerness to escape my wife's relations for the chance to aid my own, woke me with the news and I jumped at the chance for a truly excellent adventure."

Anna piped up at this point. "Or an irrefutable excuse to your wife."

Harold smiled. "Absolutely, you've caught on very well." He turned to Brandon. "You've got a bright lass there, my boy. I'm afraid I've ruined one perfectly good excuse for you with your future wife."

"But how did you get here so fast?" Brandon insisted.

"I hold the record, you know..."

"Yes, yes, fastest from Pall Mall to Greenwich."

"Just so, just so. I've been letting my driving skills get rusty of late. I thought I needed the practice. Came up the North Road at a fine clip with Marley in tow, for an extra set of eyes. Good thing, as he spotted that gray mare quick as a wink. And that poor excuse for a carriage. I sent him back with it."

"What!" Liston squeaked from where he remained seated on the dusty floor.

"Well, your Smitty was only too eager to say that he'd been employed by Lord Liston and that he'd not been paid in some time. A mere guinea and the man was only too happy to allow me to claim part of the debt you owe me from two nights ago." Liston's eyes bugged out in outrage. Harold was thoroughly enjoying this game. "I think all those boxes will serve marvelously well as storage for manure in the Chester stables. I shan't even have to remove the contents."

Liston sputtered and made to rise and Anna brought the pistol up to aim unsteadily at him. He sank back down to his ignoble seat. Anna grinned evilly. "I can't think of a more fitting use for clothes in such bad taste, Lord Harold."

"Please, call me Hal. We're to be family, I gather."

"As soon as humanly possible," Brandon announced, in a voice that would brook no argument.

Harold strode across the dingy little room and bent to stare at the disheveled Herbert Dalrymple, who seemed to have entered a state of catatonia at the pending loss of his wardrobe. "As for this fribble, what shall we do with him?"

Brandon looked thoughtful. "I have no wish to call the authorities. They would only drag everyone into a bloody mess of paperwork." The obvious effect on Marianna's reputation had no need to be stated.

Anna nodded. She searched through the pockets of the greatcoat she held, coming up with her mother's precious locket. She threw a murderous glance at her cousin. "He'd most likely end up in debtor's prison soon enough. I do not care where he is, just as long as he is far away from me."

Harold smiled wickedly. "I think I have just the answer."

* * * * *

Marianna Penelope Sanderton Kelsey wrapped her arms around her new husband and relaxed into the comfortable cushions of the Kelsey coach with a blissful sigh. It was just past noon and she had had very little sleep but she could not give up consciousness when it was so very wonderful to be awake.

"Just how long had you had that special license in your pocket, my dear husband?"

Brandon flushed slightly. "I am embarrassed to say I had very desperate plans for you, my dear. The day after that infamous ball, when I was sure of your name and identity, I applied for it. I thought perhaps I might be able to convince you to wed me instead of Bington."

She giggled. "Well, it was a good bet, my love. Though I daresay you didn't think of marrying me while I was still in my nightgown and sodden boots, with my face a most becoming shade of blue-green. I think that we gave that parson in Banbury quite a fright."

He gave her face a thorough inspection. "Actually, love, I'm afraid it's more a combination of purple and green."

She hit him in the shoulder. "Yet you still married me."

"I would marry you anywhere, anytime." He leaned into her for a thorough kiss, being careful to avoid her bruised and battered skin.

After a moment, she pulled back, blinking at him through a haze of desire. "You may have to, my dear. I'm sure my mother and my aunt will be appalled at the situation. They'll want some ceremony or other to cover the scandal."

He smiled. "Your mother practically ordered me to marry you, so I have no doubt that she will be pleased. I have no idea what your aunt may or may not think."

He captured her lips again and all thoughts of Aunt Harriet fled. His hands raced over her body, setting fires wherever they touched her. She climbed into his lap, straddling him shamelessly, her hands buried in his thick black hair.

