



AN EARLY ENGAGEMENT

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Chapter One

Some marriages are made in heaven. Some are made in solicitors' offices between the pages of Debrett's *Peerages* and on county land maps. Some are even conceived in the minds and hearts of well-meaning fathers.

"A fine day's work, eh?" beamed the Earl of Stokely, who had the hearty good health of a country squire, vast acreage to field his sporting interests, and the continuance of his line assured if his heirs managed not to starve to death or end in debtors' prison.

"Indeed, indeed," congratulated his friend, the Duke of Aylesbury, a somewhat older, more reserved gentleman wearing a black armband. My Lord Aylesbury possessed an ancient title, a position of respect at court, and immense wealth. Unfortunately, he had but one child, even more unfortunately, a daughter.

With a sigh of relief, he had just promised the hand of this daughter, Lady Emilyann Arcott, to his old friend and neighbor's eldest son and heir, Everett Stockton, Viscount Stokely. "At least I'll know the chit's future is secure. What was I to do about settling a motherless chick?"

The earl tried to look mournful in respect for the other's recent loss, but the proposed change in his own family's fortunes could not dim his enthusiasm

for long. "No need to talk like that, Aylesbury, you're not in your dotage yet, you know. It's early days, but you'll wed again." The earl knew *he* would. He was already on his second wife.

The duke shook his head. "Not after my Cora."

"What, not even for the succession? You'd let that wastrel brother of yours come into the title? The man's a gambler, a cardsharp—a regular dirty dish. He is hardly received in company."

"Aye, Morgan is all that and worse, and that is why I need to see my girl provided for. I promised her mother that I would, for Lord knows Morgan won't have her best interests to heart. Now I can rest comfortably.... But enough of such gloom. This is a day for celebration. A toast, I say. To your son!"

"To your daughter!"

"May they have a long, happy life together."

"Health, wealth, and a parcel of grandbabies."

So the pleased papas repaired to the duke's study to affix their seals to a letter of intent for their men of business, to enter the engagement in the Aylesbury family Bible, and to have a few more toasts with the duke's excellent brandy. They left the youngsters, duly chaperoned, of course, to get better acquainted.

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Viscount Stokely staggered a bit under the combined weight of his father's hardy slap in the back and his cheerful admonition to "go do the pretty with the little lady, my boy." Everett tugged uncomfortably at his newly starched collar, then he pulled the fingers of one hand through his dark hair, disturbing the slicked-down curls.

Zeus, what did he know about courting? The bride-to-be was no help, growing fretful at his ineptness. It was obviously up to him to soothe the social waters. He cleared his throat manfully and stepped closer to Lady Emilyann, her duenna smiling encouragingly.

Viscount Stokely hesitated a moment, looking down at his fiancée all done up in fussy white lace. His clear gray eyes opened wider and he declared, "Gads, she looks like something that fell out of the nest too soon!"

The infant Lady Emilyann, hairless, red-faced, and indeed as scrawny as an unfledged nestling, did not appear precisely enamored at the betrothal either. She scrunched up her face and started wailing, angrily

waving her arms in the air.

"Here now, don't do that," Master Stokely told her, "you'll hurt yourself."

Without stopping to think, since rational thought would have told him this was no job for a six-year-old lad in nankeen shortpants, he reached over the side of her eyelet-decked bassinet and held her hand away from her face. The tiny fingers curled naturally around his. Perhaps it was the sound of his voice, or the bright red soldier Everett held in his other hand that caught her eye, but Lady Em stopped crying, looked up, and smiled a wet, gurgly, gummy baby-smile at her intended.

"I think she likes me," he said with wonder.

"A' course she does," Nanny told him. "She will love you and look up to you and you'll be a brave lad and look after her forever. She be yours to cherish, you know. Didn't your papas just say so?"

They had. He would. He did. "Hallo, Sparrow," he whispered.

Emilyann blew some bubbles and contentedly shut her eyes. Still clutching his finger, she went to sleep, exhausted by her hard day's work. After all, how many ladies manage to be christened and betrothed on the very same afternoon?

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"Don't you dare cry, Sparrow. It's only a little scratch, and viscountesses don't blubber."

"No viscountess has her hair all in rats' nests and her skirts trailing in mud either," taunted Thornton, second son of the Earl of Stokely. "I don't see why *she* had to come along anyway, Ev," he whined, "she's just a baby."

"She's not a baby anymore, are you, Em? And if we're going to play at St. George and the dragon, we need a lady to save. Besides, she's more fun than you are anyway."

Lady Emilyann, five years old, stuck her tongue out at Thornton, who promptly announced, "I'm going to tell!" So her cavalier, a handsome eleven now, rolled his younger brother in the grass. And the mud. Master Stokely was birched, of course, and Lady Em was sent to bed without her supper, because Thornton always did squeal, but no matter. After Thornton had run home, they'd had another glorious day without him, out in the adjoining estates, begging gingerbread and

cider from the cottagers, finding tadpoles and newborn sheep, fighting off countless Saracen invaders.

No one worried about them overmuch, except perhaps the young viscount's tutor, who would certainly lose his position if the earl ever found how little time his eldest son actually spent in the classroom. Lady Em's parent spent his time in London, immersing his grief in affairs of state, leaving his daughter alone except for a horde of doting servants, including Nanny, two nursemaids, the entire stable crew and indoor staff, and a rather totty-headed young female relation of his late wife's to serve as governess/companion to the little girl.

Cousin Marietta was suitably grateful to Lord Aylesbury for such a comfortable position in his luxurious household; life would certainly have been very unpleasant for a gently bred female with neither pittance nor prospect. Marietta would have been a great deal more grateful, however, if instead of a child to watch her noble cousin had seen fit to give her a dowry and a London season. Why, the only company the man ever invited to Arcott Hall were dull old political cronies. No chance for her to meet eligible gentlemen! Here she was, stuck in the country, getting older by the minute, with nary a beau in sight. So she spent her days and, regretfully, her nights, sighing over the heroes in her Minerva Press romances, while Smoky, Viscount Stokely, looked after her charge.

"Smoky" was not Lady Em's first word, but it was close. The young lord was Master Stokely to the staff at Arcott Hall (when he was not that imp of Satan), but the syllables were too difficult for Baby's tongue, so he quickly became Smoky. The name stuck, partly due to Emilyann's insistence, partly to his clear gray eyes, but mostly to his knack for escaping his own governors and the harum-scarum household at Stockton Manor, with a new stepmother, new baby brother, Geoffrey, and the righteous Thornton to bedevil him.

At Sparrow's home he was treated with respect, even devotion, plus all the treats a growing boy could cajole from a willing kitchen staff, and all the coy smiles he could win from Cousin Marietta. She couldn't help it; a girl had to stay in practice, didn't she? And he was such a charming scamp. As Nanny said, the boy was too smoky by half.

He thrived on all the attention, and so did Sparrow. If his name wasn't her first word, he was there for her first steps. He taught her to write, and received her first letter. He read to her for rainy-day hours, and if the books had more to do with King Arthur's knights and their bloody battles than they did with good little girls who studied their Bibles, well, Cousin Marietta had no complaints. She was lost in *Lady Longacre's Liaison* or *The Web of Westfall* herself, books the children later disdained as too flowery, with not enough action.

Marietta did insist on *some* ladylike accomplishments, though, especially close to holidays when her employer might be expected to visit and show an interest in her charge's progress. So Smoky received Miss Arcott's first pressed-flower picture, her first muddy watercolor, and her first wobbly curtsy. Emilyann herself drew the line, however, at stitchery.

"I'm not going to do this silly girls' stuff and you can't make me!" So she had to sit in a corner for an hour.

"I won't do it! I won't! Smoky's out riding and I want to go!" She kicked over the sewing basket, sending silks every which way, and got none of her favorite strawberry tarts for a week.

"I hate this ... this bloody sampler!" She had her mouth washed out with soap, and Master Smoky got his hair combed with a footstool by Nanny for teaching her chick such language.

In the end Emilyann learned a few other female skills beyond needlework. A trembling lip, big blue eyes swimming in tears, and Smoky bribed his stepmother's abigail to finish the wretched piece, and the two went riding. After all, a lady of the ton needed to know how to sit a horse, too.

At first Emilyann rode in front of Stokely on his pony, a groom on either side. Then she was given a mount of her own, and the two were off, her silver-blond baby-fine hair coming undone and streaming out behind her, her pale complexion turning sun-kissed, and her laughter delighting everyone on two estates and in the tiny village of Arstock, which separated them. If some of the higher sticklers considered her behavior hoydenish, well, a female who was already spoken for had a great deal more latitude, no matter how young.

"Lady Em," Nanny would chide, "you cannot go galumphing down the stairs with your skirts all apelter and throw yourself at Master Stokely! What would your mother think, to see her lamb such a forward miss?"

"It is perfectly proper," Sparrow would announce in her best *grande dame* manner, "we are afanced."

Smoky called her a silly widgeon. "It's affianced, you goose. Fancy is something you'd better not ever be. Besides, one day I might forget to catch you when you come flying down that staircase, and then where would you be?"

"Then I'd be showing even more of my petticoats, I suppose. As if you ever would!"

"Minx." He grinned at her, then told her not to stick her tongue out. "I don't want any ill-mannered brat for my viscountess," he declared, effectively curbing that bit of waywardness.

If it weren't for the viscount, even Nanny admitted, little Emilyann would have grown up spoiled, headstrong, and hey-go-mad, without limits. Without love and affection and attention, either, except what she received from the servants.

Their attachment stayed constant even when Smoky was sent away to school. It was the young nobleman this time who needed the reassurance of his devoted friend, away from home and all he knew, with more restrictions on his freedoms than he thought possible outside Newgate Prison, and only few opportunities to employ his knack for disappearing from unpleasant tasks.

So he wrote long letters home to Sparrow, and she read them over to the barn cats and the toy soldiers he'd outgrown and left in her safekeeping. In return, Emilyann filled her sometimes grubby pages with bubbling news of Queenie's foal and the vicar's hiccups—right in the midst of the sermon—and Cousin Marietta's latest book from the lending library, and love.

At the long vacations, Smoky's first stop was at Arcott Hall, before going home. Lady Em would come flying down the stairs, her sun-bleached hair coming unbound, and launch herself into his arms, laughing. He never did let her fall.

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"I won't have it! Do you hear me, Stokely? I won't

have it!"

"B'Gad, I hear you, Aylesbury. My whole household hears you. The whole county hears you. Blast if they don't hear you back in Parliament, where you dashed well belong, rather than haranguing a gentleman in his own home."

"Gentleman? A gentleman, is it? You insult the name, sir, with all your wenching and carryings on. Shameful, I say."

"Why, because you're a dull old stick with no fire in you? Confound it, you are turning into a Puritan. My Louise has been dead these two years. I'm not shaming her memory any."

"No more than you did when she was alive, nor your first wife either, chasing every light-skirt in Northampshire. But now you've gone too far. Aye, far enough that I hear of it in London! You are a laughingstock, man. The 'Eager Earl,' they call you."

"So get ye back to London, you old fool. It is naught to you."

"It is when you bring your profligacy home to me, you poltroon. My household, my family."

The Earl of Stokely was silenced, finally. He turned away, red-faced, and covered his embarrassment in pouring another glass of port, which was another mistake. A man needed a clear head to deal with the Duke of Aylesbury, especially when he was on his high ropes, and the earl hadn't had a clear head in ages.

Stokely had always possessed robust appetites, and the passage of neither years nor wives had caused them to diminish. What did dwindle were his resources, so jaunts to London for the pricier pleasures were a thing of the past. Even the countryside was not such a fertile field for plowing, not for a bleary-eyed, bloated old philanderer with pockets to let. Attics to let, more likely.

"I must have been foxed."

"That's not an excuse, man, that's a condition!" Now, the Duke of Aylesbury may have led a celibate life after the death of his beloved Cora. Then again, he may have not, but at least he was discreet. He was certainly no prude, not living in London among the decadent aristocracy, but he most assuredly did not bring those pleasures home to sully the eyes and ears of an innocent, inquisitive child. "In front of my daughter, by Jupiter!"

“Chit had no business being in the library. Why she couldn’t play with dolls like other girls, I don’t know. My little Nadine don’t go tearing around on horses, playing at soldiers with the boys, or reading books, you can be sure of that.”

Whatever else the earl may have said concerning the education of girl children was drowned out in the duke’s roar. What they weren’t supposed to learn, he bellowed, was how their governesses got topped by ramshackle Romeos!

Cousin Marietta had found something better to do with her evenings than read tawdry romances.

“You’ll not bring scandal to my doorstep,” the duke insisted. “I expect a special license before the week is out. You may honeymoon at my hunting box.”

“But listen, I can’t afford another wife, especially one with dreams of London ballrooms in her cockloft. It ain’t as if—” The sound of a fist being smashed down on the desk gave him pause. He may have been a randy old fool, but he wasn’t gudgeon enough to face Aylesbury at twelve paces over any female. Marietta was a tidy armful, anyway, a bit scrawny and featherheaded with die-away airs, but a man could do worse.

... And some marriages are made in heat.

Scandal kept from his door, the duke meant to keep it that way. He was rid of Marietta; he’d be rid of the whole Stockton clan.

“That boy of yours bids fair to follow in your footsteps, and I don’t want him near my girl.”

“Come now, the lad’s only sixteen. Wild oats, you know.”

“I know it all! Do you think I don’t keep track of everything that concerns my family? I know he’s been sent down from school so many times they hardly recognize him there. His instructors say he’s near brilliant—where he got that heaven knows—but he lacks discipline. He’ll end up another care-for-nothing loose screw, and I won’t have it.”

The earl grew even more red-faced, if possible. “The whelp’s just army-mad. Always has been. I won’t let him sign up, the heir and all, so he’s just kicking at the traces. He’ll likely buy his own colors when he’s eighteen with the money his mother left him. I misdoubt I can stop him.”

“What, did you think my girl would follow the

drum?"

"Dash it, man, the chit's only what? Ten or eleven? He'll be ready to settle by her coming out."

"And if he's not? If he's so deeply in debt he's just waiting for her dowry? It won't do, man."

Damn, but the earl saw all that wealth slipping away. "Then maybe my second son, Thornton, would suit you for the chit? Lord knows he's sober and steady enough for a bishop." Lord knew where those traits came from, either, but the earl held out his last, faint glimmer of gold. Fool's gold, of course, as he saw by the duke's answer.

"I swear your first wife must have played you false, Frederick. That boy can't even keep up with Emilyann on horseback, for all his four years' advantage. He's nothing but—"

The earl may have agreed that Thornton was a priggish toad-eater, but enough was enough. His third son, Geoffrey, was a jolly, likable lad, but he was younger than Miss Arcott, with no chance of coming into the title or lands. The duke would never go for that, so Stokely had nothing to lose. Hell, he was getting a flighty new wife, a parcel of debts, and his heir's future to settle all over again. At least he deserved the satisfaction of spoiling the duke's holier-than-thou attitude with a few home truths of his own.

"There's to be no scandals in your family, eh? What about your own brother? The man's a regular here-and-thereian. You worry about keeping your darling's fortune safe from my boys, but Morgan Arcott would go through that money in a year, and throw your girl in the streets without thinking twice of it. And if"—he was in full spate now—"if you are thinking it will be so easy to settle your daughter to some high-born gentleman, think again. If ever there was a hell-born babe with more instinct for trouble, I've never seen it. The chit is a regular tomboy and a hoyden to boot. I've never seen her with her hair combed or her face clean or her pockets free of frogs. She's on terms with every groom and dairymaid for miles, and has about as much ladylike decorum as my prize pig. Less, maybe."

He didn't say that he'd miss chasing her out of his orchards and stable yards if she ever changed. He didn't say that everyone adored Lady Em for her

cheerful deviltry and there wasn't an ounce of guile in the moppet. He just concluded: "If she don't blot her copybook, it'll be a miracle. And even if you get those haughty London hostesses to accept her, she ain't going to make anyone a comfortable wife, I'll wager."

"Don't bet on it, you cannot afford to lose."

It took a while for Lady Emilyann to figure how to smuggle letters into and out of Miss Meadow's Select Academy for Young Ladies in Bath. At last she received a reply to her most recent tear-stained missive. *Dear Sparrow*, he wrote. *Don't worry. I'll marry you anyway.*

Chapter Two

Under the British legal system, a person who stole a loaf of bread could be hanged or sentenced to a long imprisonment. He, or she, could be exiled to Botany Bay or one of the other penal colonies. Many such involuntary tourists died on the voyage or from hunger, disease, or the elements. Others survived and made the best of a harsh living. Some even fought hard to succeed in their new life—dreaming of the day they could go home.

For the crime of being a child—worse, a girl child—Emilyann Arcott was shipped off to Bath, to a school devoted to the task of making young girls into model citizens, young ladies ready to make their bows to society. If it took mincing steps and modulated speech, Emilyann would do it. Dancing, French lessons, even the harp, she would learn it all, then go home, or so she thought in her childish naiveté.

But Rome wasn't built in a day, and a hoyden wasn't made into a debutante overnight, and life wasn't fair. No matter that Emilyann outpaced her instructors, or charmed even the redoubtable headmistress with her eagerness to learn, she could not go home, except for an occasional long vacation. Gads, it was a life sentence!

And how she hated it! Some of the lessons were interesting, and she made friends among the less silly of her fellow students. She did not even mind the uniforms the others despised, never caring about her clothes so long as they were comfortable; she barely resented the rules about keeping them neat, for there was no chance to muss anything. She missed the country, the freedom, the rough-and-tumble of boys'

play, the bustling activity of a productive estate. She missed Nanny and Cook and all her friends on the farms. She missed her dog.

She did not miss Smoky, who had himself been at school for ages and would soon join the army. Boys could have adventures! Of course she remembered his last promise, but without much hope for the future. Not even he could change the mind of the Duke of Aylesbury. No one ever had, in Emilyann's memory, and not for lack of trying. Her own tears and pleas and threats to starve herself hadn't prevented her continued incarceration at school.

Instead, she was sent to a dragon of an aunt for one whole vacation, where she did nothing but read improving works and sew shirts for the parish needy. (Those who had one arm shorter than the other, who didn't take part in strenuous activities like breathing, which would have opened her pitiful seams, or those who did not require buttonholes, which were entirely beyond her. Miss Arcott might understand the functions of an orery, but the workings of needle and thread were true mysteries.)

She did not miss her father either. She hardly knew him, except as some distant divinity to be worshipped, feared, and obeyed. Occasionally he would grant some benediction, like petitioning Miss Meadow to provide riding lessons for the girls, and sending Emilyann's own pony down to Bath. Mostly, however, he was an implacable force, in God-like charge of her life.

Previously, Emilyann had childishly and cheerfully accepted his edicts concerning her future. Of course she would marry the man of his choice. That was as natural to her as her name. She was Lady Emilyann Arcott, betrothed to Everett Stockton. Here was her right hand, here was Smoky. What could be easier?

Things were different now. Among all the other gossipy, giggly young misses, some approaching their debutante seasons and freedom from Miss Meadow and lessons in deportment, Emilyann quickly learned that daughters, especially daughters of wealthy, powerful men, were only pawns in their fathers' chess games. The girls might read as many lurid romances as they could smuggle into school, dreaming of the dashing heroes who rescued the distraught damsels, but they knew they would wed the suitor their fathers chose, be he old and gouty, pock-marked, or averse to

bathing.

Lady Em kept Smoky's letter, folded so many times the creases almost split, and dreamed her own dreams.

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"Well, my dear, we will be sorry to lose you here at Miss Meadow's Academy."

That was a lie. The pudgy little headmistress would be sorry to lose only the duke's patronage and the money she had extorted from him for his daughter's schooling. Emilyann waited to see if Miss Meadow would be struck by lightning for such a monumental untruth. No such luck, so she courteously replied "Thank you." She would *not* tell the bigger whopper by replying that she would miss the school.

"I am sure you will make us all proud of you when you enter society." Now, that was coming too strong, Emilyann considered. Likely old Meadowlark was shaking in her boots lest any prospective parents learn what institution had had the molding of this particular pupil.

"Sixteen is a bit early, but the dear duke feels you would benefit from some local society in Northampshire before your official presentation, and sooner or later we would have to see you off anyway. It is the nature of young things to leave the nest, try their wings, take their proper place...."

Miss Meadow was rushing through her standard farewell speech, most likely to get to the celebratory bottle of champagne that much sooner. Emilyann found no fault there; she had been eagerly anticipating this day herself for six years now.

"... Remember that you will always be in our hearts."

Hah! That midget martinet might look like a cherubic chipmunk, with pouchy cheeks and button eyes, but her heart held all the affection of a flea! Emilyann murmured, "How kind."

"We will miss you."

Miss Arcott choked and needed a restorative sip of tea. That was the biggest rapper yet. Miss Meadow would be vastly relieved to see the last of Lady Emilyann Arcott.

She looked like the model student, hands folded demurely in her lap, blue eyes cast respectfully downward, light blond braids twisted into a pristine

bun at the back of her neck—not a single hair would dare to be out of place. She wore a simple but elegantly fashionable white muslin gown that had been ordered from the most expensive dressmaker in Bath, with a percentage, naturally, accruing back to Miss Meadow's account. Her cheeks were appropriately pale, untouched either by artifice or vulgar sun-darkening. Smiling politely, repeating her "Thank-yous" in a softly sweet voice, Lady Emilyann was an angel, a lady, a debutante!

A wraith, a shrouded corpse, a blasted virgin being readied for sacrifice, she muttered to herself as she took another sip of tea. (A lot better quality than the brew served the pupils.) Lord, it had been a long time—for both of them. Emilyann had learned in her very first year that cooperating with the gaolers would not shorten her sentence. No knight on a charger was going to ride to her rescue either.

Smoky had charged off to join the army while his father and Marietta were on honeymoon. His letters were few and then, when he joined the Peninsular campaign and his knack for playing least in sight sent him behind enemy lines, even more sporadic. Lately, all she heard about him was when she managed to see his brothers at some neighbor's house during vacations.

No, if anything was going to be done about her wretched condition, she would have to do it herself. It was not in her nature to be mopey and miserable, not when she could do something to enliven her days and make the gaol bearable. As the daughter of a duke, with a more than generous allowance and a natural friendliness that charmed the kitchen staff, the grooms at the hired livery, and anyone else she had no business being in contact with, there was a great deal Miss Arcott could do to subvert authority ... and make Miss Meadow's life hell.

How many creatures had crept, crawled, and slithered their way into the schoolrooms? How many bushels, barrels, and bales of merchandise had found their way to the academy's kitchens with Miss Meadow's signature on the order forms? The clocks set back, the signs repainted naughtily, the Madeira watered at a social for local patronesses—the list went on and on because there was nothing Miss Meadow could do about it.

There was only so much retribution she could exact before the duke withdrew his daughter and blackened the school's reputation. Miss Meadow would never admit defeat—nor refund a tuition. Not even the time the entire school had to be quarantined during the bishop's visit when a whole grade came down with measles—that had been painted on!

None of the other girls would ever squeal on the chit; she was a hero to them. Even the older girls who had already absorbed Miss Meadow's strictures on propriety and decorum, she thought, were not above giggling at Emilyann's fits and starts. The most senior students, those wise young debts who were about to make their curtsies to the polite world, realized it would be better to stay friends with one of the wealthiest heiresses in England. Furthermore, they liked her, with her gamin grin and big blue eyes and boundless energy.

Lady Em even had the instructors wrapped around her dainty little thumb, being polite, cheerful, eager to learn. Emilyann was quick to see the teachers were as much prisoners at the school as she was, with their miserly salaries, drab existences, reams of rules and regulations. Perhaps they were in worse straits, for she could leave eventually. Sparrow was never one to add to another's burden; she was a lady.

She was a witch, recalled Miss Meadow, shuddering at memories of pink dye in the laundry, scarlet ribbons appearing in the hair of every single student, in church, no less, and the magistrates even calling on her—twice! Magistrates, dear Lord. The sooner the hellion was gone, the better.

"Yes, well, we must not keep your father's coach waiting. I expect he will join you in Northampshire as soon as Parliament is adjourned. Then there will be local assemblies and house parties, and next year, London," she said reverently.

London. It was the goal of a girl's schooling, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, where a miss could become a Toast, a Belle, a bride. She could also become a social outcast if her behavior was found wanting. Miss Arcott's behavior was wanting a bridle! In one last, desperate effort to inculcate six years of pleas for propriety, and incidentally save the reputation of her school, Miss Meadow placed a chaste kiss in the air near Miss Arcott's chin and said, "We'll

be thinking of you.”

“I’m sure you will,” Lady Em said, dropping a perfect curtsy, and, behind her skirts, a lovely little green garden snake.

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“Freedom, Nanny,” Emilyann shouted, skipping into the old nursery. “Two whole weeks of freedom!”

Nanny put down her mending and adjusted her wire-rimmed spectacles to read the letters being gaily waved under her nose while Lady Em went on happily: “Father writes that Parliament is embroiled in another debate on the Corn Laws and so will not adjourn for at least another two weeks. And even better, Aunt Ingrid cannot come to Northampshire to chaperone me because that nodcock Bobo fell off his horse and broke an arm. Too bad it wasn’t his head; that might have knocked some sense into him.”

“Now, missy, you shouldn’t be agloating over another’s misfortune, and that bein’t any way to talk of your cousin.”

“Nanny, you know very well that if the wiser creature sat on top, Bobo would be wearing the saddle. Besides, he isn’t really my cousin. He’s only Uncle Morgan’s stepson from Aunt Ingrid’s first marriage. Thank goodness I have no blood in common with that bobbing-block.”

She changed the subject at Nanny’s frown. “Father sent Jake Coachman to look after us because Jake’s arthritis is too painful for him to drive right now. He’s been telling me the most wonderful stories about the highwayman they are calling Gentleman Jim. Jake hasn’t seen him in person, of course, more’s the pity.”

Nanny harrumphed. “Fine watchdog your papa sent, filling your pretty head with such notions. Next thing you know, we’ll be having you out on the highway with a mask and a pistol.”

“Not to worry,” Lady Em said, lifting her chin. “I’ll have you know I am a lady now.”

“Sure, and your lovely gown is allover dog hairs and grass stains already, and your hair is no-how, like a gale came through here. And I had it braided so pretty not two hours ago.”

“Oh, Nanny, you know my wretched hair is too fly-away to stay tied for long, unless I sit perfectly still.”

“And a fine day that would be, if I live to see it.”

"Don't scold, Nanny. I mean to be good, truly I do."

"Aye, I'll bet you do, after your papa's letter. One hint of mischief, he says, and it's right back to that school for you. No parties or picnics, and no going up to London in the spring neither."

Emilyann twirled around, oblivious to the falling hairpins and ribbons. "Won't it be grand? The opera and plays and Vauxhall Gardens and Venetian breakfasts. Father says I'll even get to meet the prince!"

"And a whole passel of eager young bucks, too. I'll wager every eligible gentleman in London will be begging His Grace for your hand within a sennight. Some what aren't so eligible, too."

Emilyann blushed, an easy occurrence for one of her fair coloring, and one which happened much too often for her peace of mind. "Do you really think so, Nanny? Do you really think I'll be popular? What if I have to sit out every dance on the sidelines with Aunt Ingrid, or, worse, if only Bobo asks me to dance?"

"You'll be a wallflower when pigs fly, child. And not just because of your papa's wealth. He would no more let a fortune-hunter come near you than he'd let Old Toby's plowhorse near his broodmares. But for the other beaux ..." The old nursemaid shook her head, wondering if the duke knew what he was in for. "You'll do, if'n you just remember that pretty is as pretty does, and you have to please the mamas as well as the sons."

"Father said I might have a year to ... to survey the field. I know that sounds vulgar, but that's how all the girls at school refer to it, and the season is nothing more than a marriage mart anyway. He promised he'd consider my wishes."

Nanny waved the letter. "And he promised right here that he'd marry you off willy-nilly to the first suitable *parti* if there was one whisper of scandal while you are here. No riding astride, no going into the village alone, no dicing with the stablehands, he says."

"Yes, and I am to stay away from Stockton Manor, although it seems harsh that I cannot pay my condolences to Nadine. That was a terrible tragedy, losing both the earl and Cousin Marietta in a carriage accident. They said he was foxed."

"A lady doesn't gossip, missy. And you know your father ordered that woman's name not be mentioned

around here. At least you won't be getting up to deviltry with those boys. Master Thornton has taken orders and has his first vicarage, a fine living not far from London, and that rascalion Geoffrey is still away at school."

"And what of Smoky? Is there any news of him?"

"He's Lord Stokely now, of course, but isn't making any hurry to sell out. We heard he was mentioned in the despatches." Nanny pursed her lips.

"Why do you look so disapproving? There's more, isn't there?"

"There have been stories, stories not fit for your ears, lamb. Wellington's young officers make a habit out of cutting a dash, you know, and that lad always could charm the birds out of the trees."

Emilyann hooted in delight. "A rake? You mean Smoky is a rake? How exciting for him! Oh, I wish I could go visit with Nadine. She would know."

"Ladies don't gossip, missy. And Miss Nadine is too young for such goings-on. Although what I hear about her and that ninnyhammer aunt of hers who is supposed to be taking charge at the Manor ..."

"I thought ladies didn't gossip, you old faker," Emilyann teased. "No matter, I'll hear all the *on dits* from Cook or Mrs. Finster in the village. Father said I was to have some new dresses made up, to give some of our trade to the local merchants, although I already have so many gowns I don't know when I'll get to wear them. But I'll wait till he returns home to ask him about a duty call to the manor."

* * * *

She never got to wear the new gowns or make that call, for the duke never came home. It was raining. The right leader slipped and came up lame, so one of the grooms led it back to a farmhouse they had seen. The undercoachman could not handle the off-stride team, and the coach foundered in the mud, miles from nowhere, in the rain and wind and cold. The duke took a chill, which settled in his chest, which became pneumonia, which killed him in three days.

Chapter Three

Black was the color of Lady Em's dresses. Black were her prospects. But not as black as her uncle Morgan's heart.

Like a sapling growing crooked in the shade of a larger tree, Morgan Arcott grew bitter in the shadow of his brother's money, power, and title. But for a trick of birth, Morgan would have been the chosen one, their father's heir and favorite, not the unfortunate younger son given an allowance and a good-bye.

Brother George got to marry the woman of his choice. Hell, beautiful Cora would have been Morgan's choice, too, if she would have looked at a green lad already in the hands of the cent-percenters. No, Morgan had to wed money, and a bride was found for him among the wealthy merchant barons. A Cit, no less, and a shy, frail, nervous female Laura was, with neither looks nor wit to sugar-coat the pill.

Morgan's father thought the responsibility of a young bride would mature his son. Instead, Morgan got her with child, got his hands on her dowry, and got himself back to London and the gaming tables as soon as possible. She lost the baby; he lost her fortune, but they both kept trying.

Worn out with three or four futile attempts to bear him a child—Morgan could not quite recall the exact number— Laura faded away mere weeks before her twenty-fifth birthday, which he most assuredly would never have remembered either, the date not being scribed on the back of the pasteboards, although certain other marks were.

By now their father had stuck his spoon in the wall and brother George was Duke of Aylesbury, no more generous nor less censorious than the old man, just younger. He was a rising star in political circles, his investments returning fourfold, his wife increasing. Morgan's interests also broadened as he added shilling for the gaming dens to card-sharping.

Morgan needed another wife. Oh, not for the comfort of a woman's warmth; he got all that from a different class of female entirely. No, he needed another investment in his career, another bankroll, but this time there were even higher stakes. George's Cora suddenly died of childbed fever leaving the one infant, Emilyann, a girl. Morgan found himself second in line to the tide, with his grief-stricken brother vowing to remain a widower.

That was doubtful, even to Morgan. After all, George was still a young man with more sense and family pride than to leave the Arcott fortunes to an

ivory-tuner. Nevertheless, the gambler in Morgan saw a chance, albeit a long shot, of getting his hands on the Arcott wealth, taking his rightful place in society, and topping that flat George at something, even if merely in begetting an heir.

Money and an heir. Those were the only two reasons Morgan could ever see for marrying, and he was desperate for both. Finding a bride, however, was not quite as simple this time. There was no wealthy duke spreading patronage, nor were Morgan's own prospects such that a wealthy Cit would trade his daughter on the chance of a title. Those middle-class merchants and mill owners were as canny as the money lenders when it came to Morgan's place in the succession.

As for finding a wealthy heiress among his own kind, he had a better chance of finding the lost mines of the Incas. He was not even invited to ton affairs, and chaperones in the park made their debutantes sidestep him like a pile of horse droppings.

Then he found Ingrid, a handsome widow with a handsome jointure and a small son: a proven breeder! Better yet, he discovered her while on a repairing lease to Cheltenham, where word of his unsavory reputation had not reached. He put on sober clothes and attended her at Sunday church; she put off her widow's weeds and gaily accompanied Morgan to the theater. Even the lad was cautioned to stop drooling, stop fiddling with his unmentionables, and to leave the contents of the gentleman's pockets alone. With such fine behavior on all sides, a match was soon made.

Now, if *this* marriage were made in heaven the angels had a most quirky sense of humor, for the wedding was one of the few times Ingrid saw her husband that month, much less sober. It was the last time she smiled at him, as soon as she realized that not only would she have to pay for the wedding breakfast herself, but none of Morgan's noble friends were coming, because he had none.

Beauregard spilled down his shirt whatever he did not manage to cram in his greedy little mouth, and promptly cast up his accounts on his new papa's boots. He also "found" a shilling that had somehow slipped from the vicar's topcoat pocket.

Beauregard indeed, Morgan told himself too late, a jumped-up name if there ever was one. As soon as the happy new family removed to Arcott Hall, the only

honeymoon spot available to Morgan on his finances, Emilyann and the Stockton boys renamed the sausage-shaped, light-fingered, slow-topped little toad Bobo. Only his mother could love him and, as it turned out, he was the only thing she could love besides Mother Church.

Ingrid was a rampant reformer, an evangelical missionary out to save the world from the evils of gambling, drinking, and wenching—the only particulars Morgan was good at! So she would pray for his soul, that he repudiate the devil before it was too late and he burned in hell forever.

According to Morgan, hell would have been an improvement to life with Ingrid. As for begetting the heir, she did her wifely duty at first, praying the while. Morgan prayed, too, that he could muster up enough enthusiasm to get the deed done. When no child was forthcoming, Ingrid took it as a sign from on high, a punishment for her sin of ambition, hoping to better herself and her son's position in life.

In her weakest moments she dreamed of becoming a society hostess. Heaven forbid! So she redonned her Puritan gowns and scraped her hair back in a bun and refused to attend plays. And she started getting headaches, especially when Morgan came back to their lodgings in London from wherever he spent most of his time, remembering why he married in the first place.

Gads, he kept asking himself, how could any woman who spouted of hell-fires and soul-scorchings be as cold as her northern forbears? Worse, she was clutch-fisted.

In all honesty, Ingrid had mentioned that the bulk of her wealth was held for Bobo, with her to administer, but at first—before the wedding—Morgan thought he could charm whatever he needed from her; if that woman had been in Eden, Adam would still be eating gruel in the altogether. So it was back to work, back to gulling greenhead boys into losing their allowances, back to weighted dice and shaved decks. Morgan played; Ingrid prayed.

Until, that is, one cold, rainy day when the right leader of the Duke of Aylesbury's coach slipped in the mud and came up lame.

* * * *

"What do you mean, he left most of the money in trust for the chit?"

"What do you mean, he named Uncle Morgan as one of my trustees?"

Both together: "Damn and blast!"

Mr. Baxley, the late duke's man of business, wiped his forehead. Where to start? He turned first to the ashen child lost in a tentlike black gown. He had known her all her life; he moved the ink bottles farther out of her reach.

"My dear," he said gently. "You must know that your father loved you very much and he wanted the best for you. But you are not even seventeen; you cannot set up your own household. Arcott Hall is your home, your uncle is now its owner, therefore it is reasonable for him to be one of your trustees. I, ahem, was honored by the duke to be the other. According to the terms of your father's will, you will have a generous allowance, and of course the whole of your inheritance will be turned over to you when—"

"Just like that damn fool brother of mine," Morgan muttered, "handing a fortune over to a female! Soft-hearted, he was. More like soft-headed."

Emilyann jumped up, indignant to the slur to her father, and nearly tripped on the unfamiliar wide skirts of her mourning gown. "At least he had enough sense not to leave it all to you to gamble away, you . . . you basket-scambler!"

"And you wonder why you need a trustee? Unmannered brat, you need a keeper! I've a mind to—"

Mr. Baxley interrupted hastily. "As I was saying, Lady Emilyann, you will receive control of the principle when you come to your majority, which is the age of twenty-five for females, somewhat older than for males." He paused while Em's unladylike snort told what she thought of that piece of jurisprudence, conceived by a man, no doubt.

"Yes, well, as I was saying, when you come of age, or when you marry, whereupon the management of said capital will devolve to your husband."

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't I get my own money then?"

Uncle Morgan grinned. "Ignorant chit. A woman's property always becomes her husband's."

"Aunt Ingrid's didn't," she answered sweetly, changing his grin to a scowl. "But no matter, I shall simply remain unwed until I am twenty-five and then I can be my own woman."

Morgan had gotten up to pour himself a glass of his brother's excellent brandy. "That should be easy," he said between sips. "No sane man would have you. Tongue like a viper, temper of a shrew, about as much sense of decorum as a mayfly, and looks ..." He just shrugged.

Emilyann and even Mr. Baxley, who was fond of her, had to agree with the last affront. Good grief, her father wasn't dead a fortnight, of course she wasn't in looks, what with the original shock and the funeral to get through. She had lost weight, giving her face a close, pinched look, with no color to speak of; she'd also lost her ready good humor and sunny disposition, having Uncle Morgan and his family thrust upon her in her grief.

And her dress, well, it had to be black, of course, but it did not have to be the heaviest, scratchiest stuff ever made, with high neck, long sleeves, wide waist, and acres of skirt. The matching poke bonnet did not have to cover her ears, her forehead, and every strand of her hair, but it did. Suffice it to say, Aunt Ingrid had the dressing of her now.

Mr. Baxley tut-tutted in sympathy. "It's early days to be worrying overmuch of marriage. You'll be in mourning for a year, naturally, and then you will have to be presented, et cetera."

Emilyann's mind wandered, wondering what kind of come-out she could look forward to, with Aunt Ingrid as chaperone. No dancing, no theater parties, no pretty dresses. No, she may as well wait for her twenty-fifth birthday. The only bright spot she could see, her thoughts coming back to the present, was that Uncle Morgan was not looking all that elegant himself. Surely that coat was second-rate and the pouches under his eyes were more noticeable, especially when he'd turned that greenish tint on hearing the terms of his brother's will. At least he was no happier about it than she was. Good.

Lord, how she despised the man. For years he had been bearing tales to her father about her misbehavior: sneaking off in the bushes with the Stockton boys, when they were only digging worms for fishing; boxing Bobo's ears, when she had been teaching the clunch to leave her possessions alone. She had been scolded sharply while he, Uncle Morgan, was permitted to dally with Dirty Sal down at the tav-

ern, chouse the stablehands out of their salaries with stacked decks, and make off with a few dozen bottles from the duke's cellars on every visit. She would never tattle, of course, but Bobo would, or threaten to.

Uncle Morgan always knew where Bobo got his information—the flabby little worm was too dunderheaded to figure such things, although he developed a fine sense of the principle of blackmailing. Morgan paid for his stepson's silence, loathing his niece more with every farthing. Since the funeral he had been gloating over her, peacocking around, demanding even she call him by his new title. He'd been hard put to show the least sorrow for his brother's passing, not when he was so busy eyeing each piece of furniture, and every painting and silver platter with a view to its value. He was bound for more disappointment. At least it appeared, from what Mr. Baxley was explaining, that while her father may have left Emilyann in an uncomfortable coil, he left Uncle Morgan worse.

"But you see, my lord—"

"That's Your Grace, dammit," Morgan snarled. He wasn't going to get much out of this, or out of the smirking scarecrow, but he'd get respect, by Jupiter!

"Yes, Your Grace," Mr. Baxley said. "His Grace, that is, the duke, ah, your late brother, was able to petition the court for such a dispensation. He did move in influential circles, you know." Inferring, of course, that Morgan did not. "With no male heir extant, no distant cousins or missing branches of the family, it is acceptable, although highly unusual, naturally, for the entailment to pass through the distaff side."

"Yes, yes, so the brat's son would be my heir instead of the property and the title reverting to the crown. But what of the rest of his money, man?"

"Ahem. Lady Emilyann's bequest was by far the largest, with some small pensions for employees, et cetera. The income from the estates follows along with the entailment, which consists of land, titles, the London house, heirloom jewels, et cetera."

Morgan banged his fist down on the desk. "Will you stop with the et ceteras and get on with it already! How much money will I have?"

Emilyann poured Mr. Baxley a cup of tea. He needed it. "Thank you, my dear. As I was trying to explain, Your Grace, the rest of the late duke's fortune was his

own, to do with as he chose. He chose to leave it in trust for the next heir, either your son, if there should be one, or Lady Emilyann's firstborn. The money would be, again, held in trust until the birth of the child, then given to his parents to administer."

Morgan's ears perked up. "Ah, and I suppose I am one of the interim trustees there, too."

"No, Your Grace. There is a considerable sum involved, you know, and the duke considered it safest left with his financial advisers."

"Oh, well," Morgan said, almost reconciled. "I never thought the old stick would leave me more than he had to. So tell me, how much am I worth?"

Emilyann showed great forbearance, merely plopping a lump of sugar into her tea with more noise than necessary.

"That's a difficult question, Your Grace. The holdings are extensive, certainly, but they also require a great deal of reinvestment to maintain."

"But if I sell the lot? How much then?"

"Oh, you cannot do that, my lord, it's all entailed. Otherwise His Grace could have left you out entirely."

Morgan could not dispose of the properties outright, but that did not stop him from trying to bleed the estate in any way he could: dismissing most of the household staff, not fixing the roof, selling off the racing stud. As he told his angry niece, he was not about to maintain the place for *her* comfort. He was long gone back to London and the gaming halls, taking Ingrid with him for a last-ditch effort to turn her up sweet enough to try for a child. She was not much more than forty. Stranger things had happened. Her conceiving would have been lucky; her cooperating would have been a miracle.

A great many new temptations were open to Ingrid as a duchess. She prayed for the fortitude to resist. They took Bobo, thank goodness, after loyal Jake searched his luggage and restored the snuff boxes and pearl-handled silverware.

Morgan returned to the country occasionally after that to see how else he could beggar the properties to settle his losses. When Emilyann complained, he threatened to throw her out completely, except they both knew he wouldn't. He would only lose the heavy fees he extorted for "administering" her estate. So her allowance, which once looked so generous, had to go

for Nanny's pension after Morgan turned her off, for making repairs to the tenants' cottages, and for buying wood for the fireplaces so the unused rooms of Arcott House would not succumb to dry rot from the damp ceilings.

Emilyann barely had enough funds for new dresses, which hardly mattered, since she was in mourning and never went anywhere or saw anyone. She could have changed to gray or lavender for half-mourning, as the depressing year wore on, but her one effort at economizing by trying to sew up a new gown herself merely created more rags for rubbing down her mare—whose feed she also had to pay for out of her own funds.

If nothing else, the long, lonely months made Em rethink her ideas about marriage. If living under her uncle's thumb was this dreary, she'd go to London as soon as the year was up and find a sweet boy she could manage who could overlook her lost-waif appearance and dowdy clothes in favor of her dowry. She would wed him before the cat could lick its ear. She'd grow to be like Cousin Marietta, finding her dreams of romance between the covers of a book, which was a sad enough fate for a seventeen-year-old girl to contemplate. There were, of course, worse fates.

"Marry Bobo? You must be more addlepat than he is, Uncle." Emilyann laughed as she took a comfortable seat in her father's study. Morgan was already at ease behind the desk—her father's desk—and he was already half disguised, she guessed from the bottle and glasses and the half-baked idea he'd just proposed for her future. She laughed again. "I wouldn't marry Bobo if he was the last man on earth."

Morgan's eyes glittered as he poured another refill. "He is, as far as you are concerned. That way all the money gets tied up in one neat little package. Your money, the heir's trust, the estate, all in the family, heh-heh."

"Yes, and all in your greedy hands, I suppose. I do congratulate you though; it's a brilliant scheme, from your viewpoint. Unfortunately, Uncle, that horse won't run, I'm afraid, because there is just no way in hell you can make me marry that nodcock. My year of mourning is nearly over and I have decided to go to London to find myself a husband."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Her uncle

snickered. “I ain’t about to provide for your come-out, and you cannot do it on your own. Besides, in case you’ve forgotten, my dearest niece, I am your trustee. You cannot marry without my permission. Oh, you could run off to Gretna with some romantic young fool just to spite me, but you better pick a well-heeled one, for you won’t see a groat of your money until you are twenty-five. No, there will be no presentation, no pretty new frocks and geegaws, no half-pay officers or second sons. Just Bobo.”

This was no longer laughable. Emilyann could feel herself beginning to perspire in the wretched wrong-season black gown. She got up to pace around the room, trying not to notice the new stains on the fine Aubusson carpet. By all that was holy, the man was serious!

“Come now, Uncle, Bobo could not want to marry me. He thinks I’m a bluestocking. Most likely because I know how to read. We wouldn’t possibly suit.” Now, that was one of the biggest understatements of Emilyann’s life, but she was trying to maintain a little politeness, trying very hard not to lose her temper and start another shouting match with her uncle, who only ended up taking his anger out on the servants or the horses. “You remember, just this Christmas I had to box his ears to keep him from bothering the upstairs maid. He does not even like me.”

“Nevertheless, he’ll marry you. Soon.” Morgan wore a self-satisfied smile. He picked up a piece of paper from the desktop and raised his glass in salute to the legal-looking document. “Special license. Damned expensive, but worth every penny.”

Emilyann stopped her pacing. “You can keep me from London, Uncle, and keep me from marrying any other man, and even keep me like an indigent prisoner in my own home, but you cannot make me wed that slimy toad.”

Morgan tossed down the remainder of his glass and stood up, coming around the desk to confront his recalcitrant niece face-to-face, bloodshot eyes to flashing blue ones. “You will, girl,” he said dangerously, no longer smiling. “Because a lot can happen in what? Eight years till your majority? A lot can happen in a week, my proud lady. I can leave you here alone with Bobo, for one. He ain’t no relation of yours, so your reputation would be in tatters. No man

would ever look at you again, at least not in any honourable way.”

“I don’t give a fig for my reputation, and Aunt Ingrid would never countenance such a thing anyway,” she said disdainfully.

“Ingrid is in Cheltenham playing the grand duchess to her old neighbors. Then, too, perhaps she’d approve, to make the boy a lord. Enough of the ready, a handsome gift to Prinny, the heir’s father’s got to be a viscount at least.”

“The *heir*! You think I’d ever let—that Bobo and I—” she sputtered.

“As I said, a lot could happen in a week. Maybe I would let dear Beauregard try to convince you. A lad his size can be quite persuasive. Not very polished in his address, I’m afraid, but Bobo was never one to concern himself over taking what others did not want to give.”

He could not have meant what she thought he meant. Not even this dastard could be so low to threaten his own brother’s child! Too angry to be frightened, too incensed to mind her tongue, she screamed at him: “You miserable, craven leech! That’s all you’ve ever been, a dirty bloodsucker. No wonder my father left his will the way he did, so that you couldn’t destroy everything he loved. It’s only too bad he had to name you my trustee, but I suppose he was too high-minded to suspect even you of such abominable behavior. Trustee, hah! I wouldn’t trust you to oversee a pile of manure, and you won’t destroy me!” she raged unwisely. “I’ll go live with Nanny. So there.” And she shook her fist at him.

Red-faced with fury, Morgan shook his own fist inches from her nose. “And good riddance to bad rubbish. I’ll declare you a runaway and pocket your bloody allowance. Then how will you and your precious Nanny live, huh, raising pigs?”

“Better that than living with them!” she shouted.

That’s when he hit her.

Chapter Four

No one had ever struck her before. Of course she had gotten her own back and snatched up the special license before fleeing to her room—expensive be damned! He could go through forty inheritances

purchasing the blasted things before she would go along with his plans. She would burn it later, when she had enough patience to build a fire. Now she just had to get out of there, put space between herself and that worm. She did not even have a riding habit that fit her, thanks to him. No matter. Emilyann thrust her feet into her riding boots, tore open the confining collar of the black gown, rolled up the sleeves, and headed for the stables.

"Hey, Lady Em," Jake called from the side of the barn, where he sat polishing tack in the sun so his knotted joints moved better. "Where you goin' lookin' like thunderclouds? And no hat on neither."

"I'm getting out of here, that's all," she threw back over her shoulder as she led her mare out. "No hat, no saddle, and I don't need you to accompany me either." She mounted herself from a railing, hiking her skirts to straddle the horse and showing a deal of leg above the boot "Don't worry," he heard on the wind, "I'll be back. Unfortunately."

Jake shook his head, knowing he'd never catch up, not when missy was on her mare Coco, not in that mood. Not that he could blame her, knowing the master was back. Jake spat tobacco juice at a passing beetle. Some master, hah! How this place was going to ruin, and young miss wasting away like some faded rose, all on account of that loose screw.

"I should of been drivin' the coach that day," Jake told himself, not for the first time. He shook his head and spat again. "Damn, I should of. There be none of this nipfarthin', nor branglin', and missy'd be all set up like the little princess her father intended. No jumped-up caper-merchant actin' like king o' the hill, neither." But he hadn't been driving and things had been going to hell in a handcart ever since, and hanged if he could think of a way out.

Emilyann rode and rode—and hanged if *she* could think of a way out. She did not notice the sweat, the twigs caught in her hair from low branches, the growing shadows, not even the early crocuses lining the hedgerows. She saw nothing except the passing miles until the mare's heaving flanks finally brought her back to reality. So she got off and walked, no destination in mind, no haven in sight, nothing but the need to put still more miles between her and her horrible relations.

Marry Bobo? Old Toby's plowhorses would dance at Almacks first, wearing white gloves and pearls. Her dear stepcousin had grown from a repulsive boy to an even less attractive man, only slightly better dressed. Now he stuffed his extra tonnage into the latest fads, like the yellow pantaloons he wore to dinner the previous evening, his legs like two giant sausages dipped in egg yolk. With an aqua jacket and puce waistcoat—all this in a house of mourning—the cocklehead resembled nothing so much as a silk balloon half inflated for launching.

"I only wish he would fly off somewhere," Emilyann told the horse as they tramped on. "But he's so stupid he couldn't find the sky if he had wings."

As nasty and light-fingered as ever, Bobo had added leering to his list of charms. "Just what the world needs, another bacon-brained lecher." Coco pricked her ears but made no comment. "How could any woman think of marrying him?" Emilyann couldn't stand being in the same room with the slug. The thought of him touching her with his bloated fingers, kissing her with his damp mouth—"Ugh!" she exclaimed. The horse snorted in alarm so Emilyann stopped her marching to reassure the beast with a nose rub. "It will never happen. My father's heirs will not be slimy little mushrooms who paw at housemaids and have gravy spots on their shirtfronts. Never."

So she would not marry Bobo; that was the easy part. But how? "Think, Emilyann," she told herself, hiking on, dragging her skirts in the dust. Mr. Baxley might listen, but he was in London, a long, expensive way away. Too, he was growing old, and might agree she would be better off wed. He would certainly never countenance her showing up on his doorstep like an infant in a basket—if she could afford the stagecoach ride. It best be a letter. There had to be somewhere she could go meantime, somewhere she could be safe. Nanny's little cottage was inviting, but Uncle Morgan was sure to just fetch Emilyann back, despite his threats to let her rot there in poverty.

No, he would ride down like a marauding Hun to reclaim his missing meal ticket, then he would make the old woman's life hell. Emilyann could not chance his petty vengeance affecting anyone else. She realized that she'd been unconsciously headed for Stockton Manor this whole time, and heaven knew there was

not much ill he could do there, not in the deplorable condition the last earl had left it.

The only Stocktons in residence, however, were skitter-witted Nadine, at fifteen the biggest flirt in the county, and her equally flighty aunt, no protection at all. Those two were barely holding household and needed another penniless mouth to feed as much as they needed another leak in the roof. There was no other house in the neighborhood where Emilyann could just drop in and announce: "I do not like the husband my evil guardian has selected for me, may I stay here for eight years?" They would lock her in chains, right before sending a message back to Arcott.

"But I *can't* go back, I just can't," Emilyann wailed, dropping to the ground and beating her fists on her knees. The mare nudged her before ambling off to find a patch of new grass. "Fine help you are," the girl complained, getting up to fetch the reins before Coco remembered she was missing her supper. "You would most likely go home without me."

Home. No money, no friends, no loving family. Home, where Bobo would torment her and her uncle would batter her with words, meanness, and greed. She could stand up to his harassment—she was her father's daughter, after all— but how long could she endure this new physical abuse?

She could make one of the maids sleep in her room, and keep one of the dogs by her side and a pistol in her pocket, but she knew from that gleam in Morgan's eye that he would never give up. She would never be safe again. How long, dear Lord, could she live like that? How long before she took Bobo to wed ... or took a life, Morgan's or her own?

She buried her face in the horse's mane and wept.

* * * *

"Hell's bells, Emmy, don't tell me you and the mare have parted company. I wouldn't have believed it."

She'd never even heard the horse and rider approaching, but she looked up quickly, wiped a dirty hand across her face, and smiled at her old chum Geoffrey, the youngest of the Stockton boys, now grown to a gangly sixteen-year-old, dark like all the Stocktons.

"Don't believe it, you clunch. Coco would never be so rude. But whatever are you doing home, Geoff? Not that I'm not delighted to see you, of course."

He waved one hand in the air with studied nonchalance as he dismounted, saying, "Oh, the usual." His wide grin ruined the effect.

"Sent down *again!* Oh, you great looby!" It may have been true, but it was spoken with a deal of warmth as the two shared a quick hug of affection.

"I say, though, Em, if you haven't taken a toss, why is it you look like you've been dragged through the hedge backward?"

"Now, that's a pretty thing to tell a lady," she said, stalling, bringing a blush to her friend's cheeks.

"You know I ain't in the petticoat line, Em. 'Sides, if you were hanging out for compliments, you'd be reclining on a sofa dressed to the nines, like m'sister Nadine."

Emilyann shook out her skirts in a cloud of dust, avoiding his eyes. "Uncle Morgan's home."

"Uh, right." Nothing more needed to be said, so they walked on, leading their horses. After a bit Geoff murmured, mostly to himself, "Damned lucky I didn't take the shortcut and miss you at the Hall."

"Dashed lucky," she corrected him automatically. "Aunt Ingrid is visiting in Cheltenham, so you wouldn't have had to make your bows there, and I doubt dear Uncle was receiving. Only he and Bobo came for the visit," she added bitterly.

Geoffrey wrinkled his brow in an effort to figure out what wasn't being said, then he gave it up. "We've got company over at the manor, too. M'brother Thornton and his wife, Cynthia, stopped by on their way from London."

"Oh?" She couldn't drum up much interest. Reverend Thornton and his wife were as dull as ditchwater, with minds as stilted as the social conventions they worshipped. "Is he still hoping for a preferment?"

Geoffrey laughed. "Not after this week, I'd guess, to hear him rant about all of us ramshackle Stocktons ruining his chances of advancement. What a dust-up there was."

"About your being sent down again? What has that to do with—"

"That ain't the half of it. They were already up in the boughs when they got here, and well, there's no wrapping it in clean linens, the manor ain't in prime gig. Something about mice and cobwebs and the

ceiling falling on Cynthia while she's in her bath. Aunt Adelaide got her all calmed down enough for sherry before dinner, in the 'good' parlour. Only Nadine decided it was a good time to show Thornton she's old enough for a season in London."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. Red dress, damped petticoats, painted cheeks, and tossing off Madeira like it was mother's milk."

"What did Thornton do?"

"You know that look he gets when he's going to start a sermon? Eyes raised to heaven, hands clasped in front of him, a big breath so he won't have to pause for hours? Well, he takes his big breath and sneezes—the dust, don't you know—and spills his glass all over Cynthia, who's hopping up and down and screaming so loud that *more* plaster comes down."

Emilyann was laughing so hard she could barely get out the words, but she just had to know: "What about Aunt Adelaide? Did she 'go off' as usual?"

Geoffrey grinned back. "Of course. Right over on the couch. I didn't hang around to hear anymore."

"Coward!"

"Genius, you mean. Besides, I thought you might want Everett's present."

"Smoky sent a present? Why didn't you say so, you gudgeon! How is he, and where, and is he coming home?"

"Slow down. He's fine, I think, from what I could get out of Thornton, who, incidentally, insists we call Ev Stokely now, as befits his title."

"Oh, pooh, as if Smoky would ever stand on his dignity!"

Smiling, Geoff handed her a rumpled package from his saddlebags. "Well, he is a captain now, in addition to being an earl. Here, this one's for you. He sent one for Nadine and Aunt Adelaide, too, and a bang-up knife with designs etched up and down the blade for me.... Thornton said it's called a *mantilla*," he explained as Emilyann unwrapped a gossamer length of sheer white lace and an ivory comb. "The Spanish ladies wear them in their hair."

Emilyann tenderly covered the lace again in its paper before it got soiled. "It's beautiful. Is Smoky still in Spain, then?"

"No, and that's what set Thornton off in the first

place. Old Ev is in London, or he was, at any rate. He's supposed to leave tomorrow. He had two or three days' leave only, presenting papers to the War Office from Lord Wellington, so he could not come north."

"Just enough time to cut a swathe through London, I'll wager!"

"And have Thornton running to the bishop. Then Thorny thought he could give big brother a lecture on what was due the family name, and how he ought to sell out and see to the properties. I don't know what he thinks Ev can do, when we all know his pockets are as much to let as ever, what with paying off the governor's mortgages so we don't lose the estate altogether, and my allowance and—I say, Emmy, are you all right?"

Big tears were splashing onto the wrapped package. "I ... I don't have a handkerchief."

"And that's why you're turning into a watering pot?" he asked, offering his none-too-fresh cloth. Years of living with his sister and aunt had cured him from turning into a blancmange at the sight of feminine weeping. "I never thought you'd be one to go all missish, damned if I did."

"Danged," she sniffed, before explaining about her father's wretched will and Uncle Morgan's greed and the threats, and Bobo.

"Why, that bleeding—sorry, that bleating bast—hell, Emmy, you know what I mean." He straightened his shoulders. "There's nothing for it; I'll go call him out."

"Don't be a cabbagehead, Geoff, he wouldn't meet a puppy like you, and anyway, you're not a good shot. Too bad I can't challenge him—I already thought of that—and it's just so unfair, being a woman and all. I can't take care of my own money, I can't decide where I'll live or whom I'll marry, I can't even defend my own honor!"

"Now who's being harebrained? You need a husband for all that. Tell you what, Em," he said after a long moment's considering, "I'll marry you myself. It won't be so bad," he conceded, "you're a dashed fine rider, for a girl."