"You, my dear sweet wife, have on entirely too many clothes." He complained huskily against the skin of her neck as he ran his fingers under the loose bodice of her dress, denied access to her naked skin by the many buttons of her high-necked nightgown underneath.

"And I have yet to see you without your clothes at all!" she countered in a whisper, afraid that Harold, acting both as witness to the marriage and driver back to London, would hear them.

His hands moved down her back, cupping her buttocks and letting her feel his arousal in full. "That shall be rectified in short order, Maria, as soon as we can find a clean bed and a bit of privacy. Shall we wait until then to engage in the benefits of the married state?"

In response, she pulled up on her skirts, revealing bare legs and an enticing lack of petticoats. He groaned and ran his hands up her thighs, giving her the most enjoyable case of goose bumps. "Beds are so dull, my husband. I'm certain that we shall never be dull." Her green eyes twinkled wickedly as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him with abandon.

Some minutes later, Harold chuckled at the loud and lusty noises emanating from the box beneath his perch. *Ah with such material he could tease his overly serious brother for years.* Still he doubted Brandon would remain quite so solemn with such a woman by his side. He had no doubt that happiness would make his brother much easier to live with. He would need to look for a new target for his fun. Perhaps Lady Harriet would serve? One's relations by marriage must be good for something.

Epilogue

Excerpts from the Society Column of the London Times, May 1814–March 1815

The gossip created by the flight of Viscount L. to the Colony of New South Wales to escape from debtor's prison was quickly trounced today by the news of the shocking marriage of Miss S. of Shropshire, to Mr. K., son of the illustrious Earl of C., after only a week's acquaintance. Gossipmongers were severely disappointed that the couple decamped to the bride's home in Shropshire almost immediately and they were unable to ascertain firsthand whether or not the couple was a love match. A Lady H. was said to have made some claims that the families had been intimate for years and the match had been talked of for an age but this was not given much countenance by those in the know...

Lady H. has recently become Mrs. O. with the anticipated announcement of her marriage to the elderly Mr. O. of London. She set up her household with astonishing rapidity and by Season's end, she will no doubt have given a ball that will set the height of fashion and be the envy of many an aspiring hostess.

Many of the fashionable set made their way back to town in late September for the wedding of the unassuming Mr. B. of Kent with the lovely Miss E., daughter of Sir F. and Lady H., forces within government and society, respectively. It is yet to be seen whether Mr. B. shall make use of this connection to further any interest in politics but those who know him well say it is unlikely.

The New Year brought in a welcome addition to the peerage of England, with the birth of a healthy baby boy to Lord H. and Lady P., destined to be the heir of a reportedly very happy Lord C. This gift of fortune to Lord C. may have followed on the heels of the generous donation of land made by the earl to the newly founded Soldiers' Hospice outside of Oswestry, Shropshire. Lord C.'s son, Mr. K. has been said to spend a great deal of time and effort on the project, along with his lovely wife. His grace, the newly elevated Duke of W., is said to have made a visit there personally, to congratulate Mr. K. on the fine and necessary work the Hospice has undertaken. He also is said to have been impressed by the care methods displayed by Mrs. K. and had ordered more efforts be put into standardization of care for wounded soldiers by Whitehall. Although the threat of war is gone, we can never be sure when a beast such as Bonaparte will rear his head again.

About the Author

Elaine Lowe is a work-at-home mom in Silicon Valley, California. Of her many part-time jobs, her favorite one by far is writing. She has a background in biotech, but she has branched out into the demanding world of home management, toddler entertainment, transcription, envelope stuffing, and of course, writing romantic and erotic fiction.

A love of history, magic and romance combines to inspire a lot of her writing. That and her wonderful husband, who is a fantastic sounding board, support system, and research consultant. He really enjoys research. And so does she.

Look for upcoming novels involving forces of nature, a touch of magic, and the idea that sensuality is not specific to any particular time period.

Elaine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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