Emilyann giggled. "Is that how you'll pick your bride, by how well she rides?" She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "But thank you for the compliment, and thank you for the offer, my good friend. You can rest easy. I won't take you up on it, for

we'd never suit, you know. I'm a restless, managing sort and I like you too much to make your life a misery. It wouldn't fadge anyway. Uncle would just have the marriage annulled because we're both under-age. If not, he could withhold his permission, so he would never have to release my inheritance to us. There's no way we could live, unless you've come into a fortune recently."

He grinned cheerfully. "Not a sou. I'm even below hatches till next quarter-day. There's no appealing to Thornton either. He's as tight as a clam when it comes to parting with the blunt. I already tried." He shook his head, rearranging the dark curls. "It's the deuce of a coil all right."

Emilyann kicked a pebble out of her way. "I bet Smoky would know what to do."

Geoff nodded. "Downy cove, m'brother. Even Wellington said so, asked him to join his own staff. Too bad Ev's not staying around long enough to set your uncle straight."

"He's leaving tomorrow?"

"That's what Thorny said."

"But he's in London tonight?"

That sudden note of hope warned him. "Don't even think it, girl. London's over six hours away. It took Thornton the better part of two days to get here, and putting up at an inn overnight."

"But he had the carriage, and Cynthia. If we took the horses, and rode cross-country ..." She was thinking aloud.

Geoff gulped. So was he. "We?"

She didn't hear him, or pretended not. It was a good idea, maybe brilliant. It was also her only idea. She had enough of the household money left to change horses, and they could carry food and ...

"Listen, Emmy, we don't really know that Ev didn't leave early. We don't even know if he can do anything about this mess."

"You said he was a knowing one."

"But he's got no time, and he sure doesn't have any of the ready to spare. If he did, he would have sent it down to Aunt Adelaide like always. And besides, a girl can't ride into London in the middle of the night! Even I know it just ain't done."

* * * *

So it was that Lady Emilyann Arcott crept up the

back stairs of her home and changed into some mismatched, foul-smelling, overlarge clothes pilfered from the grooms' room over the barn while Jake and the stable crew were at dinner. She used a likewise borrowed shears to lop off her hair any-which-way, consigning the hatcheted locks to the bottom of her wardrobe, with good riddance to the plaguey mop.

While she was at it, she cut a piece of the drapery pull cord to hold up her falling breeches. She stuffed money in her sock, a pistol in her boot, and some bread and cheeses and apples into one of the deep pockets of her filched friezecoat. Into the other pocket she tenderly placed Smoky's gift, still wrapped for safekeeping. The coat looked, and smelled, like something used to transport a poacher's booty but, she told herself, beggars—or borrowers—cannot be choosy. She rolled the sleeves up twice, crammed a moth-eaten cap over her shorn hair so the peaks and clumps didn't show, just a pale, ragged fringe around her face, and she was ready.

She patted an odoriferous inside pocket of her coat one last time, to be certain of her "insurance." There, among leaves, hairs, and worse rested a kerchief wrapped around three papers: a parchment document with official-looking seals, a creased and tattered letter, and that miserable, misintended special license.

Captain Everett Stockton, Lord Stokely, mightn't have much money, and less time, but he did have something Lady Emilyann needed desperately. She grinned. Wouldn't Smoky be surprised!

Chapter Five

"Cap'n Stockton ain't to home now." And never would be to the likes of these callers if Private Micah Rigg had anything to say to the matter. Rigg was his lordship's batman, valet, butler, and sometimes watchdog. It was a position the older Rigg much preferred to being cannon fodder at the front, so he was bound to see his employer stayed alive and well, and happy with the service he got. Which he'd never be, if Rigg admitted these two scruffy boys to his temporary quarters at the St. John's Hotel, an establishment favored by the itinerant military.

"But it's three in the morning," squeaked the smaller, dirtier lad out in the hallway. "Where could he

be?”

The other boy kicked him. “Stubble it, Em. We said I’d do the talking, remember?” He tugged at his jacket and turned back to the mustachioed soldier. “I appreciate the inconvenience, my good man, but I am Geoffrey Stockton, Lord Stokely’s brother, and I really must see him tonight. Could you tell me where he is?”

Brother, was it? Rigg raised his candle higher. This one did have the look of the cap’n about him, the same dark hair at least. The cap’n had given strict instructions that that other bloke, the starched-up religious fellow, wasn’t to be admitted again, ever. He hadn’t said anything about refusing any other brothers. “You wouldn’t be the one as keeps getting sent down from school, would you?”

Geoff bowed. “The same.”

Kinship to the officer showed more and more in the cheeky lad. He was likely in some bumblebroth or other, expecting his lordship to go bail, which he would if Rigg was any judge. Whatever the trouble, it could only get worse out on the streets of London in the middle of the night. “The cap’n’s out with some officer friends,” Rigg told Geoffrey, ignoring the grubby companion entirely. “It’s anybody’s guess where they are, but I expect he’ll be in soon ‘cause it’s early reveille tomorrow if we’re to be on time for the ship sailing. You can come wait in here, I s’pose, but *he*”—with a whisker-twitching grimace in Em’s direction—“has to stay out in the hall.”

“Why, you—” Em began, and Geoffrey kicked her again.

“I’ll vouch for my friend,” he said quickly, stepping around the short batman and dragging Em behind him by the sleeve of her coat.

There was a smallish room, with a bed, a dresser, and two chairs drawn around a table cluttered with books, papers, and bottles. When Rigg shut the other open door to the dressing room, where his own cot was set up, Geoffrey flopped down into one chair, exhausted. Rigg pointedly took the other. Em glanced yearningly toward the bed, but the batman’s glare discouraged her quickly, and Geoff’s grin did not help matters. She sniffed her disdain and found a place on the floor. At least the carpet was thick. She was so tired she let the wall prop her up until she caught herself starting to slip sideways, half asleep. She

fumbled her way out of the bulky overcoat and curled up in it like a kitten, using part as a blanket, part as a pillow. A short nap was all she needed, waiting for Smoky.

* * * *

"Bella, bella señorita, mi corazon necesite," sang a remarkably loud, off-key baritone. Footsteps staggered to the entry and a hand fumbled for the latch before Rigg could get the door open and his master inside.

"What's that, shush? Me shush? Oh, company, you say? Good, good. I told the lads the night was still young. Here, who is it, Rigg? Don't look like any of the army fellows." He wrinkled his nose. "Don't smell like one either."

"It's your brother, sir," Rigg informed him, grabbing for his master's hat, sword, and gloves before they ended on the floor. "Your younger brother, Cap'n, Geoffrey. I'll just go fetch some coffee, shall I, sir?"

"Capital idea, Rigg, my brother's here."

"Yessir."

When the batman left and a grinning Geoffrey was being pounded on the back, Emilyann stayed quiet in her corner, horrified. She hardly knew this man! She had not seen Smoky in, what? three or four years, and then briefly, but how changed he was, how much older he seemed than his twenty-four years. She did not recall him being so large either, surely not so broad-shouldered under his scarlet uniform jacket. His hair showed some silver at the long sideburns, his face was pale and gaunt, with a new red scar following along his jawbone, and worse, Captain Stockton was more than a little disguised. She huddled back into her coat.

"Devilishly glad to see you, bantling," he was telling Geoff while tugging at his neckcloth. "If I had more time, I would have sent for you from school, but you wouldn't have been there anyway, right? Ain't it lovely how things work out? By the way," he asked, shrugging out of his jacket, "what was it this time? Wine, women, or song?"

Now, Geoff had declared himself the spokesman while on the road lest anyone recognize Emilyann for a girl; he desperately wanted *not* to be the talker now. His frantic glances in Em's direction brought no salvation.

"Your abysmal grades, eh? You'll come about. Give

me a hand with these boots, will you?"

"It ... it was the pig," Geoff blurted out, giving a pull on one well-polished boot, then the other as his brother leaned back in one of the chairs. "It was a runt, you see, and the farmer was taking it to market anyway, and the little thing couldn't keep up—oh, Lord."

Stokely had unbuttoned his shirt and was starting on his breeches when a squawk from the corner made him turn around. "That had better not be the pig, my boy," he said awfully, eyeing the pile of rags.

"It's Emph, um, hm."

"Gads, you'd never make a soldier. Speak up, Geoff, it's a what?"

"It's Emilyann."

"Holy Mo—" Pants were hastily fastened, shirt tucked in. "You imbecile, how could you bring her to London like this, to bachelor quarters? Don't you have anything in your brainbox at all? The pig would have been better!"

"That's not fair, Ev. When was the last time you tried to talk her out of anything?"

Indignant, Emilyann started to get up, but a thundering voice ordered her to "stay. I'll deal with you next, miss." Stokely ran his fingers across the scar on his cheek. Lord, what if his friends *had* come back with him? All he could see of her in the shadows were two huge eyes in a face that was ghost-white where it was not mud-streaked, topped with clumps of colorless hair. Arms and legs poked out from the rags like sticks, and an aura of what?—kennel, kitchen, swamp—hung over the whole corner like a bad dream. At least no one would recognize her for a lady. Hah!

"You still look like an unfledged nestling," he told her, finally beginning to see the humor of anyone mistaking this guttersnipe for a gently born female. He headed back toward the chair, apologizing that she improved with the distance, and where the hell was Rigg with that coffee anyway? "For I think I am going to need all my wits about me when I hear what you two cawkers are up to."

He was smiling. He was the Smoky she had always known, but oh, dear, where to begin? It wasn't as if he was going to be happy with the idea, she could see that now. She sent a silent appeal to Geoff for help, and he nobly rose to the occasion.

"We, that is, Em, needs to get married."

The amiable gentleman was instantly replaced with a snarling beast, his hands at his brother's throat, lifting him clear off the ground. "Why, you—"

"Not me, Ev!" Geoff croaked, and was dropped.

The earl turned to Emilyann in disgust. "What was he, some good-looking stablehand, or some smooth-talking basket-scrambler? Or maybe he's already married. Is that it?" He sneered. "And what do you think I can do about it? I'm not exactly in prime fiddle to force a duel on some dirty dish so he'll marry you."

Now Emilyann found her voice. No one, not even Smoky, was going to talk to her like that. "Why you ... you miserable mawworm, how dare you think the worst of me like that. As if I would ... And here I came to you for help. Some help, a jug-bitten old soldier"—she emphasized the *old*—"back from a night of hellraking, giving orders and suspecting everyone else of behavior as bad as yours!"

She stood there, arms on her hips, blue eyes flashing, and he laughed, partly in relief that she hadn't been led down the garden path, and partly in memory of a tiny scrap of a girl giving Thornton what-for over some slight. He held his arms open. "Hallo, Sparrow," he said, and she walked into them, rags, aroma, and all.

"Hi, Smoky."

Rigg almost dropped the tray, coming back to the room to find his master holding the raggedy urchin. "That will be all, Private."

Rigg shut his mouth enough to say "yessir." He set the tray down with a thump and about-faced to march to his own room, shaking his head and vowing to burn that shirt the captain had on.

There, she was safe now, protected in Smoky's arms. She could tell her story, ending with "I really had no choice. I just couldn't stay there, not after he hit me."

He held her away from him and gently cupped her chin, turning her face to the light. His eyes narrowed to steel-gray slits when he saw the bruise there, under the grime. "What did you do then?"

"I ... I kicked him."

"Where I taught you?"

She just nodded, looking down.

“Good girl.”

Geoffrey cheered. “I hope you put paid to *his* getting the heir, Emmy,” he said, which earned him such a scowl from his brother that he decided a nap might be in order. Yawning mightily, he sprawled across Stokely’s bed, his back to the other two.

“Such subtlety,” complimented the captain, indicating that Emilyann take Geoff’s vacated seat. She poured him out coffee first, and then, deciding a slightly fuddled Smoky might be easier to deal with after all, poured some brandy into his cup, too, while he was busy finding his slippers.

Smoky finally settled, the cup on his knee. “All right, my girl, let’s hear what feat of derring-do you expect from me. I’m sure you’ve some feather-headed scheme in mind.” He took a sip of coffee, only raising one eyebrow at the taste.

Then she said, “I want you to marry me,” and he spilled the hot liquid down his shirt.

“Damn, Sparrow, you shouldn’t say such things to a fellow.”

“But I am serious, Smoky. I need you to marry me. You are old enough, and have a title and property and you’re even a hero! There is no way Uncle Morgan could withhold his permission, not when my own father once approved.”

His lordship stopped dabbing with his napkin at the brown stain to look at her again: a bedraggled, undernourished elf in ragpicker’s hand-me-downs pouring coffee like a duchess.

He shouldn’t have laughed. He knew it the moment her spine stiffened and a very determined nose, slightly tilted, lifted in the air. Maybe it was the alcohol clouding his mind, but damn if he didn’t laugh again.

Lord Stokely may have been in his altitudes, but Lady Emilyann Arcott was very much on her dignity.

“Laugh now, my lord,” she announced in a frigid tone, unfolding one of her documents, the special license. “But marry me you shall. I don’t think you’d find it funny in the least when I take you to court for breach of promise.” She unfolded a second paper. “Our fathers agreed to the marriage in a legal contract.”

“And rescinded it later.”

“But not on paper.” She unfolded her last page. “You wrote me a promise, swearing to marry me anyway.”

“I was sixteen! You were a lonely little girl at school.”

“It’s evidence.”

He was still smiling, still drinking coffee, another cup with additions. “It won’t hold up in court, minx, and you know it.”

“But it might hold up in the newspapers. If you don’t agree to marry me, I’ll see that all of London laughs at you. And if you don’t care, think of poor, worthy Thornton, or Nadine, what a scandal in the family could do to her chances of making a good match.”

One side of his mouth quirked up in a lazy smile. “Blackmail, Sparrow?”

She jumped up and stamped her foot. “I’ll do it, Smoky, so help me I will.”

The other side of his mouth joined in the humor, and she sat down again. They both knew she never would. Emilyann shrugged and smiled back at him. It was a good try, and she wasn’t finished yet. Smoky sat quietly in a state of happy relaxation, enjoying the play of emotions across her face and cheerfully awaiting the next round of machinations. He did not have to wait long.

“You know, Smoky, Stockton is going to rack and ruin without you. Old Mr. Taylor, your estate manager, is going deaf, and even if he could hear, there’s nothing he can do without money. He can’t buy equipment or stock or seed or food for the workers’ families when times are hard. I’ll come into a great deal of money when I marry, and possibly more if there is an heir to my father’s dukedom. Even without, think of all that could be done with a fortune.”

“From blackmail to bribery, eh?” he teased. “You must have spent time with my sister. She’s always writing that I should marry an heiress so she can be presented at court with all the pageantry her mercenary little heart desires.”

“Of course I know about Nadine’s wish to go to London for her come-out. The whole county knows about it. And that’s another thing, Smoky. Not just the money, but your sister is getting a sorry reputation, and your younger brother is going to need some occupation, surely not as a scholar, and your properties need someone to oversee them while you are gone. I could help.”

“She’s right, Ev,” Geoff put in, giving up the pretense of not listening. “The place needs a lot of

improvements, and I've got some capital ideas about modernizing. Been reading the farm journals, you know."

The captain opened his eyes wider. "No, I didn't know. From what I heard, you never read anything at all."

"That's just school. But the agricultural experiments ..."

"See, Smoky, you don't even know what's happening at home."

"Don't start spouting about my selling out, either of you. I heard all I need to hear on the topic from Thornton. And I know little brother is returning to school so he learns more than to be a farmer."

"Too late," Geoff brightly declared. "They won't let me back in. So if you marry Emmy, the two of us can take care of the estate and you won't have to sell out at all."

"Thank you," Stokely said dryly. "The way the two of you handled this mangle-mangle, there will be nothing left to come home to. And what's this about Nadine? I thought Aunt Adelaide had the chit in hand."

So they told him about Nadine's flirts: the gardener's boy, the parson's rector, Squire Dickerson, and how whenever Nadine was likely to create a scene Aunt Adelaide would "go off."

"Gads, Dickerson's fifty if he's a day! You mean she just leaves the chit to make micefeet of her reputation?"

Emilyann was giggling. Smoky was rubbing that scar on his jaw. "She don't go off visiting," Geoff had to explain, "she 'goes off' in a near constant swoon. Always manages to land on a sofa or chair, too."

When they were finished laughing, Emilyann addressed him again: "You see. Smoky, you need to get your house in order, and I can do it"

"But those are all the wrong reasons for marrying, poppet. It's not like buying a pair of shoes or hiring a housekeeper."

"But you are my only hope, Smoky. I have no other choices."

"You always have choices," he told her, reaching to pat her hand. Then he suggested that since it was almost dawn anyway, Geoff go fetch them some hot rolls from the bakery a few blocks away.

"What, and leave you two alone?"

"It's a little late for propriety's sake, bantling," Stokely told him, tossing a pouch of coins.

"Who cares for propriety? I'm just worried you'll murder each other."

"Well, little one," Stokely asked after the door was shut behind Geoff, "have you used all your ammunition?"

Blue eyes twinkled up at him. "I haven't tried tears yet."

"Heaven help me from the heavy artillery! Truly, though, Sparrow, I can fix things without such drastic measures. I can stay a day or two." He held up one graceful hand. "Old Hooky won't be best pleased, but the Corsican won't run over the allied forces without me there, at least not for the time it would take to see your Mr. Baxley and put the fear of God into your uncle and that jackanapes Bobo. I have friends about, men who have served with me, who would be eager to look after you. I'm sure I could locate other officers' wives who would be willing to act as chaperone, you know, be hostess for a season or two. As for the other, my family isn't your responsibility. The war won't last forever, then I'll come take charge. I'm not entirely below the hatches, you know, despite my father and old Taylor. So you see, you don't have to worry about anything; you don't have to fear anything."

"I wouldn't be afraid, Smoky, but I still wouldn't be free either. I couldn't travel or pick my own friends or purchase a horse for myself or even make sure my money is invested properly. Don't laugh. I've had nothing to do this past year but study such details. You've always made your own choices; why shouldn't I? I don't mean to set myself up as some independent eccentric, I just want to make some of the decisions in my life, just till you come home."

"I see what it is, you want the convenience of a spouse's name without having to put up with his daily presence. How fortunate your chosen husband is a soldier with a war going on."

"Don't tease, Smoky. I am serious."

"I know you are, pet, that's what worries me." He studied his fingernails. "What if you, ah, fall in love with another man while I am gone? You are young, you've never been out in the world. Maybe your head is filled with romantic dreams that could come true one day. It's entirely possible. What would you do then,

leg-shackled to an old war-horse?"

"More likely you'll fall in love with an opera-dancer or something. Don't look daggers at me. I know all about those things. And I have thought it all out. We could get an annulment when you return if we find we do not suit. After all, the marriage will not have been consummated, will it?"

Smoky choked. "It most certainly will not!" The idea of bedding this tattered waif was thoroughly unappealing, nearly indecent.

"Well, that's all right, then, as long as Uncle Morgan thinks it's a real marriage. He'll know I spent the night here, and with your reputation ..."

"My reputation is for a deal more discrimination, miss, and no, we shall not discuss opera-dancers and the like. Annulments indeed. What a topic for a delicate maiden. Who knows, you might get lucky and end up a widow."

"Smoky! Don't even joke about that!" She jumped up and took his hand between her grubby ones and knelt at his feet. "You have to come home."

"Of course, the heir," he said lightly, smoothing the irregular tousles of her hair. "Nice to know that someone will be praying for at least parts of me to come back intact."

"Now who's talking improperly?" she wanted to know, looking down to hide her blush.

He tilted her face up and, taking a serviette from the coffee tray, began wiping at the smudges there. "Is this what you really want, Sparrow?" A brilliant smile was his answer, blue eyes shining.

* * * *

"Good going, Emmy," Geoff enthused on his return. Pounding his brother on the back, he chuckled. "I knew all along you would do it"

"So did I," muttered the Earl of Stokely. He shrugged. "Well, let's do it, then. You and I, Geoff, are about to go ruffle a lot of feathers. Nothing like shaking a flock of stuffy old men out of their beds. Great Zeus, solicitors and sermonizers, and the sun's not even up.... And Rigg," he called louder, "you can stop listening at the door and get out here on the double. You've got a harder job yet."

The red-faced private stood at bandy-legged attention, eyes forward, chest out, even when the captain introduced him to the future Lady Stokely. His

round chest swelled even more when his officer said, “Don’t worry, my dear, I’ve trusted Rigg with my life countless times. You can trust him.” But tears came to his eyes and the twin mustachios drooped when the captain gave his final orders: “Make her presentable, Rigg. I’ll not wed a hobbledehoy ragamuffin in britches.”

* * * *

A short time later, on what was the start of a gorgeous sunny morning, Lady Emilyann Arcott was finally wed to Captain Everett Stockton, Lord Stokely. The groom was attended by his brother, his solicitor, and his batman. He wore his second best uniform, and his eyes were only a trifle bloodshot. The bride was given away by Mr. Baxley, her man of business; her matron of honor was the vicar’s plump wife, who wept through the thankfully brief ceremony. The bride’s cheeks were red from scrubbing, and she clutched a nosegay of violets hastily purchased from an early morning street vendor. She wore an exquisite white lace mantilla held by an ivory comb—and the bridegroom’s lace-trimmed nightshirt. Her bare feet hardly showed.

Chapter Six

Marry in haste; repent at leisure. But in the middle of a war? Captain Lord Stokely spent the first hours of his marriage giving orders, deploying his ragtag troops, and signing papers. He affixed his name to the marriage license, a settlement deed, a new will, a quitclaim to his wife’s property, and a power of authority, all in Emilyann’s favor. He also sent off notices of the wedding, details omitted, naturally, to the newspapers, his brother Thornton, and, with great satisfaction, Emilyann’s uncle, Lord Aylesbury. Next he saw his child-bride off on her way home, in a carriage, in a dress, with his brother, a maid, and a draft on his bank.

Her readymade dress was at least two sizes too big, the best poor Rigg could do—hell, cannons and bayonets were less scarifying to the bewhiskered batman than frippery doodads and snooty dressmakers. The front was looking better to him all the time. Emilyann’s bonnet was an atrocious concoction of feathers, flowers, and fruit, but she wore

Smoky's gold signet ring on her wedding finger and a brilliant smile on her pixie face as she listened carefully to his firm instructions about her future conduct.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Stokely congratulated himself and Rigg, whose hands were still shaking. "We even brushed through in plenty of time to meet the ship at Portsmouth."

He hardly gave another thought to the matter, beyond a few chuckles, until rejoining the army and reporting back to his commander. Word of the nuptials had already reached him, and not for nothing was Wellington called the Iron General.

"I don't like it, boy, do you hear me? I don't like my junior officers involved in any havey-cavey affairs. You knew that when you signed on, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"It looks bad for the army, bad for the country, bad for me, do you understand, Captain? My men don't rape and plunder; my officers do not ruin gently bred females and get wed in hole-in-corner fashion!"

"Sir, it was nothing like that. In truth, it was quickly decided, but there was a long-term understanding."

"And the gel ain't breeding?"

"Certainly not, sir." Stokely stood even straighter. Gads, did the old man think he was a child molester?

"Harrumph. She better not be or I'll have your resignation on my desk before you can say Jack Rabbit. I don't like my officers married even, don't like 'em distracted, don't like 'em overly cautious. She ain't goin' to be hangin' on your coattails, weepin' and beggin' you to come home, is she?"

"No, sir. My Em is pluck to the backbone. She has plenty of bottom."

"I don't like creatin' widows either, by George, and I hate like hell makin' orphans. You're a damned fine tactician, boy, one of the finest, but I won't keep any man at the front whose mind ain't on the job to hand. There's too many other lives at stake, you know."

"Yes, sir. That is no, sir. Thank you, sir. My, ah, wife is well provided for and shall not cause me any concern which might interfere with my duties."

"I ain't seen the woman yet who didn't ... but you remember what I said. Carry on, Captain."

Stokely saw no cause for concern. He did not feel any different, being leg-shackled, nor was he crushed

by any mounting responsibilities. Sparrow and Geoff would play at handling things, and he would take care of everything else when the fighting was done. A soldier learned fatalism early, never making too many plans for when the war was over anyway; too many of his friends wouldn't be going back home at all.

No, things had worked out for the best, and the captain saw no difficulties. He had given Sparrow explicit instructions: do not overspend what the estates could hope to pay back in the near future, for he would not live off her wealth; do not go near her uncle; stay away from public appearances until he was there to help her take her rightful place in society.

If she followed his directives, there would be no problems beyond minor childish scrapes, and he could proceed wholeheartedly with the job of defeating Bonaparte. Why should he worry? He was an officer in the army. Everyone obeyed his orders.

* * * *

It took Emilyann longer to get around some of Smoky's mandates than others, and some lapses were not entirely her fault, like seeing her uncle. She had to retrieve her parents' portraits and her clothes, didn't she? And Jake, and her mare, and a little bit of her pride. She waited to be sure Uncle Morgan had Smoky's letter and the London papers with her wedding announcement before visiting with Geoff and Nadine and two grooms.

Smoky needn't have worried: Uncle Morgan had been passed-out drunk for three days. She gathered her belongings, offered positions to any of the staff who wished to join her, and left her hastily engraved new card, one corner carefully turned down to indicate that Lady Emilyann, Countess of Stokely, had called in person. Let him swallow that!

Then there was the issue of her not going out into society. As soon as word reached Northampshire, however, local society came to her. At first all the old biddies came, paying respects to the new bride, they said. Checking to see if she was increasing, more likely. She couldn't let the gossip-mongers ruin her good name, or Smoky's, she wrote him, by hiding and acting as if she had something to be ashamed about. She didn't, and wouldn't, so she had to be seen at the local assemblies. Furthermore, he wouldn't want her to be rude to the neighborhood gentry by refusing their

company, so she had to accept dinner engagements and invitations to private parties, and then she had to repay the calls and hospitality, didn't she? It was good practice for his sister, too.

And do you know what? she wrote to Smoky. *Everyone seems to like me. I suppose that's what comes of being a rich, titled married lady. Even Squire Kimball has forgiven us for the orchard incident, and Vicar has not mentioned the ant colonies in at least a month. So you needn't be concerned that I am not fit for polite company.*

Finally, there was the money. She was not about to live like a pauper anymore, not when she was a wealthy young woman. Her old home was turning into a crumbling mausoleum through lack of funds and attention; her new one would not follow suit. No more cheeseparing, no more dilapidated furnishings or cold and damp accommodations. But new carpets made the draperies look faded, and new, bright hangings showed how threadbare the upholstery had become. Simply taking charge of the household showed how the china was chipped, mice had gotten into the pantries, the linens were darned past redemption, and the servants needed new livery, especially if they were to be inundated with callers eager to find fault with the new mistress of Stockton Manor.

Coming out of mourning, Emilyann also needed an entire new wardrobe, since her schoolgirlish frocks were hardly suited to a countess, or her still slim but more mature figure. She could not spend days shopping and being fitted without taking her new sister-in-law, who knew more about fashions than Em ever would, or would care to, or dear silly Aunt Adelaide, who was so pleased to hand over the managing of the place. Of course those ladies needed new outfits, too.

Then there was the estate, and Geoff's pigs. She read his journals with more enthusiasm than she read Nadine's *La Belle Assemblée* and came to agree that hogs and turnips were indeed the crops of the future. Geoff came to learn not to let her make pets of the piglets, or he'd never get any to market. As for the tenant farmers, Emilyann believed with all her heart that those old friends who shared their lemonade and fresh bread with a hobbledehoy little tomboy deserved better conditions now that hers were so improved.

She also decided to reestablish her father's racing stud at Stockton, as an investment. Breeding mares, proven stallions, and likely young colts all took money, men to care for them, and decent stabling conditions. Of course she had Jake to advise her, and he knew all there was to know about horses, as she wrote to Stokely, so there was sure to be a profit in a few years.

Smoky wrote a letter back, forbidding her to do any such thing as pour a fortune into four-footed gluttons, no matter how fast. Unfortunately, she replied, the mails were so slow, two mares were already in foal. Did he have any preferences for names?

Wife, he wrote, I have received letters from my bank, my man of business, and my brother Thornton. What in hell are you doing?

What she was doing was having the time of her life. She had a family and friends and looked better than she had in years. She kept busy using her head and time and money, all for good purposes, doing what she was born and bred to do, and coincidentally proving to Smoky that she could manage. Repent the hasty marriage? Not on your life.

* * * *

"Repent, ye sinners! Repent your evil ways before your souls burn in eternity. Repent, I say!"

Hell and damnation, indeed. What in bloody hell was Morgan Arcott doing sitting on a deuced hard pew at one of the Reverend Brother Blessed's spiritual meetings? Trying to turn his wife up sweet again, that was what. Might as well try to teach a cow to sing. He repented, all right. He repented that damned marriage, letting the chit slip through his fingers that way. His sources of credit had dried as fast as the ink on the wedding lines, forcing him back to Ingrid, who was fool enough to give his niece her blessings—and a damned pricy tea service.

"Renounce the temptations of the flesh; that way lies perdition." Hah! The last time Ingrid was tempted by the flesh she had another serving of roast beef. With her hair scraped back from her sharp features, and her perpetual mourning clothes shaped like sacks, not even Old Nick would be lured by her.

"Reject the devil-worship of greed, money, and ambition. Repent! Repent!" Now, that was more like it, Morgan decided. Maybe Ingrid would begin to see the evil of her ways and feel the urge to share some of her

wealth. Give to the needy, sister, and one of the neediest was sitting beside her. Clutch-fisted old bat could line Brother Blessed's pockets and let her own husband punt on tick. Damn! And double damn his brother. Now, there was a soul he'd like to see writhe in Satan's grasp. Repent, hell, Morgan wanted revenge!

He wanted the money, he wanted the heir, and he could not see his way to either of them now. At least his miserable niece wasn't breeding—his spies in Arstock kept him well informed—so there was no immediate danger from her. Those threats from Stokely held his hand from any thoughts of danger to her, especially since Emilyann's money would only go into the Stockton coffers now anyway. Besides, with any luck, and the Lord knew Morgan was due for some luck, that rackety hero of hers would get himself killed in the wars. No, his only hope was Ingrid, or getting rid of her.

"The true jewels of life are piety and purity; do not seek the false gems of earthly trappings."

Now, how did the fellow know Ingrid's diamonds were paste? Morgan had been selling off the Arcott jewels one by one, after having copies of the entailed heirlooms made for the vaults. Never mind hell, he'd go straight to Newgate for that if old Baxley got wind of it.

"Elevate your mind to the Almighty! Divorce yourself from the bondage of the body!"

Well, there was always divorce. It took time and a lot of money and made a scandal, none of which mattered if he had any grounds for getting rid of the sanctimonious albatross legally. Barrenness was legitimate, but there was the evidence, albeit weak, of Bobo. Adultery? Not even Golden Ball had enough blunt to hire some poor blighter to seduce her, for a crim. con. case.

"The devil reads your mind. You cannot hide your evil thoughts. Get them from you. Banish them. Cleanse yourself in a spiritual rebirth!"

A new wife, that was it. Morgan knew he was virile enough for a fruitful young bride if only he were free. Unfortunately, he was a coward. Just enough of Ingrid's preachings had roosted in the tiniest corner of his shriveled heart, just enough to cause a niggling, nagging fear of that eternal hell she was so sure of. The fear wasn't enough to keep him from shaving the cards, of course. A fellow had to get by, you know. But

it did stop him short of killing his wife.

"And the Lord helps those who help themselves." So bad oysters and loose saddlegirths didn't count. "Let us bow our heads and pray for salvation that we may leave this mortal coil for a better life." Morgan's *amen* was the loudest in the room.

* * * *

Lady Ingrid Aylesbury returned to Arcott Hall in Northampshire for her health. She felt her life's work was in the city, where evil abounded, and Brother Blessed was there to give spiritual guidance, but even the staunchest warrior in the battle against sin had to rest from his wounds occasionally. She never did find out how those wild mushrooms got into her stuffed capon, or why the fireplace in her bedroom should be stuffed with rags. Perhaps it was all part of a divine plan to bring spiritual fulfillment to the ignorant masses in the countryside.

She burned every pack of cards in the house, those devil's hymnals, and threw Emilyann's collection of novels out in the trash bin, where the maids retrieved them and had the housekeeper read aloud about the Masked Marquis and Dimquith the Demon. The girls trembled in their cots at night and went stumbling to Ingrid's prayer meetings in the morning.

It was Ingrid's mission to spread righteousness, and her right as the highest-ranking lady in the vicinity to oversee the morals of the neighborhood. The path to salvation may have started at home, but it led straight to her niece's door.

There were to be no more social at-homes on Sunday, no gambling, no waltz lessons. Emilyann's bodices were to start no lower than the collarbone and her hair, in that deplorable crop, must be covered by a cap. She must stop riding about the countryside giving orders; that was man's work.

"And I'll wager I shouldn't dampen my skirts, either," Emilyann said, just to see her aunt's lips move in silent prayer. Not that Lady Stokely's elegant new muslins and silks needed any artifice, nor would she be goosish enough to want clammy fabric draped to her legs, but Aunt Ingrid was so easy to send into the boughs. Ingrid had never approved of her niece, Emilyann knew, thinking her a wayward chit, not good enough for her precious Beauregard. But cropped hair indeed! One of the most expensive coiffeurs in London

had come here to style Em's shorn locks into a halo of white-gold curls. Monsieur had gone into raptures; even Geoff had acknowledged it was better than that flyaway mop she used to wear. No matter, she nodded politely at her aunt, agreeing to anything that might shorten her aunt's visit. Then she could return to practicing the dances, for after the card party she was giving next week.

Ingrid's lips trembled, but she knew her duty, especially now that Bobo was safe. There was no one else to see the motherless child through the rocky shoals of marriage. "You poor neglected orphan," she told Emilyann, who looked around her elegant new morning room, searching for a destitute tot. Nanny was over in the corner with her mending, scowling. At least she hadn't fled like Nadine and Aunt Adelaide, at Ingrid's all-to-frequent visits of enlightenment.

"I always told Morgan you were not to blame for growing like a wild weed instead of a tender blossom. Never knowing a mother's care, it was too easy to fall into headstrong ways. Now that you are married, you need the guidance of an older woman. There are certain—"

"Too kind, dear Aunt Ingrid," Emilyann hurriedly interrupted before her aunt could start a lecture on wifely duties, as if her marriage to Uncle Morgan were an example of heavenly bliss. "But you really need not worry. My lord writes that he is quite pleased with me and all my domestic accomplishments."

That was not quite true. What Smoky wrote in his last letter was that he was happy Mr. Offitt was not threatening to sue him anymore over her last investment, and thank you for the socks, or were they mittens?

Aunt Ingrid was relieved, both that Stokely was not disgusted with the girl yet, and that she would not have to explain certain delicate matters. "Fine, fine. And you must consider yourself fortunate as a young bride, with your husband a soldier abroad, not having to put up with all that."

"All that?"

"You know, what we were talking about."

Mittens?

"Of course you'll be denied the joys of motherhood."

Oh, *that*.

"Yes, the ultimate fulfillment for a woman, if she

lives through it, of course. There was your mother, and Morgan's first wife, and Stokely's stepmama and ..."

Emilyann suddenly decided to put "all that" off as long as possible.

"Nevertheless, I pray for the captain's safe return nightly."

"Thank you, Aunt. So do I."

Dear Smoky, she wrote, you are in our thoughts and our prayers. The fire at the granary was not extensive. Please don't feel you have to hurry home on my account.

Chapter Seven

"I don't see why we cannot go to London like everyone else," Nadine whined. She was sitting in the morning room, nibbling macaroons and practicing flirtatious looks over the top of her new chicken-skin fan.

Emilyann looked up from the journal she was reading, considering new designs—for plowshares, not gowns. "What was that?"

Nadine screwed up her face. "You heard very well, you just think you can ignore me. For the hundredth time, why can't we go to London for the Peace Celebrations?"

"For the hundredth time, we cannot go because Smoky specifically told us not to."

"Oh, pooh, you know he specifically told you not to invest in that shipping venture, either."

"That was simply because he did not have all the information to hand. When I explained how I made the captain's personal acquaintance and found the other investors to be very astute businessmen, Smoky agreed."

"After you had already made a handsome profit, you mean. And what about the fox hunt? You know Stokely told you that you could not forbid the hunt to pass through Stockton lands without offending the local gentry."

"He also told me not to hand-rear those fox kits, a full month after I had them weaned—and released into the home woods. What was I supposed to do? Let Squire ride down two half-tamed innocents waiting for a handout? Squire would have looked foolish. Besides, Smoky was not familiar with the hogs, and how upset

they would have been with the horses riding past.”

“Like when he told you to fix the drains first and then the thatch on the old cottages by the mill?”

“It was simply a matter of timing. You know very well his letter came after the matchers were already at work.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Smoky understood.”

“Gammon. You just don’t want to go to London because you’re too content to wallow here with Geoff’s pigs. Either that or you’re afraid you won’t take.”

“Nadine Stockton, what a nasty, spiteful thing to say. Has anyone told you lately what a spoiled child you’ve become?”

“Yes, Thornton does all the time and your Nanny nags, too, and you are beginning to sound just like them! Even Aunt Ingrid is beginning to approve of you. Bobo says—”

“Bobo?”

“Well, yes. You know he is rusticating with his mama. I danced with him at the Finley-Bourns’s ball. Oh, I think you were discussing that tiresome fence with Mr. Offitt at the time. And you were out with that man Jake at the horse auction when he came to call yesterday. He stayed to tea,” Nadine said around another macaroon.

“Did you count the silverware?” Emilyann moved the dish. No wonder Bobo appealed to the girl: they would both soon be fat as flawsns.

Nadine pouted. “Well, *I* think he’s very nice. He’s looking top of the trees, too. You don’t have to smile. Just because you are skinny does not mean it is fashionable,” she preened, wriggling her rounded dumpling of a body. “And Bobo knows everyone in London. You should hear him tell about the fireworks displays and how the streets were all lined with people when the tsar arrived and how there are more fetes every night than anyone can attend.” Her fan waved furiously in her enthusiasm. “And I am stuck here in the country, where nothing ever happens. Emmy, I am nearly seventeen! I’ll be on the shelf soon if I don’t get to London and find a husband! Why, you were already married when you were my age. Of course, your aunt Ingrid says—”

“Aunt Ingrid has been entertaining some very odd notions lately,” Emilyann put in hurriedly. “She hasn’t been feeling at all the thing since Uncle Morgan’s last

visit; she's even complaining that her tooth powder tastes peculiar."

"But Bobo says even she is considering returning to London before the end of the victory celebrations."

Emilyann turned the page of her journal, tired of the discussion. "Yes, well, perhaps we shall get there, too, if Smoky comes home in time."

"He's been gone over a year this time," Nadine wailed, throwing down the fan. "All the other officers are returning. I don't see why Stokely can't."

Emilyann stood and picked up the fan. She smoothed the feather tips between her fingers and tried once more to stay patient with her sister-in-law. "He explained it very carefully, that it was an honor to be asked to help establish the peacekeeping forces in Belgium. Lord Wellington himself asked Smoky to stay on until a new command staff can be assembled. There were so many losses at Toulouse, you know, that experienced officers are in short supply. The Congress of Vienna will be convening shortly, anyway, and then it is just a matter of time before the peace is finalized and all the troops can come home. Since Smoky will be selling out, it only seemed fair to let the other officers have leave first, before they rejoin the army or go off to the American conflict."

"You know what I think?" Nadine asked with a sneer. "I think you're glad. I think you are going along just as you please, managing everything and everybody, and you don't even care if the war lasts forever. I bet you'd be happy if Stokely never came home!"

"Hateful little shrew!" Emilyann shouted back, shaking the fan under Nadine's nose. "Don't you ever, ever say such a thing! I have been waiting forever for Smoky to come home. And he will; he promised me. Just because he's the finest, bravest, most honorable officer there ever was, and won't go back on his responsibilities so some foolish little girl can attend her silly parties ..."

The fan didn't last long.

* * * *

Nadine apologized sweetly. How could she have been such a wretch to dear Emilyann, who had done so much for her and the family? She would be content to stay in the country, she swore, even if all the local boys did have hay in their hair, except Bobo, of course.

And Emilyann bought her a new fan, with turquoise ostrich feathers this time, to dazzle the rustics. And she threw her first large entertainment, to encourage Nadine's local swains, except Bobo, of course. And she did a lot of serious thinking.

She was almost nineteen now, and she had never had a London season either. She would like to see the spectacles, too, and all the other evils Aunt Ingrid was always nattering on about, like the theater and Vauxhall Gardens. The lands were prospering, her investments were earning returns, her remodeling projects were nearly accomplished— and where the deuce was Smoky? If she felt a trifle guilty for enjoying herself too much in his absence, she also reasoned that she had worked very hard on his behalf. Now she wanted to show him the fruits of her labors, convince him that he hadn't married such a ninnyhammer and an antidote to boot.

Of course he had responsibilities, and of course the peace treaties would be signed soon, but perhaps, just perhaps, he could have come home for two weeks in the past year or so if he wanted to. Which was the rub, naturally. It was perfectly reasonable that she was not overeager to become a wife in deed as well as name, and understandable that she might be nervous about his return. But if he was not returning because he didn't want to return, if he would rather stay in some bloody war rather than come home and be her husband, if he was ashamed of her—then she would show him a thing or two. The Countess of Stokely did not have to vegetate in the backwaters growing pigfeed and crocheting, as if she knew how, during the biggest celebrations of the century, not on any overbearing soldier's selfish whim.

Dear Smoky, I hope this finds you well. Thank you for the package of Brussels lace you sent. Did you really watch the women making it? Nadine is busy steeping hers in tea for the aged look she swears is all the crack now. Nanny is helping me use mine to retrim a boring gown. See how frugal I have learned to be?

Speaking of saving money, I have been thinking of refurbishing the London town house so that it might be rented out rather than sit empty for years, growing stale and shabby. I understand houses are being let at remarkably high prices now, with so many dignitaries and hangers-on in town. I would have to supervise the

work myself, of course, which would involve moving the rest of the household to London for a brief time, which I cannot but think would be to everyone's benefit, despite your worries.

I know you felt we should do better in the country for the time being, but I think you might not have considered all the facts of the matter. To wit, your sister is growing into a beauty, and unfortunately knows it. She really needs a bigger pond in which to swim, the local swains offering no challenge. I fear she is fixing her interest with Bobo, of all people. I cannot decide if he loiters about the place for Nadine's sake or Cook's excellent pastries, which interest they have in common.

Geoff, meanwhile, is in danger of turning into the complete farmer, as you feared. It is all we can do to get him to change for dinner. I myself would not find a little town bronze amiss, between visits to the warehouses and linen drapers. I have been most eager to view the new British Museum with Lord Elgin's treasures, and to hear that soprano everyone raves about. La Catalani. You see, nothing exceptional.

Aunt Ingrid is thinking of returning to town now that she is recovered from the carriage accident, so we shall have the most rigorous of overseers. Aunt believes the peace talks need her blessing.

How are the treaty negotiations going anyhow? We hear so little, here in the country. Oh, and Nanny is sending you some handkerchiefs. Nadine says that I should write that I embroidered the monograms myself, but you would not have believed a word of it, would you? Which is by way of saying you can trust me.

There, I am sure I have overcome all your objections. Do you have any preferences for colors for the London drawing room, and was there any of the old staff you wished to see rehired?

Of course if your orders are changed, we would naturally be delighted to await your homecoming in Arstock, so do keep us informed. I hope that day comes soon, Smoky. As ever, Sparrow.

* * * *

The mails were more reliable now that hostilities were over, and a letter could reach Smoky in Brussels in less than two weeks, Emilyann estimated, especially since he was no longer moving around with a marching army. He had won promotion to major, too, and the higher the rank, she was sure, the quicker the

mail was sorted and delivered. So there were perhaps ten days before he had her letter, another ten before his response. She foresaw no difficulty; they would be making their curtsies at Almacks long before that.

As she told Nadine, it was all a matter of timing.

* * * *

Major Lord Stokely thought bald men looked silly, otherwise he'd tear his hair out. He was drowning in paperwork, choking on conflicting orders, and being nibbled to death by the ducks of diplomacy. And his little peahen of a wife was going to London! She had dirty-dish relatives, a near-scandalous marriage, no looks, and about as much sense of self-preservation as a kitten. She would hate all the petty strictures and she'd flaunt whichever didn't suit her.

Gads, those dragons of the ton would eat a spirited girl like her alive, and spit her reputation out in shreds. With no proper sponsor but a psalm-singing fanatic, and no chaperone except Aunt Adelaide, who could be counted on for a season-long swoon, Sparrow wouldn't be received in the polite world. The impolite world, filled with hardened libertines and fortune-hunters, would welcome a fresh-hatched chick like her with open arms. His baby-faced brother could be counted on to outrun the constable, and that sad romp of a sister needed a lot heavier hand on the reins than Sparrow's if she wasn't to disgrace them all.

To top it off, Stockton House in London was a moldering pile that would take a king's ransom to restore. He would have sold it long ago if he could have found a buyer stupid enough. Of all Sparrow's cork-brained schemes, this one took the prize. Those unprotected innocents had no more business in London than he did behind a desk in Brussels. He couldn't leave Belgium; they couldn't leave Northampshire, period. That was it.

Do not go to London, he wrote. How much more explicit could he make it? He sent Rigg to dispatch the letter at once, then he came back to his office, loosened his collar, and put his feet up on the battered desk. He shook his head, smiled, thought how he'd ought to have taken a switch to the chit when she was nine, and wrote the letter over. This copy he sent to Stockton House, Portman Square, London.

Chapter Eight

So he thought they were innocents, did he? From his letters, with all of his do's and don't's, Emilyann gathered that Smoky thought she was still a nine-year-old scamp with a soiled pinafore. One mustn't gallop in Hyde Park, one must always be accompanied by a maid at least, one must not speak to a gentleman unless formally introduced to him. Goodness, one might think she hadn't learned anything at all at Miss Meadow's Academy. She surely had not been instructed in how to keep accounts, or how to trace a broodmare's bloodlines, or when to invest in consols or futurities, so what did Smoky think they taught there, anything practical?

No, she had a head full of paltry rules and trifling data, such as how to greet each level of the peerage, how low to curtsy to each dignitary, and which fork to use at dinner. She knew how to discourage an overheated beau, and how to hold polite conversations with half-deaf dowagers. If she did not always choose to use this education in inconsequentialities, that was a minor point only.

I did not just sprout from under a cabbage leaf, you know, she wrote back to her doubting husband, meanwhile thinking that if Smoky was so sure they would land in the briars without him to watch over them, he should dashed well be there.

Emilyann had intended to keep a quiet profile in London: visit the modiste shops and booksellers, see the historical sights, look up some of her school friends, and take in a few concerts and plays. She would have to see about a presentation at court and their vouchers for Almack's for Nadine's sake, but she truly meant to stay on the outskirts of the ton, more an observer than a participant.

That was before receiving the reams of orders and advice from Major Lord Stokely. Now she was determined to make a splash.

When Emilyann and her entourage arrived at the Pulteney Hotel for a week's stay while the city mansion was being restored to glamour, the hotel staff sniffed as if the aroma of Geoff's hogs had traveled with them. A bit of name-dropping, a lot of largesse, and the little countess became a favored guest, and she hadn't even needed Smoky's instructions. Soon the best couturiers and the premier employment agencies and caterers to

the elite were sending emissaries, leaving gratuities for the porter for the references, *certainement*. Bankers and merchants and carriage makers filed through her suite, and then, after she began making morning calls and leaving cards, dowagers and debs.

Many of her former schoolmates were easy to locate; anyone not already married was in London for the season, hunting. They wholeheartedly welcomed Emilyann back to their friendships as someone who was wealthy, titled, fun-loving—and absolutely no threat to their capturing a *parti* of their own. She even had a charming brother-in-law, a bit young but sweet. Of course they would be pleased to extend invitations to their balls and Venetian breakfasts.

To her father's friends, the diplomats and politicians who used to attend house parties at Arcott Hall, Emilyann was a cherished recollection, Aylesbury's moppet. She was as dear to them now as any young woman they did not have to feed, clothe, or provide with a dowry. They made sure their wives and secretaries put her on the lists for state dinners and soirees.

Even Aunt Ingrid was moved to do her part. Back in town for the Peace Celebrations, surely a praiseworthy occasion, Ingrid was convinced her cachet was all-important to Emilyann's success, not that being accepted by the leaders of the ton was on a scale with being welcomed to heaven by a band of trumpeting angels, Ingrid disdained such worldly pursuits for herself, of course, but her harum-scarum niece was just as likely to set the town on its ear if not guided properly.

Lady Aylesbury shuddered to think of even more scandal and shame touching her family. It was her duty to see that Emilyann had the proper introductions and supervision. If, in the meantime, Ingrid was pressured into purchasing new gowns and wearing the Arcott emeralds now and again, it was all toward a higher good. She had to attend that tiresome marriage-mart at Almack's and those insipid come-outs anyway, if she was to find Bobo a suitable mate. Her husband might not be welcomed at routs and receptions and ladies' teas, but no one refused a duchess, no matter how eccentric.

When the house was ready, Emilyann was ready. She had the start of her new wardrobe, all bright

colors and vibrant fabrics, not the sprigs and calicos suitable for country life. She had an elegantly appointed, well-staffed mansion, and a hall table full of invitations. She had an experienced abigail, a full cellar, and a still-healthy bank account.

What she did not have was the continued support of her most loyal followers. Nadine, Aunt Adelaide, Nanny, and Geoffrey all wanted to go home within the first month. Emilyann had been too busy showing Smoky how wrong he was about herself to see how right he had been about the rest of the family.

Don't let Nadine have her head, he'd written. But Emilyann hated checkreins; how could she impose them on another? So she made Nadine an allowance, hired a maid to accompany her, and made sure she knew the rules as well. She could trust Nadine not to jeopardize her own chances, she had thought. Smoky would have every right to call her a dunderhead or worse—if she ever mentioned the matter to him.

"Mrs. Drummond-Burrell said I had country manners!" Nadine howled, red-faced and weeping.

"She told me she thought you were too young to make your come-out. I had to disagree, naturally, but I thought we discussed how they did not do the contra dances here with quite as much enthusiasm as you were wont to see at the local assemblies."

"Sally Jersey said I was fast." Sob.

"Yes, but you knew you should not go onto the balcony with the Mittleborough boy, or that Prussian Hussar, or that ..."

"And Princess Lieven told Aunt Adelaide my dress was farouche. Auntie says that means t-t-terrible."

"I *told* you all the other debutantes would be wearing white. Cherry stripes are not at all the thing for a girl in her first season. Smoky even wrote that specifically. I remember reading it to you."

Sniff. "But you never do what Stokely says. Why should I?"

"Because I am older and married," Emilyann told the girl. She did not add that she had a better head on her shoulders, too. "Moreover," she continued instead, "I do try to listen to Stokely's advice."

"That's a farradiddle if ever I heard one. What about the carriage?"

Emilyann suddenly discovered a spot on the hem of her peach sarcenet gown. "I, ah, suppose you are

referring to my new phaeton. In my previous letter to your brother I mentioned admiring Lord Findley's new equipage, and Smoky wrote back that a high-perch phaeton was too dangerous and too daring, and I was on no account to consider purchasing one. I never did. The seats are much too high to get into gracefully, you know, without showing an undue amount of ankle."

"But?" Nadine asked, smiling now.

"Oh, very well, you wretched girl. But he never mentioned standard phaetons, which are quite two feet lower."

"Don't you think that's cutting hairs?"

Emilyann grinned, showing her dimples. "Don't you think it's the most dashing thing ever?"

"Everyone in Hyde Park certainly did. The way heads were swiveling, I thought the regent himself was out for an airing."

"Oh, but he was. Prinny complimented me on my driving. I must remember to tell Smoky that, for he taught me, you know. Of course I had time to practice on the country roads, and Jake to give me tips, but—whatever is the matter now?"

Nadine was dissolved in tears again. "I can never go back to the park. Ever. They all laughed at me, Emmy!"

Emilyann bit her lip to keep herself from giggling. Nadine was the worst shopper in London, wanting every tasteless frippery she saw in the store windows. She just had to have the parasol with gold tassels, the red slippers with turned-up toes, that outrageous headdress with five ostrich feathers in a rainbow of colors ... and she still needed a new shawl. All the ladies were wearing those brightly woven Kashmir wraps which were, unfortunately, much too dear for Nadine's allowance. Emilyann told her, Nanny told her, even Smoky wrote and told her, *Buy quality*. But Nadine saw a way for her allowance to go further, and bought a shawl of the cheaper dyed India muslin.

So there she was in the park with Aunt Adelaide, in the family chaise, at the appropriate hour of five o'clock, when the ton came out to see and be seen. Soon she was surrounded by a flock of young Tulips, with a scattering of military types. She decided to get down and walk, so her beaux might admire her glorious new ensemble better, the colorful scarf, a lemon-yellow jaconet dress with mulberry ribbons, the

ostrich plumes floating above.

"I'm afraid it might shower, dear," Aunt Adelaide fretted. "Perhaps you shouldn't ..."

"Don't be such a worrier, Auntie," Nadine told her, gaily twirling her parasol.

It wasn't a very hard rain, and did not last long. Just long enough for the parasol to collapse, the ostrich plumes to sag onto Nadine's forehead, the red tips of her slippers to droop into the mud with a squelch, and those bright colors of the shawl to run down her dress, leaving rivulets of dye streaming down her arms.

"I can never show my face in public again! I'm ruined, Emmy, ruined. I want to go home! Aunt Adelaide says she wants to go, too, and Bobo offered to accompany us."

"Bobo? Whyever would that overfed fop leave town at the height of the season?"

"His jackets don't fit so nicely with his arm in the sling, so he thought he may as well rusticate. I tried to tell him he looked heroic— Are you all right? Shall I fetch some water?"

Emilyann held up her hand. "No, no, just fine. What, er, happened to Bobo's arm?"

"Oh, such a silly thing. He tripped on some loose carpet threads outside his mother's door. It's a miracle he didn't fall right down the stairs. Just his shoulder was bruised though, poor thing."

Poor thing, Bobo? No, Nadine could certainly not go home with that oaf. In fact, the best thing all around would be to get her fired off and married soon, before she landed in the basket altogether. That would take a little luck and a lot more management than Nadine was used to, or Emilyann wished to impose. The solution? Blame it on Smoky.

"Your brother insists you stay and have a proper presentation. He writes right here," she said, waving the shopping list, "that I have to make sure you have an acceptable wardrobe and more seemly conduct. If I don't he'll ... he'll sell the phaeton and the racing stock and make me live with Aunt Ingrid."

Nadine looked wide-eyed. "Can he do that?"

Of course he couldn't, and assuredly wouldn't. Didn't the rattlepate know her brother at all? Emilyann was not about to disabuse her of the notion of Smoky as ogre, though, if it kept the minx out of

dark corners and got her into white gowns.

"But white is so boring. I suppose next you'll order me to fold my hands in my lap and sit mumchance through endless piano recitals."

"It would be more suitable, indeed, than going to a military revue with none but your maid and three half-pay officers!"

"But no one likes those dull girls. Even Papa used to say those colorless females were no fun."

"My dear Nadine, are you being guided by your father's conception of how a female should act? The whole county knew his preferences ran to blowzy women with painted faces and easy manners. You cannot be trying to live up, or down, to his values, girl. No one marries those women, not even your papa."

"I shan't take anyway, I know it."

"Not if you proceed the way you've been going," Emilyann agreed. "But there is no reason you can't be one of the season's Incomparables. You know your dark looks are quite the fashion this year, pity us poor blondes, and your figure is everything pleasing if you just refrain from so many desserts. Smoky has set aside a comfortable dowry for you, and your breeding is unexceptionable. We can turn the lady patronesses up sweet with one or two demure morning calls, and the rest of the ton will forget the park incident as soon as Lady Bainbridge takes a new cisisbeo or Prinny insults another German *graf*."

"You really think I can become a Toast?"

"Definitely. If you will be led by those who love you and truly have your best interests at heart, then there is no doubt."

* * * *

Aunt Adelaide had plenty of doubts. *She's just not strong enough for the rigors of the season*, Smoky had written.

"My heart, you know, dear. No, I don't feel at all well in this foul air. I fear for my health, I truly do."

Emilyann feared she might have to accompany her sister-in-law to every debutante do and young peoples' outing herself if she could not talk Aunt Adelaide into staying.

"I thought you enjoyed the opera, and I know you were delighted to encounter that old friend of yours."

"Yes, but all the hustle and bustle can cause palpitations, quinsies, dyspepsia. I could succumb to

any number of them, you know, if I don't return to the country."

"What a hum, Auntie. I saw you having a comfortable coze with Mrs. Richfield and tapping your toes. You didn't feel the least bit weak until Nadine went behind the draperies with that Austrian."

Aunt Adelaide reached for her vinaigrette.

"See? You needn't worry anymore. I have decided to take Nadine in hand myself, and she agrees to try to moderate her behavior. That is, Smoky insists. Since I am a married woman, I'm considered enough of a chaperone for her, so you needn't come with us to all the big squeezes if you think they might be too wearing. It's just that we need you for some of those times when I may have other plans. You know, those quiet afternoon teas you find so pleasant, or the afternoon dance parties the young people like so much when their mamas sit and gossip. I wish you could see your way to staying with us, but you mustn't jeopardize your health, of course."

"Oh, dear, so kind of you to concern yourself. And you've been so generous, I keep asking Nadine what would we have done without you. And to disappoint dear Everett. No, no. The family must come first. You did say she wouldn't wear those awful feathers anymore, didn't you?"

"I burned them myself, ma'am."

"I do miss my garden though...."

So Emilyann had three rosebushes planted in the grassy patch behind the house, and a bench installed. It was a fair trade if she got out of another harp musicale.

Nanny was even easier to deal with. It was her opinion that Miss Emmy should be in the country, where Master Stokely ordered, waiting for her man like a good wife. Instead, she was gallivanting around town in a flimsy rig, wearing her hems too high and her necklines too low, making too much of a stir for a respectable matron. Her little lamb was trotting too hard altogether, so there.

Emilyann couldn't get Nanny a baby to mother, not comfortably, anyway, so she did the next best thing: she bought her a puppy.

Geoffrey, at least, was no problem. *It's too easy for green boys to fall into the wrong company in London*, Smoky wrote, but Geoff hadn't. He had quickly made

friends with one of her schoolmate's brothers, young Johnny Remington, who was such a likable, levelheaded fellow, with a nice smile and even features, that Emilyann was considering him for Nadine. Geoff and Rem went everywhere together when they were not escorting their female relatives, poking fun at the dandy set, and only halfheartedly emulating the Corinthians. They seemed to be enjoying London and their freedom as men about town, so Emilyann was surprised when Geoff approached her one morning in her study, saying that he wished to go home.

She put down the pen and closed the account book she'd been working on, with some relief. "What, is mutiny contagious?" she joked, not really worried. "I suppose you're worried about your hogs, is that it? You know Meecham writes every week, and follows your instructions to the letter. But I suppose we can get along without you for a few days if you are determined to see for yourself."

"It ain't a visit I had in mind, Emmy. I don't think I like this kind of life here, you know, nothing much for a chap to do."

"No? What about that mill, and the race to Richmond, and the new steam engine exhibit you wanted to go watch?"

Geoff set his mouth stubbornly, all too reminiscent of Nadine's sulks. "I ain't on leading strings, Emmy, and I want to go home."

Emilyann was sure she could bring that ready smile back to his face, the one where he reminded her more of Smoky than of his sister, even though his face had Nadine's roundness, and his hair and eyes were brown like Nadine's, not Smoky's darker colors. "I know what it is," she teased. "You want to get out of another night in knee breeches. Very well, you need not escort us to Lady Cheyne's ball this evening. Or is it that you're afraid you won't be able to outrun little Miss Rivington and her predatory mama?"

Geoff grinned sheepishly; he never could stay mad for long, and Miss Rivington did seem to be nearby whenever he took his sister anywhere. Then he noticed the account books, and remembered his mission. "No, Emmy, this place is just too dashed expensive for my tastes. I'd rather be home seeing the farms prosper than stay here, being a drain on them."

"I see," said Emilyann, thinking she did. Smoky and

Geoff had agreed to maintain the latter's allowance, adding in the unused school money, until Smoky was home and the estates were earning more. Then they would see about a fair share of the profits, or even a manager's salary. Meantime, she supposed, keeping up appearances in the city was more expensive than they had planned. Her other investments were paying off well. "Why don't I write to Smoky about increasing your allowance?" she offered.

"No, Emmy, you've done enough, and it ain't anything I want you mentioning to my brother, not even a right 'un like Ev."

"Oh, ho, wild oats, is it? You've sown barley and wheat and turnips, so why not? From what I heard, Smoky did his share." She refused to consider whether her husband had put such ways behind him or not. "If it's a loan you're needing—"

"Stokely would have my hide, discussing such things with you!"

"But the problem is money?" she asked, her blue eyes looking troubled now.

"Ah, not exactly ..."

She tapped her fingers on the account books. "Then what is it, *exactly*?"

She was like a dog with a bone, this fragile-looking sister-in-law of his. A big dog with a meaty bone, and she was never going to let go. So he told her, between his embarrassed pauses and her impatient prying, about the previous evening's event. He and Rem had decided to seek more excitement than watching the sobersides at White's and Watier's and had left for a visit to Drury Lane. They couldn't really afford the high fliers at the greenroom, but the night was still young so they left, this time to the Daffy Club and the Cocoa Tree, using Smoky's name to gain entry. Stakes were awfully high there, and they weren't much into gambling, so they wandered the streets awhile, until Remington recalled hearing about a place where the dealers were all women....

They threw down a few pounds here and there at the craps tables, or at *rouge et noir*, admiring the females, tossing back a few glasses of Blue Ruin—"It's free at those places, don't you know"—and feeling very well up in the world indeed. And then ...

* * * *

"You got into a game of cards with *whom*?"

"Your uncle Aylesbury?"

"You clunch! Everyone knows what he is. No one ever plays with him but greenheads, and they never, ever win."

"I know, but I couldn't very well ignore him."

"Why not? I do."

"It's different in a club like that, with his friends all around."

"That makebait doesn't have any friends. He's such a cur, it's a miracle Aunt Ingrid hasn't prayed her way into heaven yet, trying to make her morality compensate for his lack of principles. I am ashamed he is my relative, and mortified that he wears my father's title, yet you play cards with him, you complete—"

"You don't understand, Em."

She did, though, understand how two well-mannered, friendly boys wouldn't know how to extricate themselves from such a trap. There was venom in her voice. "How much?"

"All of it. I lost the rest of this quarter's allowance, and the governor's gold watch. Rem went through his bank account, too, to the tune of about five hundred pounds. Your uncle—" At her glare he amended that: "Lord Aylesbury said he'd take our vouchers, but we had sense not to go that route."

"Thank goodness for small favors. So then you left, and now you are ready to slink off to Arstock and wait for next quarter-day before you can buy a friend a drink or send a lady a bouquet of flowers?" The quill pen snapped in her fingers. "I won't have it!"

"Nothing you can do about it, Em. Debt of honor and all that."

"There is nothing honorable about an old Captain Sharp chousing allowances out of farmboys. No, we'll just have to get the money back. And your father's watch."

"But—"

"But nothing. It's my family; I'll handle it. You get yourself ready to escort us to Lady Cheyne's this evening. The refreshments there are free, too."

* * * *

By Jupiter, this was something Smoky should be handling! Emilyann fumed as she waited in her carriage outside Arcott House for Aunt Ingrid to leave for her four o'clock Tuesday afternoon prayer meeting. She was so angry at her uncle for being a dastard, at

Geoff for being a trusting fool, and at Smoky for being right and being gone, she hadn't a thought to spare for the might-have-beens, seeing the elegant old house again. When her aunt's coach left, Emilyann marched right through the doors of her family's one-time home and demanded to see her uncle.

She did not know the new butler and he did not know her, but he recognized quality, and a blazing temper at that. He murmured, "The library," and stood aside.

"I want it back. All of it Geoff's, Remington's, the watch. Now."

Uncle Morgan was still trying to keep his eyeballs from jumping out of his head at the door's slamming open. "Lower your voice, girl. My poor head!"

"Jug-bitten again, Uncle? My, my." She pounded her fist on the desk in front of him. "You'll have more than a headache if I don't get the money back."

As soon as he could take his shaking hands away from his throbbing temples, he took a better look at his caller. "Damn if you ain't growin' more like your mother in looks every time I see you." He reached for a bottle and glass. "And more like your father in temperament."

"Thank you. The boys' money?"

"Now, why do you think I should return the lads' blunt, assuming I still have it, that is? I won it fair."

"That word's not in your vocabulary. That's why."

"A matter of opinion only, girl. Won't hold up in court or anything, you know. No, I don't think you've got a winning hand there."

She did have an ace in the hole, however, besides a pistol in her pocket. She pulled a chair closer to the desk and sat down without being asked. "You're a gambling man, Uncle. What do you say we cut cards for it?"

His reddened eyes opened wider. "And if you lose?"

"I'll double the sum."

Morgan's trembling hand reached into the top drawer of the massive desk—her father's desk, where he had transacted affairs of state—for a pack of cards.

"We'll use my cards, Uncle." Her voice was firm, her determination unwavering, her deck well worn. She shuffled competently, set the pile in front of him. "One cut. High card."

Morgan nodded, staring at the cards. He licked his

lips, reached, cut. The ten of clubs.

Emilyann ignored his smirk. Her hand hesitated delicately over the cards for a moment, then she made her cut, a king. She gathered the cards back into her reticule and stood, expectant. Morgan rubbed his face with his hands, but did reach back into the drawer for a leather pouch and tossed it across to her. She did not move.

"It's all there, the watch, too. What are you waiting for now?"

"I just wanted to give you a little advice, Uncle. If this ever happens again—Geoff, Remington, any of my friends—I'll go straight to the magistrates. No, not to accuse you of fleecing the lambs. I'll simply mention Aunt Ingrid's jewelry, you know, the family heirlooms that were entrusted to your care."

His whiskey-flushed face turned a sickly green. "You wouldn't do it, girl. Think of the scandal."

"Still a gambling man, Uncle? Don't bet on it." She turned to leave, then went back and pulled some pound notes from the pouch. "Here, now you can get the roof fixed. A tile fell as I was driving up. It only missed Aunt Ingrid by inches."

* * * *

"There's some missing, Geoff. Consider it well spent if you learned anything."

"Lud, Emmy, I swear I did! But how in blazes did you manage to get it back?"

"It was simple. I used one of his own old decks of cards."

When they stopped laughing, and Geoff stopped congratulating his sister-in-law for being the best and bravest, he asked, "Ah, Em, you won't, that is, you don't need to mention this to Smoky, do you?"

Tell Smoky she had gone alone to her uncle's house with a pistol and a shaved deck of cards to win back his brother's money? Hah! She wasn't *that* brave.

Chapter Nine

See? she wrote. You worried for nothing. We are all settled in and having a delightful time. We are very well received, judging from all the invitations on the mantel, and Nadine spends hours each day deciding which we shall accept. We have heeded your dictates—she crossed that out and amended it to advice—and have

elected not to travel to Vienna. Although the company does get a little thinner as so many travel to the gaiety of the Congress there, after being kept from travel on the Continent for so long, we feel there is quite enough to keep us content in London for the nonce. We hear the peace talks are stalled, while the festivities there increase. Our social rounds in London are flourishing well enough....

Indeed, the Stocktons' popularity could not have been greater. Geoff could be counted on to dance with the shyest girls, those who intimidated him least, pleasing the hostesses no end. A toned-down Nadine was delighted with the steady stream of beaux and flower baskets through Portman Square, and the smiles and nods from the callers' mothers. If her laugh was too loud on occasion, at least she was not considered a milk-and-water miss.

But it was Emilyann, the Little Countess, who was taking London by storm, to everyone's surprise including her own. Rounded brunettes or stately golden beauties were the fashion, until one small, thin, silver-blond became the rage. Ladies were cool, reserved, bored—until a laughing, blue-eyed pixie charmed a smile out of the starchiest matrons and the most careworn Parliamentarians.

And men, single, married, young and old, bucks and beaux, flocked to her like Geoff's pigs followed the slops bucket. She never made fun of the callow youths nor turned a deaf ear to the prosy old gents who were her father's cronies nor let a hardened rake go beyond the line. If anyone accused her of being a deliberate flirt, she laughed back. "But everyone knows I am only an old married woman, how could I lead anyone on?"

She never singled out one of her admirers, except young Remington, who gave her puppylike devotion in return for his purse back from Uncle Morgan. She refused to hurt his feelings, and she still had hopes of him for Nadine. Mamas of young lads realized their babes were safe; jealous wives saw their husbands secure in numbers; marriageable girls took lessons and were happy for a friendship that kept them in the vicinity of every eligible *parti* in town.

Emilyann laughed and danced and teased, and never lost her own sense of style, wit, intelligence, and charm. She was in no danger of becoming spoiled by her popularity; she was in no danger of losing her

heart, either. She was pleased with her success and complimented by so many men's regard, but she held them all up to Smoky, and none met his measure.

She could not lie to herself that she knew her husband well: she had not seen him in over a year, and then for hours only. Childish dreams, girlhood fantasies, and his friendly letters (when he was not lecturing) combined to form an image of him in her mind and in her heart. He was wise and brave and kind and comical. He was tall and thin and rugged, with broad shoulders, black curls, and gray eyes that smiled down at her as he tied her bonnet's bow along her cheek on their wedding day. He had kissed her forehead and told her she was safe now. No other man ever gave her that feeling of belonging. Now she needed more than that, but only from him.

Have you any chance of coming home soon? she concluded her latest letter, then added: *Oh, Aunt Ingrid is recovering nicely. The footman who tripped on Uncle's foot, spilling the orange flambé in her lap, has been dismissed. And just in case you hear one or two small rumors about a race to Richmond after the masquerade, don't worry. I won.* She signed it, *Your loving and obedient wife.*

* * * *

Obedient? One or two small rumors? Hah! There were nothing but rumors floating around Brussels. Half of them concerned Napoleon's possible plans to leave exile; the other half concerned Stokely's own wife!

The major hated unproved information. He always had, volunteering to go behind enemy lines when he first signed up, to find the truth for his commanders lest they commit troop movements to ungrounded talk of enemy strengths and positions. Later, on the command staff, he gathered these reports from other men and helped plan the army's strategies—with facts, not hearsay.

Now he was stuck in Brussels, playing nursemaid to petty officials of the Allied forces, while Boney considered wreaking more havoc on Europe. Damn, if he only knew the truth! Why couldn't those bloody fools in Vienna stop waltzing long enough to find out?

Then there was the talk about his wife. His wife, by God! Half the time he forgot he even had one, and the other half he wished he didn't. Every returning officer

told him what a lucky dog he was. Pride kept him from asking for details; there was no way he could admit he hardly knew his bride. Every weeks-late newspaper had columns full of the latest doings of Lady S——, with this man's escort, in that man's box. Spindly little Sparrow? What the devil was going on? Carriage races and masquerades, indeed. Why hadn't the little madcap been tossed out on her ear? Stokely didn't understand any of it, and liked it less.

If she'd only stayed in the country ... Hell, if she hadn't climbed that tree after him, he wouldn't have broken his arm getting her down. Now there was no hope for a quiet annulment, not after the stir she was causing. It wasn't as if no one had heard of her or the marriage. She would be ruined by the same blasted gossip that currently raged around her. They were truly married now, for good or for evil.

The major was not even sure if he minded so much. There were times when she infuriated him, like spending her money to outfit his sister for presentation at the queen's drawing room. There were times when she terrified him, like when she wrote about wanting to be part of a balloon ascension.

And there were times when he felt an aching loss: it should have been him giving Sparrow her first sight of Vauxhall Gardens at night, with the fairy lights and fireworks. He should have shared her first taste of iced champagne ... and her first kiss. Then he remembered letting her trail after him on her first hunt, braids flying, her whole dirty face lit with a gap-toothed grin. Sparrow was just a child, an adorable imp. That was why all of London embraced her, wasn't it, and forgave her all those fits and starts? But he was a man, not a monk, and would want more from a wife than a towhead tagalong. Lord, he was confused!

The British Army left in Belgium was well encamped and organized, provisions were flowing nicely, and the troops were in good spirits. Smoky knew to a man how many soldiers were billeted where and how much ammunition was on hand, so he decided the politicians and pettifoggers could be trusted, briefly, to watch out for the Corsican's return; he had to see about his wife.

* * * *

The very correct butler raised his nose up, his chest out, and sonorously intoned: "My apologies, sir. The

ladies are out for the evening. I shall be pleased to convey a message, or your card if you choose to leave one."

"Put on your spectacles, you old charlatan, and get off your high horse. It is I, Stokely, and I own the damn pile, so you may as well let me in."

"Master Everett, is that you? We weren't expecting—that is, welcome home, milord. Welcome home indeed." He took the major's hat and snapped his fingers for footmen to assist Rigg, now in sergeant's uniform, in with the baggage. "It has been a long time."

Stokely looked around the entry hall, the gleaming furniture, the vases of flowers, the attentive servants in perfect livery. "It certainly has. Where did you ever come from? I thought you retired to your sister's farm after my father stuck his spoon in the wall. However did Sparrow find you?"

The butler's lip twitched. "Through the advertisement, m'lord, in all the papers. 'Butler wanted,' it said. 'Mr. only.' I knew it had to be me wanted, and Lady Emilyann as inserted it. She was the only one who ever called me mister. Said it did not suit my dignity to be summoned as Butler."

"But it's your name."

"And my calling, milord. The family has always been in service." He couldn't suppress the smile. "It does confuse the callers, milord."

By this time they had reached the master bedroom, redone, Stokely saw, in elegant navy velvet hangings with gold accents. He could not resist asking, in his most nonchalant voice: "I, ah, suppose there are a lot of callers?"

"Yes, indeed, milord. We are very popular."

"And Sparrow, Lady Emilyann, she goes on all right?" Gads, he was quizzing his own butler!

"Oh, quite. I was able to advise her ladyship about a few matters that—"

"She took *your* advice?"

The butler poured out a glass of cognac and served it on a silver tray. He did not bother answering, instead commenting, "How upset Lady Stokely and the family will be to have missed you. Shall I send a boy after them? They are attending Lady Winstoke's fete, I believe. They would have stayed in, I'm sure, had they known."

"No, no, it's my fault for not writing. It was a sudden

decision to come, and I arrived before a letter would. All I need is a hot bath and my dress uniform pressed, then I might drop in at the Winstokes' and surprise them."

"Very good, milord, I'll see to it at once." He turned at the door. "And may I say how gratified I was that you requested my lady to seek me out for the position."

"Did I ... ah, thank you, Butler."

* * * *

The ball was well under way when he arrived. It was one of those massive affairs where the hostess invites more people than can possibly fit into her house, for her party to be a success. The receiving line was long disbanded, so the major just stood at the top of the stairs leading down to the ballroom, looking for a familiar face. He could not see across the floor on account of the crowds milling around and the smoke rising from the multitude of candles. The musicians seemed to be on intermission, but the noise was like a barnyard, and the scents of perfume, flowers, and dancing bodies all combined to create a mind-numbing fog. He wondered how the hell *anyone* was expected to find his own wife in this mob.

Then he spotted Nadine in a cluster of giggling debs in white gowns. So Emmy really had convinced the chit to at least dress the part of pure maiden, although he recognized his sister's style in the rows of ruffles and frills. She was blooming, he could see, surrounded by a gaggle of rangy youths and a few scarlet jackets like his own. The minx was likely picking her partners by their bank balances, he thought, but she looked charming, without that discontented expression he was used to seeing on her face.

The major was attracting no small attention himself, standing in the entry in his regimentals, dress sword and all. His brother Geoff soon hailed him from across the hall, and tried to dash between the wedged bodies, nearly upending a fop balancing two cups of punch.

"Ev, it's really you! I couldn't believe m'eyes! I said to Rem here—oh, this is Johnny Remington, Ev. Rem, m'brother Stokely, you know, the hero, Emmy's husband. I said that looks—"

The major was trying to shake an embarrassed-looking youth's hand while still being pounded on the back by his exuberant brother. Geoff was broader than he remembered, and a great deal

neater. Likely Butler was tying his neckcloths for him.

“—best of all things great, I said. The fellows have been dying to meet you, read all about you in the war news, you know. There’s McCall and Wister in the card room, unless you want some refreshment first. They set a fine table, lobster patties, you know, and—”

“Hold, cawker. I just got here! I’ve got to pay my respects to my hostess, and I really think I should like to say hello to my wife.” He was looking around, so happily missed Remington’s fierce blush.

“You mean you haven’t seen Emmy yet? What a shock, ah, surprise you’ll be for her. I can’t figure how you missed her though. She’s right over there.”

Geoff gestured to the near corner, where a group of people—no, personages—was given a respectful distance. Stokely instantly recognized Lord Castlereagh, temporarily back from the peace talks, in conversation with a tall man in the uniform of, yes, the Russian forces, dripping gold braid and decorations. Princess Lieven and the Russian ambassador were there, and Sally Jersey. Another man may have been the deputy prime minister, but he could not be sure from the angle. No matter, his eyes skipped on to the next group of partygoers. Geoff laughed. “No, there.” He motioned back toward that first, select circle.

The Russian peacock turned—he had to be one of the princes, from the rows of medals—revealing a ... a what? A dream? A sprite? A small, exquisite, merrily laughing woman, shimmering in a brilliant blue gown that was tied at one shoulder only, with a cloud of curls so light colored it could have been a halo but for the tiara set regally in their midst. Stokely swallowed, hard. Sparrow? It could not be.

The last time he had seen Emilyann she had been a scrawny, scrappy, filthy waif in boys’ clothes, then a scrawny, scrubbed, wide-eyed child-bride clutching a bouquet of violets, wearing his nightshirt in that parody of a wedding. The last he’d seen of her, before handing her into the coach and sending her off to Stockton, she’d been a scrawny, shapeless imp in a too-big gown of some nondescript color, lost in her clothes like a little girl playing grown-up. Her faded hair was lopped off in odd angles and lengths so he quickly tied a limp bonnet over it, bringing a twinkle to those blue eyes, the only color in her pale face.

Well, she certainly wasn’t scrawny anymore, nor the

least bit colorless, and she definitely was not just playing at being grown-up.

“Better shut your mouth, brother, before something flies into it.”

Stokely did not hear him. He went down the stairs in a daze, crossed the room as if the crowd weren't there, barely nodded to the notables in her circle, bowing slightly in case the Russian was indeed a royal, out of habit only, and as the band struck up for the next interval, said, “I believe this is my dance, Lady Stokely.”

Emilyann turned, saw a truly handsome officer—and turned again. “Smoky!” she cried, her smile becoming even more radiant, and started to rush into his arms. Then she remembered herself, the company she kept, and how she wanted to show Smoky how sophisticated she was. So she amended her delighted call to “Stokely,” sank into her most graceful curtsy to excuse herself from the gathering, and offered him her hand. He raised it to his lips, still trying to regroup his rattled perceptions, and led her onto the dance floor. His feet thankfully performed the waltz steps, for his mind was not sending directions, too busy absorbing this glorious woman in his arms. The pert nose and dimples were the same but the eyes were a more startling blue; he wondered how anyone could have considered her colorless with that creamy glow to her skin, especially that soft fullness above the gown's low-draped neckline.

His mouth was dry; his throat felt like a hedgehog had taken residence there. All he could think to say, confirming his place with the army and not the diplomatic corps, was “My God, Sparrow, you don't look like a plucked chicken anymore at all!”

Emilyann laughed, that same bubbly gurgle he remembered. She thought she would burst with pride; she thought the orchestra had stopped playing, her heart was beating so loudly. So she stopped dancing, coming to a stumbling halt still in his arms. And he stopped, too. And they just looked at each other for a moment until Smoky laughed, held his arms open, and lifted her right off the ground as she came to his embrace. He twirled her around, miraculously missing the other dancers.

“My proper countess,” he said, smiling, while she hugged what she could of him. Blushing, she stepped

back and they continued the dance. Sally Jersey was seen to dab a tear from her eye, and Princess Lieven nodded knowingly. This certainly removed the last traces of doubt about the marriage. If ever there was a love match, it was this one. Every eye was on them, and Lady Winstoke's ball was a guaranteed smash.

Whose ball? It could have been a Red Indian rain dance around a gamy campfire for all the Stokelys noticed. They waltzed, they smiled, they stared into each other's eyes. Like moon-calves, Smoky decided, finally coming partway back to earth.

"I can't seem to get over the changes in you since I saw you last, and the house, and all—"

"You look different, too. Not as thin."

"Not as castaway and hung over, you mean."

"Somehow you do not seem as tall as I remember. Perhaps I grew."

She certainly had. "You even grew eyelashes."

That laugh. "No, I found a French maid with secrets no lady talks about."

He only half pretended to give her careful scrutiny, turning her around in the dance. "Nothing else looks like artifice to me."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to discover for yourself."

Gads, he was flirting with Sparrow! "Not long enough, I'm afraid. I have only ten days, with travel. Things are becoming less settled instead of more, and I have to return."

"Oh."

He hated seeing her look down like that, and would do anything to have the dimples restored. "I suppose every man in the room has already told you how perfectly your gown matches the color of your eyes," he teased.

"Do you like it? You'd better, it's named for you. Stokely blue, they call it. Isn't that silly?"

"Especially when my eyes are gray." There, she was smiling again. "And you dance divinely."

"Now, why do you sound so surprised? I think you're just waiting for me to pull a frog out of my pocket or do something else outrageous. I'll have you know that hugging you in public was the most improper thing I have done since I have been in London."

"I should hope so! But you'll have to forgive me,

Sparrow, for thinking you are still ten years old. You've had years to grow up, and I seem to be seeing the results all at once."

"And?"

"Are you fishing for compliments now, minx? Very well, I am only sorry I am not home for good."

She was sorry, too, and sorry the waltz was coming to an end. "You dance very well yourself," she said as they walked to the sidelines. "Where did you find opportunity to practice during all the war years?"

He passed it off. "Oh, here and there. Do you think we might collect Nadine and Geoff and leave this crowd? Or we could send the carriage back for them. I can hardly hear myself speak and—"

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry, but I'm promised for the next set."

"Come now, Sparrow, the returning husband does have some precedence." His eyes narrowed. "You can just tell your beau that I have prior claim."

"Not this one," she said, giggling delightfully, and more so when she saw his frown. Meanwhile she was leading him, fully aware that many eyes were focused in their direction, toward a section of gilt chairs near the orchestra. She nodded toward a particularly corpulent gentleman who struggled up from his seat, smiling. Then she looked back at Smoky and winked, before sinking into a deep curtsy and murmuring, "Your Highness, I believe you bespoke this dance?"

Smoky made his bow to the prince regent, and whispered in her ear as he stood aside: "Where did you learn to flirt like that?"

"Oh, here and there," she tossed back over her shoulder with another gamine grin.

Chapter Ten

How could a deuced ball go on so long, and how could a man who organized the movements of whole battalions, their cannons, cookstoves, and camp-followers, have so much difficulty garnering three youngsters in one place?

They were supposed to meet in the marble hallway after saying their good-byes and collecting their wraps. But Nadine wanted just one more dance with an exquisite in a puce waistcoat, and Geoff was promised to Lady Huntington's niece, a squint-eyed miss who

would never find another partner for the quadrille. Then he had to make his particular friends known to Stokely, who was himself drawn into innumerable greetings, belated congratulations on his marriage, and discussions of the Vienna talks and chances of a lasting peace. He found himself committed to calling at Carlton House, Whitehall, and, almost, a certain boudoir of a politically astute widow. Emilyann's cough put a stop to that.

Everyone laughed when he introduced her as Emilyann Arcott and he had to be reminded that she was Lady Stokely. Her glittering eyes told him he'd damn well better not forget again, especially in the presence of dashing widows in dampened gowns who wanted to hang on his arm. He quickly extricated himself from Lady Bramby's efforts to renew acquaintance, seeing Emmy's slippered foot tapping the ground. He was not about to test if her famous temper had undergone the same drastic change as her looks, not in public anyway. He grinned at this new possessiveness of Sparrow's, until more of her admirers kept claiming her company for dances, just when he thought they were ready to call for the carriage. Sauce for the goose, her look told him. He stopped grinning.

"You do not mind, I am sure?"

In a pig's eye he didn't, but he nodded and bowed to the Russian. He did not want to start an international incident.

"My dance, Major." He saluted smartly. He did not wish to return to the army as a private either.

"I, ah, that is, Lady Em promised, I, uh ..."

A man would have to have a harder heart than Stokely's to refuse that Remington boy, gazing at Sparrow with such moonstruck adoration. So that's what all the blushes were about. He agreed resignedly, and was awarded such a sweet smile from his wife that he vowed to get her home right after this dance, even if Mad King George himself appeared in his nightshirt and asked her for a waltz. He grabbed Nadine lest she skip off again, and joined their set.

When the dance was finished he grimly placed one hand on his wife's elbow and the other on his dress sword. This time no one interfered with their progress toward the door.

* * * *

Aunt Adelaide woke at all the commotion, and the servants darted about, hoping for a glimpse of the master. Soon they were snug in the new Egyptian salon, where cool black and white upholstery complimented the old black marble mantel. Only two chairs had crocodile heads for armrests, he was relieved to note, and the rest were comfortable, normal furniture. Stokely lounged at ease near the fire, his feet up on a footstool, with a glass of fine cognac in his hand, put down, he was assured by his wife, before the French conflict.

"I claimed these bottles from Arcott Hall when I went to fetch Mama's jewelry, as part of my personal effects that were untouched by the entailment, before Uncle could swill them all down. For you must know I would not support the French by buying smuggled wines, not while you were fighting against them."

"Emmy's so loyal," Nadine told him, "she wouldn't even let us buy French laces, there being no way to know if they came in under the blockade. That's why we were so delighted with the trims you sent from Brussels. You should see the divine ensemble I've contrived. It's white, of course, but I wore it to—"

Nadine babbled on, mostly to Aunt Adelaide, who kept her hartshorn nearby, for the excitement of his homecoming, while Geoff tried to get his attention on the Northampshire property and the hogs. Emilyann sat quietly, letting the others talk, seeing that the teacups were filled, the biscuits passed.

Stokely leaned back. How cozy this was. Here he thought he had to return to ride herd on a pack of unruly children, but now he began to think there were a lot more benefits to this being a family man than he had considered. It might take some getting used to, having a wife and all, but as he looked at her again, it seemed much less of another burdensome responsibility and a lot more like a dashed fine idea.

"Yes," he told Geoff, "I was hoping we could all get up there for a time during my leave. Invite Thornton, look over the new plantings, and decide on the next improvements." And get to know my wife, away from this blasted fish bowl, he thought.

"Capital! When do you think we can go? I'll write to Meecham to inform the household staff, and see if we can't get up a hunt for the weekend or—"

"Not so fast, bantling. I have an appointment with

the regent and his advisers tomorrow, though what they think I can tell them about the current situation is beyond me. I promised to call on the Home Secretary this week, and of course I must check with the War Office to see if they have any news, or commissions for me. Perhaps early next week ...”

Nadine was looking mutinous, but it was Emilyann who said, “Oh dear, I am afraid we cannot leave town then. That’s when our ball is planned, and the cards are already sent.”

“What ball is that, Sparrow?” Stokely asked quietly. “I thought we agreed that there should be no come-out ball for Nadine until I was home?” And until he could afford to provide for his own sister without Emilyann’s money.

“Of course we agreed, Smoky.” She couldn’t help add in all honesty, “That is, you issued a decree and I acknowledged it. That’s why this is not a formal presentation. We had a small dinner following the queen’s court, with just a few select friends, and a little dancing after, for you must know Nadine could not go out in company without some bow to the ton. But that wasn’t a ball. Why, there were less than two hundred people there.”

He blinked. “Strange, it sounds just like a ball to me.”

“Not compared to this one,” she said, laughing. “But Nadine’s name is not even on the invitations, so don’t get in a fidge. It was just time for us to repay all the hospitality we’ve been shown. It wouldn’t be polite otherwise.”

“I did not doubt for a minute there was a good reason for it.”

She flashed her dimples and told him that sarcasm was not becoming. Plus he would enjoy it immensely, and how proud she would be to have him stand in the receiving line with her. Nadine chimed in about her new dress and the spectacular decorations, and Aunt Adelaide noted how much more fitting it was, having the master of the house host his own ball. “Not that Geoffrey is not an adequate substitute, of course,” she added. “We do depend on him for everything, you know.”

Stokely’s eyes narrowed. Just how much substituting had his young brother been doing? The boy had turned into a good-looking young man, and he

and Emilyann had always been close. Now this year, rebuilding the farms, coming to London, entering society, they were thrown even closer together. ... Maybe Aunt Adelaide was trying to warn him about something. Every other man seemed to have laid his heart at Sparrow's feet, why not Geoff?

Then, "Hell and damnation, Emmy," Geoff said. "Why do we have to have another blasted party just now that Ev is home?"

"You mind your tongue, Geoffrey Stockton," she scolded. "I will not have such language in my drawing room. And we have to have this ball, you gudgeon, especially now, so Smoky can see that *some* of us can behave like ladies and gentlemen."

"You've been hanging around your aunt Ingrid again."

So they were still squabbling like brother and sister. That was all right, then.

"... have a good idea, though, Geoff. Why don't you and Smoky go up to Stockton as soon as he is free? You can make better time without us and all the baggage we would need, and you'd only be in the way here anyhow. There is all the cleaning to see to, and the caterers will be in and out, and the florists and the extra staff. As long as you promise you'll show him the stud farm, and get back in plenty of time for the ball, that is."

Geoff thought it a great notion, "Capital," of course, and urged Stokely to consider it. Even Nadine and Aunt Adelaide were in favor, likely so he could not veto any of the expenditures. It would mean being away from Emilyann for most of his leave time, though, and didn't she seem a bit overeager to get rid of him? In fact, now that he noticed, she seemed nervous, anxious over his decision, then relieved when he said that he might go, pending the outcome of his meetings.

Jupiter, he had to get a hold on himself. First his own brother, now these nameless suspicions. Incredibly, he was jealous. It was totally without foundation, he knew, except that any man would find her irresistible, particularly sitting curled in the chair with her slippers off and her stockinged toes peeking out. There was only one way to slay the green-eyed monster, he decided, and that was to make her his once and for all. He'd end this nonsense, and this new yearning, this very night. He yawned mightily and

loudly.

* * * *

Be careful of what you wish, Nanny had always said. You might get it. A confused Emilyann understood the old saying better now. She had wanted Smoky home and proud of her. Here he was, cutting up her peace, criticizing her actions, and already making plans to institute changes. The family and the servants alike instantly deferred to him, and even her own maid was casting coy glances at Emilyann as she neaten up the room. Em dismissed her, to stand in front of the fireplace, pretending to fuss with the logs, but really just staring at the flames.

She had wanted him to see her as a mature, sophisticated woman, and that part of the wish had come true also, judging from *that* look, which she was quick enough to recognize after her months on the town. When a man's eyes rolled and his breath came quicker, he was more liable to make an improper offer than call for a restorative. Smoky's offer could not be improper, of course, since they were married, after all, but admiration based on what Aunt Ingrid would call lust was not what she wanted from him. It couldn't be any foundation for a solid relationship, especially when she felt no inclination whatsoever to pursue her marital duties, especially as her aunt described them, and certainly not with a virtual stranger.

In some ways he was her beloved Smoky; in others she hardly knew this tall officer with the commanding presence. No matter what, he was an experienced man of the world. She could never please him anyway. Not like a Lady Bramby, she thought, angrily poking a recalcitrant log back into the grate. Well, he was tired tonight and he was traveling with Geoff soon, and—No, she wouldn't be in a hurry to make any more wishes. She jabbed the logs again.

"Ahem. Is it safe for me to enter? I knocked, but you did not answer."

There he was, standing at the connecting door of their rooms, looking even more devastatingly handsome in a paisley dressing gown, open at the neck to show dark curls on a broad chest. She wouldn't look. "Smoky? What are you doing here?"

"I live here, remember?" He smiled in amusement.

"I don't think so."

"Would you care to put the weapon down and

explain that?”

She blushed, and he caught his breath seeing where the blush started at the neckline of her nightgown, a flimsy pale blue affair that already had his blood racing. When she moved to put the metal poker back in its stand, the fire silhouetted her outline through the sheer fabric. He took another deep breath. His eyes shifted toward the bed, done up in gold and navy, complimenting his room’s color scheme, except for—”What’s that on the bed?”

Emilyann laughed, relieved to have a distraction from his overwhelming proximity, even at the other side of the room. She moved farther away, toward the bed, almost furtively. “Oh, that’s Pug. I wrote you about the puppy I bought to keep Nanny company, remember? She didn’t care for him somehow. There’s no accounting for taste, I guess. And he’s such a cute little fellow, I let him stay in here. I couldn’t bring any of the hounds to town of course, but he’s the perfect companion for the city.” She petted the little dog, who snorted in pleasure and tried to wag what tail he had. Instead, his whole rear end wriggled.

“Of course Pug is not a very good name,” she went on, knowing she was babbling and unable to stop, “but Nanny called him that, and Geoff only wants to call him Piglet. The hogs are the only thing on his mind sometimes and—”

Why was she so nervous, he wondered, coming to get a closer look at the pup, and her bare shoulders. “What do you mean, I don’t live here?” He sat down on the other side of her bed.

Her bed! She shivered. “Well, you are not staying and you said we needn’t, that is, not until you were home for good.” She got very busy, checking the buckle on Pug’s collar.

So that was it. He let it pass for now. “And we also said that you would love, honor, and obey me. I believe those were the exact words?”

“You’re not still angry about the ball, are you?”

“Not precisely angry, more perturbed. I didn’t want you spending so much money, you know.”

Thankful for the change of topic, she looked him in the eye and said, “But it’s my money, Smoky, and I am having a wonderful time with it. There’s lots more left and I have some new ideas about investments. You did say I might manage my own finances for now,

remember? You signed all the papers.”

“And you agreed to keep the investment in Stockton to a minimum, so I could hope to repay it eventually.”

“Pooh. The farms are already repaying the outlay for equipment. We shall recoup the other expenses soon enough. It would be very wrong of you to insist on controlling how I use my money, just because you have the legal right, when you are not here to help make the decisions.”

“I’m not an ogre, Sparrow. I wouldn’t insist on any of my rights, you know.”

They both knew he wasn’t talking about the money. “Thank you. I just, that is, I, ah ...” She rubbed Pug’s velvety ears.

“You’re afraid, Emilyann Arcott, and you may as well admit it.”

She stamped her foot “I am not! It’s just that I don’t know you very well and—”

She was frightened—of him! None but an untouched maid would be as jittery as an unbroke colt. He felt like whistling! Never had he been so happy over another’s fear, and how could he ever have doubted her? She was as true as an arrow, as solid as a rock, and his. He rolled over on his back, grinning, cushioning his head on his crossed arms. “I never thought I would live to see the day. Used to be you would follow me anywhere, into caves with bats and spiders and snakes, up to the attics to search for ghosts.”

“Smoky, I am not that little girl anymore!”

“I wouldn’t be here if you were! No, now you’re a worldly sophisticate, quaking in your boots”—he glanced over—“no, in your satin slippers, to think of your husband’s attentions.”

“Don’t you laugh at me, Smoky. This isn’t like exploring spooky old places. I just think we need more time, to get to know each other.”

“I’m not laughing at you, poppet. I’m laughing at myself for being an egotistical fool. Here I was congratulating myself that my little wife had turned out to be a beautiful, desirable woman who would fall into my arms at my first appearance.” He reached out and took her hand, tugging her to sit down on the bed next to him. “Life is never so easy, and I am sorry for frightening you, or taking you for granted.”

He was also sorry for losing something he never

treasured enough. He was, however, a British soldier, and the British hadn't surrendered yet. Major Lord Stokely would just have to woo his own wife.

"You are beautiful, you know," he told her, stroking her hand lightly.

"Fudge. I just have style. People are inclined to think me something special because they like to approve of wealthy countesses."

And still unspoiled. So much for winning through flattery. "It's growing colder. I don't suppose you'd care to continue this discussion under the covers?"

"Smoky, you said!" She snatched her hand back and jumped up, breasts heaving.

His sigh was not entirely feigned. "Well then, what about a good-night kiss?" Who knew where that could lead?

She shook her head, smiling. Damn if the chit wasn't up to snuff after all. "No? What if I said Mr. Butler advised it? I understand you listen to him."

She grinned, stuck her little nose in the air, and solemnly parodied: "I regret, my lady, that it would not be in our best interests."

"It's been a very long day." He got up, reluctantly conceding for now. It was going to be a long night, too. "We shall continue this discussion tomorrow, Sparrow, you may be sure of that." And he went through the door, turning once to fix the image of his lovely bride sharing that enormous bed with a silly, wrinkle-faced puppy—when she could have had him. She was right, there was just no accounting for tastes.

Lady Emilyann, Countess Stokely, had wished her disturbing, amusing, aggravating husband would go to his own chambers. Now she clutched the little black-faced dog tightly, undecided if she felt like laughing or crying. She did a little of both. Another wish had been granted.

Chapter Eleven

In another bedroom, in another part of town, after news of Stokely's return had filtered down through the greater and lesser haunts of social London, another husband entered his wife's bedchamber.

"Morgan, is that you?"

It was three o'clock in the morning. Who the bloody hell did she think it was?

He raised his shielded candle. The shadows parted to reveal statues of martyred saints bleeding stone tears. Maybe Ingrid was expecting St. Peter. She lay rigid on the bed like the lid of a sarcophagus, flannel gown buttoned to her chin. Sure as hell wasn't waiting for young Lochinvar. "It's terribly late. Did you want to ... ?"

Not by half, he didn't, not in view of the reproachful saints. "No, no. Sorry I disturbed you. Go back to sleep." He looked around again. No, not even a pound note left out to tempt a burglar. His wife's evening devotions were well-established: mirror, safe, prie-dieu. Heaven alone knew the combinations.

"What's that you've got, Morgan?"

"This? Oh, it's just a pillow. I, ah, thought you've been looking peaked lately. Fellows at the club recommend elevation, uh, that's it. Raise your head so blood don't pool on your brain. I can see you've plenty of others there, if you need, so I'll just toddle on."

"How thoughtful. Are you sure you wouldn't ... ?"

If he couldn't hold a blasted pillow over her head while she was awake and staring at him from those gimlet eyes, he damned sure couldn't do *that* either. He left.

Chapter Twelve

Stokely was minded to pursue the discussion with his wife. Actually, he meant to discuss the pursuit of his wife, with seduction in mind. Lady Stokely was equally as resolved to avoid the assault on her senses and defenses.

The heavy artillery was on Stokely's side. He was the master tactician, the wily campaigner, and, if not a practiced seducer, at least a veteran of the boudoir battles. Women might not find him irresistible, but they did a fine job of pretending. Emilyann, on the other hand, was practically a Johnny-raw at this type of heart-to-heart combat, and predisposed to hero-worship her adversary anyway. She did have her indignation for armor, however: if he wanted to be her husband so badly, he could sell out and stay home. Otherwise, well, she was managing very nicely without him, thank you.

Smoky was rolled up, horse, gun, and saddle. Outclassed, outmaneuvered, and out in the cold.

"A bachelor party, Geoff? That will last all night? I'm sure Smoky would love to go with you."

"That's just capital, Ev. I told Old Chadwick you'd stand buff. He wanted all the fellow benedicts he could find."

Stokely started to demur, but his wife generously thought he should have the fun of a night on the town after so many months away. "I intend to make an early evening of it anyway, after all the excitement yesterday." She yawned delicately.

"I thought I would stay in tonight, actually," the major ventured. "I'm a bit done in myself."

"Oh, in that case I'll have to invite Aunt Ingrid over. You know she is looking forward to seeing you again."

This was after a day cooling his heels outside government offices, and fruitless speculations inside them about the chances of war breaking out again. Then there was dinner with his brother Thornton and his wife. At least Thorny was still the same top-lofty, sanctimonious prig. No surprises there. But an evening with Ingrid before he could get his wife alone? He surrendered, and raised his coffee cup in a toast to superior forces. There might be time for a cozy chat before breakfast anyway, if he could ditch little brother. The image of Emilyann at daybreak, warm and rosy with sleep, would cheer him through the night.

Unfortunately he and Geoff were set upon by Mohocks outside the club where the party was being held. There were only four of the footpads, so Stokely could not work off all of his frustrations, just enough to impress his brother past belief, and leave Stokely himself in no condition to grace his wife's bedchamber.

The next day he had to call on his banker, his tailor, and a crippled officer cashiered home. He also had to converse with the magistrates concerning his strewing the city streets with injured bodies. He was not amused, on returning home, to find that his wife was riding in the park with some French émigré aristocrat, prior to dinner and a musical evening at the home of one of Nadine's fellow debutantes. They couldn't miss the occasion, Emilyann regretted, because his sister was scheduled to perform.

"It is already listed on the program. Nadine showed me, and she was so proud. She's been practicing her piece for weeks, you know, and I cannot disappoint

her. I'm sure you have much more interesting things to do, for I don't expect you to accompany us to these dreary affairs, nor will I hang on your sleeve. Married couples don't need to live in each other's pockets, you know."

He also knew that those musicales never lasted long, there being a limit to what even the most dotting mama's ears could take. So he visited a few of his clubs, then went over some papers in the library until he heard Mr. Butler welcome the ladies home. He clocked an hour after hearing Emilyann's cheerful good-nights before he, too, went upstairs. He donned his robe and gathered the bottle of wine and two glasses he had set out earlier, and tapped on her door.

"Come in," she called ever so sweetly.

His heart doing a fandango in his chest, he pushed through the door. Emilyann was sitting up in bed in that same sheer blue gown, her lovely shoulders bare—and brown glop slathered all over her face!

"It's for my complexion. I told you my maid knew a lot of secrets."

She was gone by the time he came down for breakfast the following morning, on a myriad of errands, her note said, getting ready for their party. They were promised to the Seftons' ball that evening and it wouldn't do to offend such an influential hostess, but Emilyann would be pleased with his escort if he cared to go.

At least Stokely got to dance with his wife. Twice. Then he got to watch every puppy in London drool over her hand, and every rake and Redcoat, every silver-tongued park-saunterer, try to turn her up sweet. And she laughed up at them, and twinkled her blue eyes and floated in their arms like a rose in the breeze—until Stokely went on the offensive.

"Ah, Lady Bramby, how nice to see you."

See her? You could see *all* of her, Emmy raged, her gown was so transparent. And her cheeks were rouged, and her toenails were painted, and "I'm very tired, Smoky, would you mind terribly if we went home?"

He did not mind at all, delighted with his strategy—until his lady wife pretended to fall asleep in the carriage. His hand, under cover of the lap robe, inched up her thigh, but the minx whimpered drowsily and curled up in her corner of the seat, all snuggled in

her cape. Outflanked again!

One more day before he left for Stockton, and Emilyann agreed to a drive in the park.

"What, no excuses, appointments, prior engagements?"

Lady Bramby wouldn't be busy either, not for the most handsome man in London. In addition to being out of evasive maneuvers, Emilyann felt she deserved Smoky's company, with all the subterfuge she'd been through. After all, it was daytime and she would be safe. Excepting, of course, the runaway carriage that thundered down on them after they got out to stroll along the track. They heard the shouts and cries, the neighs of frightened horses, and then there was no time to think. Smoky shoved her off the walkway and turned. Emilyann scrambled up to see him standing in the path of four frantic horses and a heavy carriage careening behind it. She screamed just as Stokely leapt for the back of the nearest leader and reached down for the fallen traces.

Aunt Adelaide was so upset by the tales of the day's events that Emilyann decided she better sit up with her that night, in Aunt Adelaide's room, of course. Of course.

Stokely left for Northampshire with his brother in the morning, but he was not going to be good company.

* * * *

The trip to Stockton was uneventful, if you discounted the wheel coming off the carriage. Geoff was thrown clear as the coach tipped, luckily onto a grassy verge. Stokely, who was driving, managed to grab the seat rail with his left hand and hang on to the reins with his right, pulling back with all his force to halt the plunging horses.

White-faced, he came back to find his batman Rigg stumbling out of the carriage. "Knocked me head over horsefeathers, sir, but nothing's broke. I'll survive."

Geoff was dusting off his buckskins when Stokely reached him. "I'm beginning to think civilian life is not as dull as it's cracked up to be," Smoky told him, using his handkerchief to dab at a trickle of blood on his brother's forehead. "Footpads, runaway horses, flying coachwheels. The front was never this dangerous."

"And you ain't even been to Almack's yet. At least

you don't need to worry about getting into the Four-in-Hand Club when you get back. I never saw driving like that! Wait'll I tell old Rem."

"I, ah, don't think we'll mention this around town, Geoff. Wouldn't want to upset the ladies, you know."

"Lord, after the dust-up yesterday, I can't blame you. Still ..."

The two brothers rode bareback to the nearest inn on the coach horses, leaving Rigg with the carriage while they fetched help. Later, when the carriage was righted, the wheel restored, fresh horses put back in the traces, Rigg took the major aside.

"Found this when I was walking around a bit, sir," he said, holding out a beefy hand with a bent piece of metal on the palm. "Linchpin from the wheel, Major."

Bent was to be expected, fresh file marks on the ends were not. Stokely rubbed the old scar on his chin. "Remind me to hire some new grooms when we get home," he told the other man quietly, outside Geoff's hearing. "I'm sure you can find a few of the lads from the old battalion in need of a position."

"Yessir, men that can keep their eyes open."

"And their mouths shut."

"Beggin' your pardon, Major, but it wouldn't be a devil's divorce, would it?" The grizzled little soldier had never gotten over the ragged stableboy who married his master. The chit had come on a piece, true, but a body never could trust a woman, much less one in britches.

The furrow on Stokely's brow smoothed, and he laughed a rich, hearty laugh. "You mean Sparrow? She was with me yesterday in the park, for one thing, and she doesn't hate me enough, for another. She mightn't be content on a short lead, but I pray it is nothing as personal as this. Then again, if I did happen to incur my lady's displeasure, her style leans more toward putting a bullet between my eyes. No, Sparrow would never resort to something underhanded like this." He laughed again.

The bewhiskered batman just grunted. Women, bah!

* * * *

Nothing much happened in London while the Earl of Stokely was away, except his wife realized how much she missed him, and how foolish she had been to deny herself his company. She went about her duties getting ready for the ball, but kept seeing his gray eyes

laughing, his mouth quirked up in a smile at her. Her knees still threatened to give out when she recalled him jumping in front of those galloping horses—and the quick kiss he had given her after.

She consulted with the chef, she stood for another endless fitting for her dress, and she counted the days till his return. Oh, yes, and the wheel came off her phaeton.

Luckily Nadine had gone with Aunt Adelaide to match some ribbons while Emilyann conferred with Gunther's again, reconfirming her order of ices. Luckily a vegetable cart was delaying traffic, so she was driving at less than her usual up-to-the-bits pace. One moment she was perched daintily on her seat, the next she was sprawled on the pavement, but with the reins still in hand. Her man Jake, riding behind as groom, shouted a commanding "Whoa," and the lovely grays pulled up instantly before Emilyann could be dragged beneath the coach.

Her horses were high-bred, fast, and showy, but steady as bricks, well-mannered, and schooled to the inch. She wouldn't raise them any other way; Jake wouldn't let her drive any he hadn't trained. None of those high-strung, unreliable prads for Lady Em, who hugged each of her matched grays and told them what dears they were. Her knees were scraped, her gown was ripped at one sleeve, and her bonnet was missing altogether. Perhaps she would visit Gunther's tomorrow.

"Oh, and Jake, there is no reason to mention this back at home. Aunt Adelaide would have conniptions, you know, and Smoky would ..."

Jake already knew the master's opinion of the phaeton, thank you. He didn't allow as he needed his ears warmed again. Not that any of it was his fault, mind. Jake misdoubted even the earl could have sweet-talked Lady Em into a ladylike chaise, and he *had* convinced her that a red and gold racing curricule was too flashy. As for this accident ...

Jake left a street urchin to hold the horses while he and Emilyann went to see the damage. The wheel was in perfect condition. The shaft was fine. The linchpin was missing altogether.

"I think we'll hire a few more grooms, Jake. You know, for the party and all the coaches there will be in the street."

Jake allowed as how that sounded like a fine idea to him. He knew a few likely chaps from the Black Dog Inn. So what if they did not know a horse's hock from his hindquarters, they were handy with their fives.

Then Lady Stokely whirled around. "But where is Pug? My goodness, I forgot all about—" She flew to the tiny, still figure at the curb. "Jake, do something!"

* * * *

Two days after Stokely's return from the country there were more grooms than horses in the stable behind the house. They had to draw straws to see who would wear the livery until more could be delivered. Jake scratched his head and kept mum.

After a go-around between the military types and the locals, he sent some of the latter out as groundskeepers with instructions not to set foot on the grounds, not knowing Aunt Adelaide's roses from rutabagas. What they kept was watch on every entrance to the house. The tack gleamed, the stalls were swept thrice a day, and no one came or went without Jake knowing about it. And Pug had round-the-clock nursing.

Chapter Thirteen

"I thought that with the ball tomorrow, and you so recently back from the country, we might stay in and have a quiet night tonight."

Stokely would have given his right arm and his favorite horse to hear those words from his adorable wife, looking fetching in a low-cut, high-waisted gown of emerald lutestring. She was trying to sound so blasé, propositioning her husband in front of his family at afternoon tea, with her lower lip caught between her teeth in an effort to hold back her blushes.

"I'm sorry, my dear," and he prayed no one knew how sorry, "but Geoff and I have other plans this evening."

"You what?" The teapot was set down with a resounding thud. Emilyann had been composing that speech for days, rehearsing to find a middle ground between friendship and fast talk. She did not want to sound overeager; Smoky was already too full of his own consequence and she was not ready to back down completely, just make a few concessions. There could

not be much danger in kissing one's own husband, she had concluded, deciding to become available for that long-delayed discussion. And he had other plans?

"Sorry, but you've been so busy, and I thought you would want us out from underfoot...."

She had almost laid her heart at his feet and now he was about to walk over it, likely on the way to some light-skirt's door. The tea in Emilyann's cup could have turned to ice from the chill in her voice: "I shan't wait up."

"I did not expect it, my dear," he said, leaving in a hurry.

* * * *

"Whew," Geoff said once they were out on the street, "I knew you were a brave man, but that was close. I don't mind telling you, Emmy on her uppers ain't a comfortable thing. Best of good fellows generally, for a female, of course, but when she gets her wind up ... Did you see Nadine cram that last almond cake in her mouth and race Aunt Adelaide for the stairs? Emmy didn't seem to like our shabbing off like that."

"You just have to know how to handle her."

Geoff grinned. "Like bolting? 'Sides, I don't see you handling her at all. Ain't my business, of course...."

"No, it's not."

His irrepressible brother just grinned wider. "Well, can you at least tell me what this is all about, and where we are going? If I'm to be in Emmy's black books, I deserve to know why."

Stokely threw his arm around Geoff's shoulder and told him, "We are going sightseeing, my lad. Big brother is going to show you a side of London you've never visited, I pray. And if you ever go back without me, being on Sparrow's bad side would look like heaven compared to what I'll do to you."

They started in the clubs, and proceeded through the gaming hells, to the dives, to the alehouses of the slums, to the stews. Always Stokely asked a few questions, put a few coins on a counter, and sat at a table for a few minutes, nursing a glass or a mug or a bottle. Sometimes a man would come whisper a name or two, for another coin. Other times a woman would come, asking a different question, in hopes of earning Stokely's favor. He sent the women away with a smile and a coin, more often than not.

It was information he was after, nothing else.

Someone had hired those thugs who attacked him and Geoff on the street, someone had rigged his carriage to crash, and that same someone had likely whipped a team of frenzied horses in his direction in the park. He wanted to know who that someone was, and soon, before he had to return to the Continent, leaving his family open to more attacks.

“ ‘Pon rep,” Geoff commented as he took a breath of fresh air outside one foul ken, “we’re lucky to get out with our skins.”

Stokely smiled. “We were in no danger. I used to spend a lot of time here and there when I was supposed to be at school and later, after I signed up but before I was sent to the Peninsula, and then on leaves. I got to know a lot of people in the army, too. That barkeep with one eye, Corcoran, was with us at Valdoz, and the beggar outside that last tavern.”

“You’re at home to a shade here,” Geoff said a little enviously. “It’s a wonder you ever left. I mean, you didn’t have to go in the army, being the heir and all.”

“What, should I have stayed and been like our father, becoming another old reprobate living beyond his means, draining the estate for his own pleasure? If I stayed here, I would have, too. Gaming, women, drink. It would have been too easy for me to fall into that trap. Then where would you and Nadine be, or the lands? I didn’t have Emmy to go bail for me like you did. No, she didn’t tell me. Butler did. Not all the details; I suppose he couldn’t hear everything through the keyholes.”

“Pompous old busybody,” Geoff muttered, but Stokely was not listening.

“I don’t know,” he reflected, “maybe I did have Sparrow then, I just didn’t realize it.”

He did not have the name he wanted either. He had some leads for his night’s efforts, and people on the lookout for him, but no proof and not enough to make up for what he was missing: an evening with Sparrow in neither a teasing nor bashful mood, but possibly willing to talk. He would not hope for more, now, just the warm, willing woman he knew she could be. And tomorrow was that blasted ball.

* * * *

The ball was the culmination of Lady Stokely’s season, proof of her stature as a lady of quality. It was a grand affair, with half the ton present, admiring her,

her home, her ability to organize a function this size. She was one of those popular hostesses whose invitations people craved, and best of all, Smoky would be there to see it.

Pride, that was what it was, and let Aunt Ingrid say a prayer for her if it was such a sin. Emilyann knew her house was in order, flower-decked and spotless, refreshments lavish, servants well trained. Her guests could have no complaints.

She herself was in looks, in a new gown of blue satin with a silver net overskirt. Every male guest had told her, if she hadn't read it in Smoky's eyes before they stood to make the receiving line. And how splendid he looked standing next to her, for once out of uniform in a coat of dark blue superfine stretched perfectly across wide shoulders, and black satin knee breeches enclosing muscular thighs. His weathered tan and the bit of gray at his temples made him seem even more distinguished than the pale, pomaded fops who passed for gentlemen of the ton. Geoff on her other side was saying just what he ought to each of the young debs who tried to catch his eye as they passed through the line. Emmy only had to grip his hand twice before he disordered the starched cravat over which Mr. Butler had labored so lovingly.

Nadine was charming tonight, too. She would never be a tongue-tied miss, and she was sparkling in her tiered gown of white lace, which still fit, remarkably, after all the nervous eating she had done this week in anticipation of the event. Lady Stokely's heart nearly burst with the glory of it all, her wonderful family, her delighted friends, her magnificent hero-husband. Let Aunt Ingrid say *two* prayers.

Smoky led her out for the first dance. "My countess," he said with pride matching her own, kissing her wrist. "I hereby demand all your waltzes and the supper dance, no matter who else asks. I don't care if it's the prince or the tsar or Bonaparte in person. Actually, I'd like to have a few words with that chap myself, so if you find him hanging about your skirts ... No, not even him. The waltzes belong to me."

His eyes told her more, that *she* belonged to him. Blushing at her own thoughts, and his knowing smile in return, she nodded. Her enjoyment of the night was complete now, and she could just as happily have retired from society altogether, returned to the country

to raise pigs and pugs (and maybe little gray-eyed tykes). Of course there was Nadine to settle, and Smoky still hadn't resigned his commission, but she had hopes of talking him 'round. But tonight, ah, tonight Lady Emilyann would twirl in her husband's arms. in the waltz, of course.

The only note to mar her contentment of that first dance came when Stokely asked: "What the devil is Aylesbury doing here?"

"Aunt Ingrid has been very kind to us. Did you notice she is out of black for once, in honor of our ball?"

"Yes, instead of wearing black buttoned to the neck, she is wearing gray buttoned to the neck. At least she is not preaching to the company."

Emmy teased: "No, that's the entertainment for during supper."

"All well and good, my girl, but what about Morgan? You know I told you to have nothing to do with him."

"Yes, but he is my uncle, after all. I couldn't very well not invite him without setting people to talk, or upsetting Aunt Ingrid."

"He's a rum touch and she knows it as well as you do. I don't want him near you, especially now."

"Why now?" she wanted to know.

Perhaps it was concern which made Smoky revert to Major Stokely. The officer in him was not used to being questioned, or having his orders disobeyed. "Because I say so, that's why."

Hmm, Emilyann reconsidered. Maybe just pigs and pugs.

* * * *

Their second dance was not quite as enjoyable. Emilyann had received congratulations from the Almack's hostesses, adulation from her usual coterie, a pinch from the regent, who stopped in for a moment, marking her party a true success, and censure from her husband.

"What do you mean letting that chaw-bacon cousin of yours hang around my sister?" he asked, taking her in his arms for what should have been a delightful experience.

"What do you mean 'letting'? That's why we came to London in the first place."

"Then why did I find her in the refreshment room helping Bobo stuff lobster patties into his pockets?"

"At least it's better than the silverware. And I gave Mr. Butler strict orders that Bobo is not to go into the cloak room, so you needn't worry about him going through the guests' coat pockets for loose change."

"Egad, I only have to worry about him stealing away my sister. Whatever were you thinking about? Next you're going to tell me you had to invite him, too."

"No, Nadine did," she shot back, eyes flashing, giving up the pretense of a smile for the attentive watchers on the sidelines. "Why do you not take her to task, my lord?"

"Because you said you could watch out for her, my lady."

"I am. That's what this whole ball is about, finding her eligible men to choose from."

"Well, he ain't one of them, madam, your cousin or no."

Emilyann vowed to strangle the wretched girl right after this dance. Meantime, she had a bone to pick herself. "May I ask what you were doing in the refreshment room, Stokely? I haven't seen you in the ballroom since the quadrille you had with Nadine. Perhaps you think that's suitable behavior for a host, but I do not. I am sure Sally Jersey expects you to pay her court, and little Miss Whitlaw hasn't had a dance yet except for Geoff. I don't like wallflowers at my party."

"Oh, but it is *your* party, madam. I could not have sprung for a third of the champagne you have flowing like water. Besides, I have more important things to consider than the Jersey's ego or Miss Whitlaw's stammer. General Fanshawe is here, and he has reports that Napoleon's army is regrouping, and the Corsican will be breaking out of exile any day."

"I don't see why you don't just sell out and be done with it. All this stupid talk."

"Yes, I know. At your ball." The music ended, he bowed, clicked his heels, and walked away.

Lady Stokely was not proud of that exchange.

* * * *

By the supper dance Stokely was quietly distracted. More reports had come in with guests from the War Office.

Emilyann was not-so-quietly furious. "I just had a conversation with Squire Kimball," she hissed as they took their place on the floor.

"What's that? Oh, yes, very nice of you to invite him and the missus up from the country. I had a chat with him myself, earlier."

Emilyann stepped on his toe, not entirely an accident. At least that got his attention. "I know," she went on. "And you told him you had no wish to purchase that lower acreage, where the orchards used to be."

"That's right, I don't."

"But I do," she ground out, putting her foot in quite the wrong place again.

Stokely came to a stop, looked down at her through narrowed eyes, and said, "If you make a scene here, Emilyann Arcott, so help me I'll put you over my knee."

"I think you have forgotten again, my lord. That is Emilyann *Stockton*, not some little child. And it is not myself who is causing the difficulty." She gestured to the other couples who were nearly tripping in their efforts to avoid bumping into them.

He took her hand again, she winced, and they resumed the waltz. "We shall speak of this later."

They certainly did not speak during supper. The wines were excellent, the food superb, the conversation nil, until dessert. Stokely turned to her and said, "Since you are already in such a taking, I may as well tell you that I fired that man Gannon you hired as gameskeeper at Stockton."

"You fired Gannon?"

"At least we know you hear me when I say things. I was beginning to wonder, my dear. I did tell you the man was a lazy good-for-nothing drunk. And you hired him anyway."

"I thought he would be good for the job." She actually thought he would be too incompetent to harm her precious foxes.

"There are no pheasants, no grouse, and almost no chickens left at the tenants' farms."

"I'll bet there are fewer rodents, too."

"And more hungry cats going after the birds." He offered her a dish of syllabub. "It looks delicious.... I hired Hebert."

"What? That man is a ... a trapper!" She couldn't think of anything worse.

Stokely took a spoonful of his dessert. "And I told Squire to organize a series of hunts. In the home woods."

The syllabub did not look as good in his lap.

Chapter Fourteen

When Stokely returned downstairs from changing his clothes, he happened to notice the Duke of Aylesbury, his unloved uncle-in-law, look over his shoulder in either direction, then enter the library. The library's door was closed, which should have informed guests that the room was not open to the public. Stokely reached for the sword that should have been at his hip. "Damn," he muttered, and moved quietly down the hall.

By the time the earl softly pushed the door aside, Morgan was standing near the mantel, examining the decanters lined up on a small side table there. He jumped when Stokely cleared his throat, and put his hands in his pockets.

"Ah, it's you, nevvie. Just came to, uh, blow a cloud."

Stokely noticed one of the cut-glass stoppers was out of its bottle. "And have a glass in private? What, is Aunt Ingrid keeping a watch in the refreshment parlor?"

"No, no. Not at all. Just wanted a little quiet. Balls ain't in my line, you know."

"I'm surprised you came, then. No matter, now that you are here, perhaps you'd care to take a glass with me."

"Honored I'm sure, but no thank you. Got to get back to the wife."

Stokely's eyes narrowed. "But I insist," he said, pouring two glasses from the opened bottle. "After all, I do not believe you have ever drunk to my marriage."

Oh, but Morgan had, bottles and bottles. Not exactly to the marriage, but certainly on its account. He had no wish to do so tonight, however. "Sorry, lad, my, ah, stomach has been bothering me."

"Brandy is just the thing to settle it, then." Morgan found himself in a leather chair, a glass in his hand, and his very large, very serious nephew-in-law sitting across from him. He shrugged. "To you and Emilyann." The men clinked their glasses together and raised them to their lips. Stokely's glass was empty. The level of Morgan's drink had hardly changed.

"Come now," said the earl, refilling his own glass and noting Aylesbury's eyes glitter. "You can do better

than that. Another toast. To the family." He emptied his glass again, after touching it to the duke's, but Morgan's hand seemed to shake, and the liquor spilled out.

"How clumsy of me."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Stokely's voice was smooth, satisfied. "I begin to think you do not like my taste in wine. That could be construed as an insult to my hospitality, you know. I am almost tempted to take offense and call you out."

"Not at all, not at all. Merely an accident." Morgan made to rise, but a hand shot out and gripped his arm in an iron-hard clasp. Morgan looked down to see wine dripping from Stokely's sleeve, where the earl had been pouring it. Morgan slumped back in his chair.

"Exactly." Stokely carefully wiped his hand with his handkerchief. "I find it strange how many of these 'accidents' there have been lately, don't you? Especially when I wrote to you once concerning my wife's welfare. Forgive my immodesty, but I consider my own continued existence also necessary to her well-being." He paused to contemplate the ruined cuff of his new shirt. "Peculiar thing about your family, you and Emilyann anyway. Neither one of you seems to take my orders seriously. You would not last long in the army." He looked up and there was cold death in those gray eyes, a promise of implacable vengeance in the low, steady voice. "You will not last long in London."

Dead men have nothing to lose, so Morgan shot back, "Go ahead and make your threats, you sanctimonious cockscomb. You're a fine one to talk, marrying a chit out of the schoolroom to line your pockets with what should have been mine. We paupers cannot afford scruples, eh, but your notions are a little nicer than mine? I think not, nevvvy." He waved a liver-spotted hand at the room, the house. "I see the way you live, how your sister's fixed on buying a title with her dowry. That was Emilyann's dowry, what should have been mine!"

"It was never meant to be yours, you old fool, and it will never *be* yours. I'll see you rot in hell first. You're forgetting who forced Sparrow into the marriage, Aylesbury. It wasn't me. I never coveted her fortune. *I never sought what was not mine.* The money she spent on the house will be repaid, yes, and Nadine's dowry

and the price of every blasted pig at Stockton if it takes me the next twenty years, and you shall never see a groat of it. You stupid bastard, haven't you even figured out that if you kill me, the money goes to my brother Thornton?"

"But not the heir's fortune. Dead men don't make good fathers."

Now, that struck the earl funny. He wished he could have shared that joke with Sparrow: Uncle Morgan wanted to keep him out of her bed as much as she did. He smiled, thinking that in the mood she was in tonight she'd be more dangerous than Morgan's wildest imaginings. She would be even harder to placate if he ruined her ball—and the new carpet—by spilling Morgan's blood all over them.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I am going to give you another chance, and a good piece of advice. The chance is this, and my last warning: one more accident, one more clumsy attempt to harm me or Emilyann, and you die. I wouldn't even bother calling you out. You better hope we live to ripe old ages and die of natural causes. Have I made that clear?"

Morgan had almost stopped quaking. Damn, he needed a drink. None of *those* drinks, of course. He swallowed the fear-taste and nodded.

"And here's the advice: get yourself the damn heir. I don't care a rap for the money; it would be the boy's anyway, and I fancy my son taking over my title, not yours. So do it, man. The babe doesn't have to be from the right side of the blanket, you know. Get yourself a by-blow somewhere, and enough proof that you're the father to stand up in court. I'll not contest your petition to have the child declared legitimate as long as you don't try to foist Bobo on us."

Morgan wore a speculative look. "Never liked the bobbing-block m'self."

"Well, there you go. A little bedroom action, a little legal action, and one-two-three, you'll have a new little Arcott to corrupt and a whole new fortune to gamble away."

The idea had possibilities, maybe even promise. Morgan could do it, all right. There was that new dealer at Mrs. Corbett's. Nice, but not too nice, of course. Good head for cards she had, too. It might even be refreshing to have a son with some intelligence for a change. Yes, he was liking the notion better and

better.

Lost in the happiest thoughts he'd entertained in years, Morgan did not realize he was being led, not back to the ballroom, but through the corridor to the front door. Stokely had his arm around the older man's shoulder, for all the world like a loving nephew escorting a relative to his coach. He nodded affably to any of the guests they passed and paused only to whisper a few words to Mr. Butler in the entry while Morgan dreamed on. The innkeep's daughter out in Richmond? What about one of the tenant farmers' daughters at the Hall? Healthy, wide-hipped, yeoman stock might be just the ticket.

"I'll do it," he declared, chortling. He pumped Stokely's hand up and down, ignoring the two strapping footmen who now flanked him and would until he was off the premises.

Stokely smiled and stepped out of the light before more of the company noticed his soiled sleeve. "Good," he said just before he went back inside, just before he made his final thrust, like a knife in Morgan's back. "Good. Now all you have to do is convince Aunt Ingrid to house your bastard."

"Cor," said one of the footmen as he slammed the door of the hackney carriage. "I ain't never seen no duke cry."

Stokely hurried back to the library, where he threw open the window, stepped out to the balcony, and proceeded to empty all five bottles of very old, very fine wines, unintentionally murdering one of Aunt Adelaide's rosebushes. Then he went upstairs to change his clothes again, just as the strains of the next dance began.

It was a waltz, and Emilyann's partner was missing. She was being stood up for a dance at her own ball, by her own husband! She almost dragooned young Remington into partnering her, then noted little Miss Whitlaw sitting forlorn on one of the gilt chairs at the edge of the dance floor. She sent a very disappointed young man in that direction and went to join a laughing group around Lady Jersey.

"What, not dancing, my dear?" that lady asked. "I thought you two lovebirds would be waltzing again for sure. Such a romantic dance." She tittered. Everyone in the place knew the Stokelys were more like fighting cocks than lovebirds tonight. What a diversion!

Emilyann seethed but smiled. "I had to see about a small matter in the kitchen. The duties of a hostess come first, of course."

"Of course, my dear, and I must congratulate you on performing them so well."

Emilyann nodded politely. If she told this old cat what she was thinking, they'd never see the inside of Almack's again. She bit the inside of her lip as Lady Jersey went on, living up to her nickname of Silence. "And it's a pleasure to see Stokely taking on his new responsibilities as host also. So kind of him to go after Lady Bramby when her flounce tore. At least I think he did. We saw him headed toward the library just after she left, didn't we, Ferdie? Thoughtful boy. You know, I had my doubts about him as husband material, such a shocking rake he used to be, don't you recall, Ferdie? Why, I remember ..."

Emilyann remembered another errand in the kitchen. "We can't seem to put out enough of those spun-sugar confections. Count Andreovich loves them so, I'll just go find some more."

What a surprise, there were no candied violets in the library. There were no erring husbands, either, but there were two empty glasses, and the doors to the balcony were open, letting in the cool night air. Emilyann stepped out to look, but the balcony extended too far in either direction for her to see past the library's meager light. Of course, they would have found a dark corner somewhere. She pulled the doors shut with a snap, rattling the glass, and turned the key in the latch. If they were out there, let them freeze. Lady Bramby had been wearing little enough anyway.

Emilyann was not a heavy drinker, but she needed Dutch courage tonight if she was to get through the rest of this awful party. She found a clean glass and—and all of the bottles were empty. Heavens, what kind of orgy was Stokely throwing? She kicked his stupid old desk. He'd been castaway on their wedding night, too, and Geoff looked green this morning after a night out with him. If Stokely was that kind of man, she told herself, he was not worth her tears. So why was she crying?

Because her foot hurt, she answered herself, and because what should have been one of the happiest nights of her life just couldn't get any worse.

She was wrong. It could.

* * * *

After the last of the guests made their departures and Emilyann had thanked the staff and ordered the clean-up left for tomorrow, she limped up to bed. Marvelous, she thought, her maid hadn't even waited up for her, and those tiny buttons down the back of her gown would be devilish to undo. It was not as if the girl were overworked either, or underpaid, Emilyann considered angrily, about to wrench the offending buttons apart. She hated the ugly dress anyway; she would never wear it again.

Then the last person she expected—or wanted—to see was in her doorway, asking, “May I help?” Stokely had been bidding farewell to the men from the Foreign Office the last she saw, ages ago. Now he was in her bedroom, wearing his dressing gown and a tentative smile. He could just take that quirky grin and—

“Thank you, no, I'll ring for my maid. She should have been waiting here.”

“She was. I dismissed her.”

Emilyann took a deep breath. “*You* dismissed *my* maid?”

Smoky nodded, meanwhile moving out of throwing range just in case. At least life would never be dull. “I wanted to talk.”

She put her hands on her hips and pursed her lips. “Well, that's all of a piece, isn't it? You order my servants about, you ride roughshod over my plans, overrule my decisions, and make me a laughingstock at my own ball. Well, you, you, authoritative ass, you can just go back to Lady Bramby, see if I care.”

“What, was Sydelle here tonight? I'm sorry I missed her. Pleasant lady, always even-tempered.”

“And I'm not, I suppose?”

He grinned.

“She wouldn't be either, married to an insufferable, arrogant brute, to say nothing of any *lady* dressing like that. Her gown was so sheer you could tell she had no underpinnings on beneath.”

“Then I am doubly sorry to have missed her.”

Now, Smoky might tease, and he might rage, but he would never lie to her; Emilyann would have sworn on that. “You did not see her tonight?”

He took a seat on the chaise longue. “I said so, didn't I?”

She sniffed. “That doesn't change things. How dare

you cancel the negotiations I had going with Squire Kimball? I've been after him for ages now, and you queer the deal within minutes. We needed that land for the new breed of hogs Geoff and I have been studying."

"I cannot afford it."

"I can!"

"But that is your money, not mine. I don't care if you dress every horse in London in a green bonnet, or buy every break-down hackney nag for your racing farm. That is yours. The land is mine, and I will not have my wife bankroll it. Which sentiment I believe I expressed frequently and forcefully."

"Of all the overblown, prideful—"

"You're the one standing there in a dress that won't unbutton rather than let me help."

She ignored that. "And what about Gannon? You had no right to fire him without a by-your-leave."

Stokely brushed at a piece of lint on his sleeve. "No? I thought I had a great many rights, even if I choose not to exercise them all the time. I gave you your head in a large field, Sparrow, I did not give you the ordering of my life. You did not buy me, you know. I *do* live here, or there at Stockton, and I have every right to make sure my properties are well tended."

"And they are!"

"In nearly all instances. Perhaps I never expressed my gratitude to you for how well you've managed. Stockton has never been in better condition, and all the tenants sing your praises."

"At least someone does," she muttered. It was becoming harder to maintain her anger. That was the way it always was with him, blast.

He looked around. "Where's the dog?"

Oh, dear, in all the bustling about, she had not even had time to check on poor Pug!

"He's in the stables with Jake."

"Good, that's where he belongs."

"And you don't even like my dog!"

He laughed. "Anything else in your budget, Sparrow? I'm sure I have wronged you woefully, so you may as well have at it now while you have the opportunity. I'll be leaving soon."

He shouldn't have reminded her. The ball! "You left *me* there without a partner at my own dance!"

"I was occupied, my dear."

“Occupied? Your brainbox must be occupied by a family of squirrels! Everyone knew we were to have the waltz. All the old tabbies were snickering behind their fans.”

She was mussed from her struggle with the dress, and she had kicked her shoes off as soon as she entered the room, and she was in a kitten-fit again, so Emilyann looked more like the hoyden he was used to than the cool countess he had been seeing. Stokely thought he might like this fiery woman better. “Does it matter so much to you what a bunch of old quizzes think?” he wanted to know.

“I wanted to make you proud. Oh.” She had not meant to say that at all.

He smiled and moved over to make room next to him on the chaise. He patted the cushion and she sat, just close enough for him to take her hand and carry it to his lips.

“And I am, my dear. I am proud of you with or without anyone else’s approval, with every curl in place at tea or on your hands and knees dicing with the stablehands.” His hand moved to her shoulder, gently stroking.

“You saw!”

“And I wished I could join the game. I have always been proud of you, you must know that.”

“Even when I sound like a fishwife? And you cannot approve of my dumping the syllabub in your lap. I regretted it instantly, you know.”

“You always do, Sparrow. And yes, even then, when you looked so righteous, like a Greek goddess casting thunderbolts at offending mortals.” By now his hand had moved to caress her neck, her back, and damn those pesky buttons, he thought. Why did they make the bloody things so small?

“I am sorry, Smoky, truly. I know I can do better. It’s just that ...”

“I know, I am overbearing and officious, and I should have consulted you first. I am sorry, too, my dear.”

“Oh, but I am headstrong and willful. Nanny has told me so a million times.”

“Only Nanny?” he teased, pressing her head against his chest and kissing the top of her pale curls, incidentally having two hands free to work on the back of the gown. “Why, if I told you not to jump off the

balcony, you'd do it just to spite me."

She laughed, a little breathless. "And you would expect me to obey you even if the house was on fire."

"What a fine couple."

Her hands had moved, tentatively at first, along the silky lapels of his robe, then to the dark hair on his chest. Was that warmth from him, or her?

"You know, Sparrow, I think we *could* be a fine couple, if we tried."

"Hmm," she agreed dreamily. "We'll have lots of time to work at it."

His hands stopped their explorations. "Ah, not much time for now, I'm afraid."

She pulled back, out of his embrace, where he could see how flushed she was, how utterly kissable. "Oh?"

Oh, hell, he thought. "All those rumors flying around, you know. That's what we were so busy discussing the entire night. The peace won't even make a hundred days, it seems. I'll have to be returning. Soon." Her brows were raised. "Sooner than I had hoped."

She stood slowly, uncurling like a stretching cat. "Just how soon?"

More like some wild jungle cat with prey in sight, he decided. "Ah, tonight."

"Tonight, and you weren't going to tell me, and you were just going to—"

"Do you want me to fetch some pudding for you to throw? How about that vase of flowers? You notice I did not put on my uniform yet, just in case I had to change again. I wish you would think of poor Rigg, though."

"How can you tease, Smoky?"

"Why, you were wishing me to the devil not five minutes ago. The devil or Lady Bramby, I forget which."

"It was Lady Bramby and I would have torn your heart out with my fingers!"

He held her face in his hands. "Then you do care?"

"Silly, I wouldn't be jealous otherwise."

"And you know I wouldn't be angry if I didn't worry about you so much, don't you?"

She nodded, and tears started to fill her eyes. Smoky kissed each lid in turn. "I don't suppose ... ?"

"Would you still leave?"

"God, Sparrow, what a question."

She stepped back. "Come home soon."

She was exquisite, like some fairy creature in an enchanted forest, and he wanted her more than he'd wanted anything else, ever. He wanted to wipe away that sad look and make her laugh and blush and get furious and silly. Gads, she was his own wife! He'd hurry home all right.

"Godspeed, Smoky."

Chapter Fifteen

Meanwhile, in that other bedroom:

"Morgan? What do you want? We already did that this week."

"No, no, just wanted to talk," he said, pulling a chair closer to the bed, where Ingrid lay with one long, heavy braid like a sword at her side.

She pushed the nightcap out of her eyes and fixed him with a piercing stare. "You're drunk."

"No, I swear. Wanted to tell you, Ingrid. I'm a changed man."

He still smelled of yesterday's mutton and still had hair growing out of his ears. She raised herself up on her elbows and said, "Yes?"

"I got to thinking at that ball, seeing my niece and her husband so well set, seeing young Bobo doing the pretty with the young girls, how fortunate we were. As a family, you know. And I got to thinking, maybe we should do more for other people, other, ah, families. You know, charity." He had trouble saying the word; it was not much used in his vocabulary. He looked at his wife for signs of approbation and went on although she looked at him blankly.

"Well, you are always nattering—uh, going on about doing your duty, bringing true belief to us lesser mortals. Savin' souls, Ingrid, couldn't be a finer ambition. Now, I say to myself, Morgan, you need a goal like that, doing something for others. Charity, that's it, good deeds to atone for the wrongs you've done." He checked to see if she was swallowing this. She was nodding, so he continued.

"And I asked myself, where can I do the most good? Lot of causes around London, you know. Climbing boys, crippled veterans without pensions. They're always debating such in the Lords, you know, always asking for money for 'em."

She wondered how he knew what was debated in

Parliament at all, since he never went and hardly read a newspaper beyond the racing journals to her knowledge. She decided it was money he wanted, thinking he could get another check out of her by appealing to her generous nature. "I already contribute, Morgan," she told him to dampen that dream. "I send two pounds every month to Brother Blessed's Orphanage and Boardinghouse for the Needy."

Great gods, she sent good blunt to a bunch of dirty rug-rats? "Very bountiful, m'dear. I'm sure the little tots remember you in their prayers. But it was more practical help I was thinking of, not just the cash. Too easy to write a chit and forget about the need." He was certain he'd heard her say that.

"I am sure Brother Blessed would appreciate if you went down and helped care for the orphans, though I cannot see what—"

"No, no. There are so many people devoting their energies to the foundlings. I was thinking of other charities, you know, workhouses, dole hospitals . . . homes for unwed mothers."

"You want to send money to encourage women who are no better than they should be?"

"Not the money, recall. Practical help, that's what those unfortunates need. Food, medical care, shelter. I, ah, thought we could offer room to a few of the girls. Heaven knows we have enough space in this old barn."

Ingrid sat up straight at this. "You want me, a God-fearing, churchgoing woman, to take one of those, those soiled doves into my home?" she shrieked. "Do you know how those women got that way?"

Morgan thought he remembered.

"It's a sin, do you hear me, and I won't let any light-skirts cross my door. Even the housemaids know I won't tolerate such goings-on, walking out with footmen and such. I know where that leads, and I won't have it."

"Uh, and if the girl wasn't such a stranger, do you think you could reconsider?" Her frigid silence told him the chances of that, so he tried another tact: "Wouldn't you like to hear the patter of little feet again? Those nurseries upstairs have stood empty for a long time and ..."

When he finally got around to it, confiding Stokely's grand scheme, the money, the title, and all, Ingrid had

only one comment to make. Very succinctly, very sincerely, and with every chance of success, she uttered: "Go to hell."

Chapter Sixteen

Smoky left, not knowing of her love. Emilyann could not tell him she loved him, not when he hadn't said it, not when she could hardly say it to herself. She whispered it into Pug's soft fur when she went to visit, as if telling the little dog a great secret. Dogs were good for that, they never gossiped and they never laughed, even when the secret was such a piece of silliness.

Of course she loved Smoky. She always had. Her hero-worship had evolved all it could—he was a hero, after all—but without the blinders of infatuation. She saw Smoky for what he was, kind and courageous, strong and warm-hearted—and pig-headed, overbearing, used to command, devilishly handsome—and gone.

Emilyann thought of the gentle, biddable husband she had thought to marry, and laughed. Pug wagged his tail. Smoky was none of those things, and she would not have changed him for the world, even if she could, except possibly to make him less overprotective. He left so many instructions—for her well-being, he said—that she may as well be a china doll wrapped in cotton and placed on a shelf until his return. As if she did not know to check her saddle girth, or was widegeon enough to ride out unaccompanied by Jake or one of the new grooms. She was not to attend masquerades or walk on the balcony during balls, although she did not think this was entirely for her safety, and hugged to herself the thought of his jealousy. She was not to spend time alone with Uncle Morgan, ever, and mostly she was not to travel to Belgium, where the ton was assembling.

First Smoky gave orders: she must not become one of those empty-headed pleasure-seekers chasing frivolity at the fringes of war. Then he reasoned with her: Brussels had not enough accommodations for the influx of tourists, with so many fleeing Paris; no one knew where Napoleon would make his final stand and Brussels could be too close; worrying over her would be a distraction from his duties. Finally he pleaded: *Please stay in England*, he wrote, *so I can come home to*

you.

She had no desire to go abroad anyway, but what about *her* worries? Emilyann asked the dog. Smoky should be safe, she believed, unless the gudgeon volunteered to rejoin the army in France, which sounded just like what he would do. And she had all his other commands to consider. He called them “wishes,” of course, as in “I wish you would be more cautious with your investments,” and “I wish you would discourage that paperskull Bobo from hanging around Nadine.” The first was easy. With the uncertainty of the peace continuing, speculation was too uncertain. There were vast earnings to be made on munitions and grain shipments if war broke out again, but Emilyann thought it indecent to profit from the spilling of men’s blood, especially if even one drop were Smoky’s.

Bobo was more of a problem, or Nadine was. Emilyann sent Geoff home to see about the harvests and replanting for the winter feed, and to find a replacement for that new gamekeeper. Aunt Adelaide went along to keep house for him, she said, and to see her garden again, but they all knew it was a surfeit of Nadine, not a dearth of day lilies, sending her off. Emilyann would have followed herself, except that news reached London long before it filtered to the shires, and she could not bear it if the armies were engaged without her knowing Smoky’s whereabouts.

She tried to send Nadine with Geoff and her aunt, but the minx refused. She adored London and declared she was never going to rusticate with the pigs again. With the foreign diplomats scurrying off, though, all the young officers reenlisting, and every second son hurrying to sign up, the field of eligible gentlemen was shrinking. The nobility returned to their country homes, and London grew sadly flat after the revelry of the victory season. Even that nice Remington boy left town for a country house party at the home of little Miss Whitlaw, she of the squint, stammer, and spots—and three thousand a year, plus a very pleasant personality. There were just enough dinners and parties to keep Nadine on the go, showing off her new clothes, and just enough suitors to admire them.

Stokely had refused four offers for his sister’s hand on the night of their ball, claiming she was too young.

Two of the offers were above reproach, a baronet and a plain mister with good prospects. One proposition was not quite respectable, the penniless son of a French marquis, and one laughable, Bobo. Nadine was in alt at the quantity and quality of her court—and preferred Bobo. Now, with the depleted ranks, it was even harder to keep her from him.

Emilyann did her best, inviting Thornton's shy curate to dinner, begging Lady Vinn and her nephew to share their box at the opera, driving with Nadine in the chaise instead of her phaeton so they could offer rides to gentlemen strollers of their acquaintance. Nadine still preferred Bobo.

"What do you see in that lumpfish?" Emilyann asked one day, frustrated in her not-so-subtle efforts to dislodge the nodcock from her tea table.

"We have so many things in common," Nadine replied, licking the crumbs of the last crumpet off her fingers.

Yes, like a love for garish colors and a fondness for strawberry tarts. "But he can hardly dance, never brings you flowers or makes pretty compliments."

"That doesn't matter. We have such a good time together."

"What do you find to talk about with him?" Emilyann had never been able to exchange more than five words with the cod's-head, words like "Put that down" and "Take your hands off me." She was appalled when Nadine giggled and answered, "Oh, we have better things to do than talk."

So Emilyann never left them alone, and was forced to attend those dreadful musical entertainments so dear to dowagers' hearts, where they could show off their daughters' accomplishments with little expense. The refreshments were just ample enough for the guests, if you discounted Bobo's pockets, so Emilyann usually came home hungry, in addition to irritable.

She did not dare let them go off riding together, so they were forced to amble along the paths instead of tearing across the greens. Neither one had much of a seat, and Bobo's poor mount was practically carrying double anyway, so Lady Stokely couldn't ask it for more exertion. As a result, Emilyann was not burning off enough of *her* energy, and was restless, agitated over her concern for Smoky, and aggravated at the whole situation.

It was no surprise, therefore, when she accepted Bobo's offer to try out the paces of a spirited new gelding.

* * * *

After his last misstep, Morgan was forced to attend three prayer meetings to get back into Ingrid's good graces, if not the Lord's, and to get back on her list of household expenses. He had no choice. There were no more jewels to be put on tick; Arcott would yield nothing until after harvest time; and that nipfarthing Baxley would not answer his letters. Moreover, the kitchen cat had died after eating some of Ingrid's breakfast gruel that tasted "off."

"Get ye hence, Satan! Do not place temptation in front of me."

No chance of that. The crone on the hard pew in the row ahead had the widest-spreading—

"Renounce the greed, renounce the avarice, renounce the temptation to value the pence and shillings over prayer and salvation."

Easy for Brother Blessed. He hadn't tried paying the cents-per-centers off with an appeal to their immortal souls. "Pray on the Almighty's time," they said. "Pay up on ours."

"Sloth is a sin. The devil spins among the idle like a great poisonous spider, ready to capture souls and suck their life's blood from them till they hang like empty husks in the web of everlasting hell."

Hmm. But where could one find a poisonous spider? Morgan did not suppose you just went off to the woods and started digging. Too much work. No, there must be places where one could procure a black widow. He'd have to look into it.

"And like the serpent said to Eve ..."

Or a snake. Morgan didn't like the creepy things himself, but if he could manage to get an asp into Ingrid's bed ... This Brother Blessed wasn't half bad.

"And I say pluck the devil from you, like a thorn in the flesh! Repeat with me, brothers and sisters, Satan, get ye hence!"

* * * *

"Here, Bobo, get ye hence."

"Huh?"

"Go on, already, take the horse over to Lady Stokely's. She's waiting for you for that picnic to Richmond."

"She don't like me."

"Of course not, you looby. No one likes you."

"Miss Nadine likes me."

Morgan couldn't understand that, but got a deal of satisfaction to think of that arrogant Earl of Stokely's own sister ending up with Bobo. The chit didn't have much of a dowry, but if she was willing to have the gapeseed, Morgan was happy to help, getting back at Stokely in the bargain. He feared the man, he feared hell, too, but he feared debtor's prison more than either of them. He had decided long ago that if he would be damned for the thought as well as the deed, he may as well get on with it, for he had thoughts aplenty. He may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Hell, he could be hanged for a wolf if he managed it, with Bobo's help.

"Here, if you want that Nadine chit, you have to get on Emilyann's good side, you know, so she will convince Stokely to approve your suit."

"Huh?"

Morgan tore at his hair, the bay gelding skittered around, eyes rolling, ears back. "Just take the horse to m'niece. Say you won it in a card game and you think it's too much horse for you. Maybe for her, too. She never could resist a challenge so she'll take it on the ride."

"But, Da, I don't want to ride all the way to Richmond. You know I get light-headed from bein' tossed around in the saddle too long."

"You got light-headed from being born, dolt." He thought a moment, then added, "They are bound to have a picnic hamper along. Wouldn't set out without nuncheon. Cold chicken, likely, and Scotch eggs, cider, and cheese, maybe some of those tarts."

"That's all right, then. They've got a fine chef, though I don't see why we have to go all the way to Richmond when Nadine don't mind sittin' in the kitchen watchin' Cook roll out dough and stuff."

Morgan shoved the gelding's reins and a bag of sugar cubes into Bobo's pudgy hands. "Here, don't try to think. Just give it some sugar to keep it quiet till you get to the Stokelys'. The nag's already got a sidesaddle on, so Emilyann won't have time to think about it. And don't mention my name."

Bobo gingerly fed the restless gelding two cubes, then crammed five into his own mouth with

horse-slobbered fingers before mounting his own steed, a sleepy, swaybacked chestnut. He rode off in stretched buckskins and lavender waistcoat, leading the fractious bay with its lady's saddle and, under the blanket, Brother Blessed's thorn in the flesh.

* * * *

Why not? Emilyann asked herself. The bay was fidgety, in a sweat already. They both needed a good run, she decided. Jake was resting with a headache that morning, a loose window shutter having blown down and struck him last night on his way home from the Black Dog. And Smoky had not ordered her to stay off any rawboned brutes. He hadn't seen the need.

She grinned, whispered sweetly in the bay's ear, and rubbed its forehead. "We'll do fine, sweetheart," she told the gelding, checking the girth and tightening it a notch. Her groom, one of the new men Jake had found, stepped back as the horse sidled and crow-hopped. Emilyann laughed happily and mounted from the stable block.

She sat lightly in the sidesaddle and held the bay in close check until they were out of the city proper and had met up with the rest of their group, mostly Nadine's young friends and their beaux. The grooms followed a little behind with the hampers. And the chaperone, the proper married woman the matrons had entrusted with their precious chicks, decided to set a faster pace.

Emilyann touched the gelding with her heel and it was off like a flash, her laughter echoing back to the horrified group. When she tried to pull in, however, to wait for the others to catch up, the bay decided that although the discomfort could not be outrun, it might be dislodged. The horse reared. Emilyann shortened the reins. It bucked. She grabbed for its mane. Then the gelding did a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, all feet in the air, and so was Lady Stokely.

The dismayed grooms had dumped the hampers to ride to her assistance, and the young people set their horses to a gallop to reach her quickly, Bobo bouncing along. When they reached her, Emilyann already had the reins in hand and the saddle unbuckled, just waiting for a leg up.

"This fellow needs to learn some manners," she told an ashen-faced Nadine. "And I cannot do it in a sidesaddle. Deathly contraption anyway." She left the

blanket on, as a sop to convention.

"But, Em," Nadine wailed, "our vouchers to Almack's!"

Emilyann looked at her sister-in-law and grinned. "You hate the place anyway, remember? Stale toast and lemonade, that's all they serve. Don't worry, maybe I'll break my neck."

She got on and stayed on, her hands wrapped in the gelding's hair, her legs firmly clamped to its sides, wide skirts of her habit raised to show a stretch of stocking above the riding boots. They left the others far behind in a mad dash through hedges and spinneys and streamlets. The gelding never settled down, however, not even when its flanks were heaving and both horse and rider were drenched in sweat. The horse stayed frantic, and Emilyann finally gave it up rather than founder the animal. The beast was incorrigible; it just was never going to be a good ride. She climbed off at a farmstead and tied the reins to a rail, pulled off the blanket to rub the horse down while waiting for her party.

What a fool she had been—again. Hell and damnation! "You poor darling," she crooned to the horse, tears streaming down her dirty cheeks.

The riding party was ruined, of course. The food was spilled, the girls were tittering about Emilyann's daring, and Bobo was still casting up his accounts behind a shed. Emilyann was no sight for an inn, so she thankfully accepted the farmer's wife's offer of cider and fresh-baked bread before herding her group back to town.

They left Bobo behind, his ears ringing, to lead the bay with a cob the farmer was willing to rent. Emilyann sat stone-faced on the swaybacked chestnut and Nadine whimpered. Emilyann could not tell if the girl was missing Bobo or the scattered hampers, and did not care. "And if I ever see you talking to him again, I'll box your ears, too."

* * * *

"So what if she forbade you the house, you gossoon, there's parties and theater and the park. She can't keep the girl from you entirely."

Morgan and Bobo were in the library at Arcott House, sharing a bottle of Blue Ruin that Morgan had smuggled into the house under a sheaf of hymns, Ingrid was upstairs resting after a trying morning in

which the suit of armor in the foyer had fallen on her, the valiant knight's spiked mace quite destroying her new black shawl.

"But Da, they had such nice teas at Stockton House. 'Sides, she says you're never to call there again either."

That was nothing new, except that his niece did not know Stokely's orders. Morgan had already had the door slammed in his face twice over there by that uppity butler and a bunch of footmen who looked more like boxers than servants. No matter, he had no more reason to call on Emilyann; she couldn't be increasing, not after that ride. Morgan lifted his glass in a toast to the gelding.

"And she says she's goin' to write to Stokely."

The whiskey tasted like sawdust and spit. Brother Blessed would be proud of the way Morgan prayed for the saints to preserve him from the devil.

Emilyann wrote to Smoky only about the ride. There was no reason to fret him with foolish suspicions, so she just said what a delightful outing it had been, the most fun she'd had in ages, and how she missed the country. And him.

Chapter Seventeen

Then came Waterloo. It was a smashing victory or a crushing defeat, no one knew which. Emilyann and Morgan Arcott both avidly scanned the casualty lists, but there was no news of Smoky. Then word started to come back to England of the actual battle, and Major Lord Stokely's name was mentioned often. He'd left headquarters when there was no one else to send command decisions to Marshal Blucher and the Prussians. He'd borrowed a horse from the Twelfth Cavalry when his was lost, and he'd rallied a battalion of Scots' Greys until a junior officer was found to take charge. He had been seen at Quatre Bras, and again helping to fix a cannon position—and not since.

Emilyann haunted the War Office, battalion headquarters, and even Prinny's councillors' chambers, seeking word, but no one knew where Smoky was. One general patted her hand, like telling a child her puppy would come home when it got hungry. The others looked at her with sympathy, their averted eyes declaring her a widow before the official

pronouncement. She wouldn't believe it.

She also would not take part in the delirium of the new, this-time-final victory celebrations, not in the face of such grievous losses, such grieving uncertainty. The ton rallied back to London from their estates, and the fugitives from the revelry in Brussels joined the new galas in town. Emilyann questioned them when she could: yes, Stokely had been at the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of the battle, no, he had not danced, and no, they had not seen him since. Shocking disarray there, you know, casualties all over, none of the amenities. Nothing like home. Another cup of tea, dear?

So she stopped going out. Fireworks and illuminations held no attractions; there was no one she wanted to dance with at the balls; military reviews only reminded her of how handsome Smoky looked in his regimentals. She should have told him, dear Lord, she should have showed him how much she loved him. Perhaps she would be carrying his child by now, a piece of him to hold if— No, he was coming back.

Geoff wrote, cheerfully insisting Stokely would turn up. He always did. And Nadine went her own way, under the wing of one or another of her friends' mothers, declaring that since they had not heard any bad news, why borrow trouble. If Bobo was at all of the same functions, Emilyann decided, so be it. Perhaps his real personality would emerge and Nadine would be as affronted as the rest of the world. Emilyann always found that Bobo grew on you, like mold.

Curiously, it was Aunt Ingrid who brought Emilyann comfort. Her prayers did not seem so absurd anymore, and her belief that they would be answered was reassuring. She would sit quietly while Emilyann brooded, reading her religious tracts or embroidering a new altar cloth. She accompanied her niece on the calls to government offices, and insisted Emilyann go for outings in the park for fresh air and come down for tea, lest she waste away with worrying.

The two women became so close, in fact, that one day Emilyann was tempted to ask Ingrid about her suspicions.

"Don't you think that a lot of, ah, peculiar accidents happen to you, Aunt?"

Ingrid was holding her head at an odd angle. The window in her room had flown open in the night

somehow, and chilled her neck into an uncomfortable position. As she told the younger woman, it was a miracle she did not get influenza. "What's that, dear? What kind of things?"

"Oh, things like that locknut coming off the carriage chassis, or the canopy falling down off your bed while you were in it. Remember last year when the stair rail had been greased?"

Ingrid set another stitch. "The servants these days aren't to be trusted, you know. I told that footman precisely how to rehang the chandelier, but no, it fell the very next day, as soon as I slammed the front door."

"But other people don't have so many of these odd occurrences, Aunt Ingrid."

"The Lord is testing me, dear. Like Job. And my faith protects me."

"What about the fire at your prayer meeting? If belief was such good protection, how could a fire start there of all places?"

"But, dear, I told you there was no real fire. Someone must have mistaken wisps from the incense burners for smoke. Of course those of us in the front pews did not know it at the time, and there was a regrettable panic until Brother Blessed recalled us to our faith. The Lord would guard His flock, he said, and so we prayed. As I mentioned, there was only the one casualty from the first rush to the doors. Your uncle should be up and about again in a few weeks, the doctor says."

Emmy grinned, the first time in days. "Perhaps I should go to the lending library and fetch him some books to occupy his mind. Improving works, of course."

Ingrid's face cracked, like a chunk of granite splitting—goodness, the woman actually knew how to smile—and she echoed: "Of course."

* * * *

Finally the courier came. The major had been found, alive, but just barely. A farmer returning to his homestead after the battle and the looting had followed a trail of blood to his barn and the wounded British officer. He did what he could, until an army doctor could be sent out and the wound, a saber gash from Stokely's ribs to his thigh, could be dressed.

The field surgeon decided to leave the officer there,

unconscious and unidentified, lest the massive wound reopen. Supplies were sent, and medicos when they could be spared, until the day Stokely revived somewhat and through his delirium managed to say his name. Then his frantic batman, who had been searching the field hospitals and helping with the gruesome task of mass burials to make sure his master was not among those sorry piles, came to take over the nursing, and messages could be sent home.

The latest report was that the wound might not prove mortal if the fever did not kill Stokely first.

* * * *

"I have to go to him," Emilyann declared, clutching the memo and pacing around the drawing room. Nadine quickly moved a footstool and a firescreen out of her way.

"Of course you do," replied Aunt Ingrid calmly, sitting with her embroidery as usual. "It is your duty as his wife to bring ease to his suffering, to succor him in his moment of need. Haven't I been tending to your Uncle Morgan? I have been reading to him from the Bible like a faithful helpmate, seeing to it myself that he had nothing to eat but gruel and barley water, lest heavy meals retard the healing process."

"Yes, but I swore to Smoky that I wouldn't go to Belgium. I gave my word."

"But, Emmy," Nadine said, "he meant you shouldn't follow the other British tourists to the parties and festivities there."

"That's right. I said I would not go for the fun, and this is not frivolous at all." She had also promised Smoky not to put herself in danger by journeying to a battlefield, but the battle was over, and she was in enough danger here in England in any case. She looked over at Aunt Ingrid, who was placidly sewing the altar cloth, sincerely believing her faith could be worn like a protective mantle. Em said nothing about her fears, just "I'll do it. I'll go."

"And I shall accompany you, of course," Aunt Ingrid said in a voice that allowed no argument. "You cannot travel alone, naturally, even with trusted servants. That thought, I am sure, would cause dear Stokely unease. No, I shall go with you, to lend you countenance and also to bring aid and comfort to the many wounded. I see it as my duty to tend to the soldiers' spiritual well-being."

"I think they might need blankets more, Aunt, but—"

"And I'm coming, too," Nadine put in.

"Not on your life," her sister-in-law told her. "Smoky would kill both of us."

"Not if he's that sick. And I cannot stay here alone, you know."

That was true. Em shuddered to think of all the trouble Nadine could get into on her own. If Aunt Ingrid went, too, Emilyann could not even deposit the plaguey chit with her, even if that was Bobo's own home. "No, it will have to be Stockton. I'll send you with the chaise and—"

"I won't go. Besides, Em, I really can be a help. You cannot sit with Stokely every hour of the day yourself. Or else I can help Aunt Ingrid with the other wounded. I'm not just a china doll, you know. I have seen lots of injuries and illnesses in the country. I can help, truly."

Em was undecided, but Aunt Ingrid thought it a good idea. "Let the gel come along. It will be good for her. She needs some depth."

"You were not thinking of bringing Bobo, ah, Beauregard, along, were you, Aunt Ingrid?" she asked, looking at Nadine suspiciously.

"No, some of us are not meant for travail. He is not a good traveler, you know. Otherwise I am sure he would want to assist Stokely. Moreover, he must remain to care for his stepfather in my absence. Quite devoted he is to Morgan, you know. Such a good boy."

Emilyann swallowed her reply and turned to Nadine. "There will be no parties, and you cannot take your pretty clothes, and I want to leave as soon as Jake can have the carriage loaded and arrangements made."

"I know all that, silly. I *do* have other interests beside balls and clothes, you know. I'll go see Cook and make sure she packs plenty of supplies so we don't have to make frequent stops along the way, and some restorative pork's-foot jelly, and whatever else she thinks an invalid might need."

Em was already making lists. "Toinette can see to the packing, though we won't know for how long. We can have a trunk shipped later. I'll send one of the footmen to the apothecary. Tan-bark infusion, I think. He'll know. We had better bring extra linens, muslin for bandages ..."

"I'll take care of the last, dear," Aunt Ingrid said,

neatly folding her embroidery into the work basket. "The Ladies' Guild has been rolling bandages throughout the war. I brought some home for Morgan to do while he lies abed. The devil makes work for idle hands, you know." She tied her bonnet strings and continued, "I shall fetch those and my necessities, leave instructions for my staff, and make my farewells to my family. I shall be back within the hour, unless I cannot find that stack of hymnals I meant to bring to the Gates of Hope almshouse."

Emilyann stopped listening, hurrying through her own lists and notes, sending maids and footmen every which way, trying not to think of Smoky lying in a pool of blood on some barn floor. Mr. Butler could take care of writing to Geoff, and someone would have to get to the bank to cash a check for traveling money, and make a draft for whatever bank they would need later. Mr. Baxley would know. When were the packet boats scheduled, and could they guarantee a passage? If they had to wait another day ... Emilyann said a quick prayer.

"Perhaps Morgan recollects where I left the hymnals."

* * * *

The hymnals were safe in the butler's pantry. None of the pawnbrokers would take them. And Morgan was safe in his bed, gnashing his teeth. He was bruised, bandaged, and bad-tempered, even more than usual. Here was his golden opportunity, Emilyann and Ingrid together, in the same coach, on the same packet from Dover. An accident, a hold-up, a hole in the bottom of the bloody boat, and his problems would be over. If he could go along, how easy it would be to jostle Ingrid at the rail of the packet, bump into Emilyann during the crossing. And he could be the one to shout "Man overboard!" just a few minutes later.

Instead, oh, the injustice of it all, he lay in bed, both legs in splints, with only that attics-to-let Bobo for company. The tub of blubber could sink a boat by sitting in it, his fond steppapa grouched, so instead of making futile plans, Morgan took a leaf from Ingrid's book, and prayed.

He always knew that religion business was a hoax. Damn boat wasn't struck by lightning at all.

Chapter Eighteen

Brussels was in chaos. Dazed men in tattered uniforms lined the curbs outside in the drizzling rain because there were no beds for them. Men with slings, crutches, bandages were everywhere, and no one seemed to be in charge. The hotels were all filled, mostly with tourists who had thought Brussels would be safe from the conflagration and who had been stranded minutes from a war zone by lack of transportation. They were leaving as fast as possible, but their rooms were taken by wounded officers who could pay to leave the horrid field hospitals.

It was already growing late in the day when the travelers found an establishment at least serving tea. Aunt Ingrid and Nadine needed a break, Emilyann decided, while she considered where to start to find rooms, or Smoky. Aunt Ingrid had already struck up conversation with a respectably dressed, middle-aged woman at a nearby table who directed Emilyann to the British Consulate. Mrs. Hammersmith, as she introduced herself, was an adjutant's wife, the officer presently lying abed upstairs.

"Hammersmith will do, hardhead, don't you know. It's the other lads who need help. We've been doing what we can, the wives who follow the drum, and some of the English tourists who stayed have been regular troopers. Some haven't, of course, afraid of gettin' their hands dirty." They could all hear the question in her voice, and Emilyann was quick to assure their new acquaintance that her little party was here to help.

"Never heard of your major, dearie, sorry to say, but I'll make inquiries for you. Someone's bound to know where they billeted an earl. You come tell me where you're staying, and I'll start asking questions."

The harried junior legate at the embassy knew of only one empty property, a mansion on the edge of town belonging to a Bruxelloise Count d'Charteret who had sided with Napoleon. He was going to stay at his country property for now, for his health.

Emilyann and Jake found the manager, a weasely, garlic-breathed churl who growled that the place wasn't for let. Money still ruled, though, even in hell. Especially in hell.

By the time Emilyann had settled negotiations, Aunt Ingrid was already surveying the possibilities of the enormous barracks of a house. The luxuriousness of

the furnishings was absurd, considering Emilyann's mission, and the fact that most of the servants required to keep up a place of this size had long since fled. Mrs. Hammersmith, who had come along to point the way, was confident they'd be back as soon as word went out that their wages would be paid. She and Aunt Ingrid set the grooms and footmen to dragging palettes and cots around, turning the downstairs rooms away from the family apartments into recovery wards. Nadine, naturally, went to oversee the unloading of their provisions and the organization of the kitchen to feed any number of hungry men.

It would do. Mounts being in even shorter supply in Brussels than rooms, Emilyann and Jake tacked up two horses from the carriage team with the count's saddles.

"For the exorbitant rental I am paying the man," she told the disapproving manager, "the saddles should be covered in gold leaf. Now, get out of my way and stop interfering, unless you wish me to write to the count myself." She looked at the scurvy little lout and narrowed her eyes. "I wonder if he knows precisely how much gold I just handed over."

There would be no more trouble from that quarter and at last, at long last, Lady Stokely could start trying to find her husband. The embassy had been no help, but directed her to army headquarters. Headquarters sent her to the Quartermaster's Office, which passed her on to Command Operations, then Battalion Chief and Captain of the Watch. Night Watch, it turned out, because so much time was wasted, every petty officer searching through lists and scraps of paper and duty rosters.

They all knew of Major Lord Stokely, everyone praised his bravery, and they all had heard he was still at that farmhouse, somewhere. Thank God she was spared searching the field hospitals at least, but Lady Stokely's temper was not appeased. Her family would have known to step back when Emilyann's eyes flashed like that and her hands clenched into fists. The desk sergeant just shuffled some more papers.

"Is this the way you treat your heroes in this army?" she started, pounding that same desk until the papers flew around. "You *lose* them? Do you think Lord Wellington is going to be happy to know you have misplaced my husband? When I tell Uncle Arthur—"

Uncle Arthur? The sergeant began to see his career flash before his eyes.

"You and the rest of the imbecilic bureaucrats sit on your padded seats filing documents while your wounded men lie in God-knows-what backwater, and God better know, because you sure don't! Well, I—"

It did not take long. The poor sergeant promised to have an address and directions delivered to Hotel Charteret by ten the next morning. Eight at the inn?

"Yes, sir, ah, ma'am. Here at dawn."

* * * *

The tired sergeant told them they'd never get the heavy carriage down the rutted country lanes to the farmhouse, so they rode again, carrying what supplies they could tie on the backs of the horses and in saddlebags. They would make better time this way, too. The farm must have a dray to get produce to market, or Jake could ride back to rent a pony cart if they found Stokely could be moved.

The farm was not too far off, as the crow flies. But horses and humans needed paths and road signs and landmarks to find their way. They took wrong turns and had to slow the pace as the dirt roads turned to mire in the persistent rain. They had to skirt the nightmare scenes of the past battle or, horror-stricken, guide their reluctant mounts through.

It was midmorning when they reached a neat white-washed homestead. No dogs barked, though, and no one came out to answer their calls. Emilyann did not wait for Jake to hand her down, or even to tie her horse. The old man clucked but secured both mounts and followed her slowly, pulling his damp collar closer around him.

"B'Gad, it's Lady Stokely! I never thought you would—that is, I am right glad to see you, ma'am." Micah Rigg came to the door to see about the commotion. Stokely's batman looked even more grizzled and unkempt than the last time Emilyann had seen him. His gray mustachios drooped, he hadn't shaved in days, nor changed his clothes nor slept, it appeared.

"The major ... ?"

"I'm that sorry for losing him, ma'am."

"My God, he's not dead!"

"No, he's resting peaceful now," he told her, pulling a chair out from the kitchen table when her knees

looked to give out. "I mean losing him in the battle. The smoke and rain and all. Then all those field surgeries and temporary billets. I thought I would go pure crazy. Now, like I said, he's resting, but it won't last. Medicine wears off, he starts burning up again, and starts throwing himself around. The sawbones says we can't give him more, or it'll kill him for sure." Rigg sat down himself, that is, he collapsed into another of the wooden chairs, with a "Pardon, ma'am. It's that run off my feet I am."

Emilyann nodded, and poured out some of the hot tea they had brought in a towel-wrapped jug. Jake was bringing in wood to rekindle the meager fire in the cookstove. "Wet," he muttered.

"Aye." Rigg sipped his tea and shut his eyes. "I was going to get to it as soon as the major dropped to sleep. We was managing better till yesterday, when the farmer loped off. Said he went to fetch his wife back from her papa's up north, safer, you know. But the French ate his pigs and the British ate his cows, and the horses trampled everything else, so I don't know if'n he'll come back." He wiped a hand over his whiskers. "Doctor's not due back till the end of the week, if he gets here. I didn't see how I was to make another night, ma'am."

Emilyann patted his hand awkwardly. "I'm sure you did everything possible, Sergeant. We're here now. Everything will be fine."

Rigg looked at her hand, so white and dainty, and shrugged. "I got to admit I never thought to say I was happy to see you, ma'am. But the major's been a-calling for you, and if you could just keep him easy in his mind when he gets those restless fevers, I figure time can do the rest."

"He will recover, won't he?"

It was Jake who answered, "Here now, missy. We come this far, ain't we?" Then he told the tired batman to get some rest, he and the little countess would watch over the major. "For I reckon I've had enough experience doctorin' man and beast in my time to see the master through. And don't worry none about missy," he said, happily ignorant of the circumstances of the first meeting between his mistress and the soldier. "She's got more pluck than pretty manners, most times."

* * * *

This was no peaceful sleep, no matter what Rigg tried to tell her in reassurance, before the exhausted batman himself passed out on a cot in the kitchen, the only room beside the bedroom where the major lay. Smoky's cheeks were clammy, his color yellowish, his skin drawn tight over the planes of his face in a grimace of pain. He looked like Death.

Emilyann brushed the dark hair off his forehead and his eyes opened. It took a bleary moment for them to focus on her, and still seemed to take most of his concentration. "Sparrow?" His voice was no more than a whispered croak.

"Hallo, Smoky. I'm here."

He waved a hand that trembled like that of an old man, and she caught it and raised it to her face, and told him again, "I'm here now."

"I thought ... I told ... not to come?"

"Yes, but then you called for me."

"I remember ... 's all right, then. Good girl." And he went back to sleep.

Emilyann bathed his face while Jake brought in the supplies, and she made broth while the coachman changed Stokely's bandages. "It's a nasty cut, make no mistake," he reported, "but I've seen worse. He'll do."

The next time the major awoke, Emilyann got some nourishing soup down him, and on him, and he tried to smile for her as she wiped his chin. She busied herself with the bowl and towel so he would not see her struggle to hold back the tears. His sunken eyes never left her, though, and he seemed more lucid.

"Hush," she told him when he wanted to talk. "Save your strength for tomorrow."

"No. You weren't supposed to come. You promised."

"I promised not to come for the fun and parties. Let me tell you, Everett Stockton, this is not fun."

"Know that. I'm sorry, Sparrow."

"You great goose. I like it better when you shout at me."

"You never listened anyway.... You shouldn't be here. Too dangerous."

"No, Smoky, the war is over, and I have Jake and Rigg to protect me." That seemed to please him, so she went on. "And Aunt Ingrid is back in town, too, organizing prayer meetings and saving souls, I am sure, so you needn't worry over the proprieties." She was not about to tell him his sister was here also; she

was trying to ease his mind, not send him into a rage. But mentioning Aunt Ingrid reminded her that her scratchy relative would be anxious for news, or Emilyann's return, before nightfall.

Smoky's three nursemaids discussed the problem in the kitchen when he nodded off again. Emilyann flatly refused to leave, especially since one of the men would have to accompany her. Jake felt that since he was well rested, he should stay on with his mistress, while Rigg, who had had a few hours' sleep, knew the roads better and would know where to hire a gig to carry supplies back from town. Rigg could report to the ladies at Charteret, get a decent sleep there and, in the morning, check with headquarters and gather whatever stores he thought they might need, including a new uniform.

Rigg did not want to leave his major, but knew when he was outgunned. And His Lordship was improved by the lass's visit, no doubt about that, and her man Jake seemed handy enough for a horse doctor. So he left with one of the horses and a list from Lady Stokely. "And remember the lemons. Smoky always liked lemonade, so we brought them all the way from England just in case there were none to be had here."

Stokely began to sweat not ten minutes after Rigg left, and an hour before his next medication. Great dropules formed on his forehead and soaked the bedclothes. Emilyann and Jake both worked to keep him covered when he wanted to throw the blankets off and dry when his sheets became drenched. This was no place for maidenly modesty, Emilyann found out quickly, bathing her husband to bring the fever down. Jake had to hold the major to keep him from thrashing around, but Emilyann's voice seemed to soothe him the most, though he was beyond responding. He would call "Sparrow," and she would tell him yes, she was there, and he would lie quietly for minutes, until the shaking started again.

At last it was time for his next dose and Emilyann and Jake were both drained when Stokely finally sank into a deep stupor.

"Whisht, lass, it's gonna be a long night," Jake told her, wiping his own forehead before sitting down to the meal of cold meat, bread, and cheese they had carried with them. Rigg had set out a jug of ale and the remains of a rabbit pie. "Best you get some sleep now,

an' you're able. I'll wake you when things get bad, then you can sit up with 'im whilst I rest a bit."

Jake made sense, and Emilyann realized she had hardly slept since that courier came with the message. It was strange, with Smoky lying there so deathly still, how she felt relieved, as if just seeing him were reassurance enough. She might never have seen him again. Yes, she would sleep for a few hours, but she dragged Rigg's cot into the bedroom and curled up in a blanket that smelled comfortingly of horse.

She did not move when Smoky woke the first time and asked for her.

"She's right over there, Master Stokely," Jake told him, holding the candle up so the major could see the blond-haired bundle in the corner.

Smoky's lips almost curved in a grin, and he slept that way awhile. The next time he roused, he was troubled. "You ... ?"

"It's Jake, my lord," the old man told him, keeping his voice soft in order not to disturb Lady Em. "You remember, the old duke's head coachman. You used to pester me to let you drive the four-in-hand."

"I remember. Jake, you'll look after her, won't you, if ..."

"I allus does, Master Stokely, when she lets me. You're the only one as had any reins on the filly when she gets the bit 'tween her teeth though, so you better be back in the saddle soon."

"Headstrong girl, my Sparrow. Shouldn't be here. You'll take care ... ?"

He did not know Jake when he woke next, wet and trembling. Jake was trying to sponge him down, determined that Emilyann should get as much rest as possible. The major started throwing himself around, however, and Jake put his arms on him, lest he fall off the bed altogether.

"No!" Smoky shouted. "No, you filthy graverobbing bastards, I'll not let you have my watch!" Even in his delirium the officer was strong enough to throw Jake's arms off and swing out and clout the old stableman on the chin. "I'm not dead yet, you damn vulture."

Emilyann jumped up, wide-eyed, and screamed for Jake to leave the room. Couldn't he see he was upsetting Smoky? She ran to kneel on the bed next to him and clasped his face in her hands. "Smoky, wake up, dearest. No one will hurt you, Smoky. You're safe

now.”

“Sparrow?”

“Yes, it’s Sparrow. I’m here. You’re safe.” She kept repeating it, stroking his face, until the tension left his muscles and he relaxed against her. She got him to take some more broth, and put a fresh case on the pillow, then sat down next to him again when he struggled to talk.

“I want to tell you. All that time ... trying to get somewhere safe ... warm, out of the rain ... trying to hold my guts together with my hands ... I was laughing, Sparrow. Know why? ‘Cause all those years, all those battles and skirmishes, I came out with hardly a scratch.”

She touched the scar on his jaw, more noticeable now that he was so gaunt. “That’s not just a scratch. A few inches more ...”

“You don’t understand. No one cared. Then I finally had something to go home to, don’t you see?”

“Yes, Smoky, I see. I cared. But why were you laughing?”

“So I wouldn’t cry, Sparrow. So I wouldn’t cry.”

Smoky rested a few minutes, his head cradled in her lap and one hand holding hers. Then his face grew troubled and he asked her to go send Rigg in to him.

“Rigg has gone back to town for supplies and things. He’ll be back in the morning.”

“Then get your man Jake, will you, Sparrow?”

“He’s fast asleep, Smoky. What is it?”

Smoky raised his other hand from under the sheets. It was covered in blood. “I think you better wake him.”

* * * *

“Me? I can’t do that, Jake. You know I can’t.” Her voice was pleading, unsteady.

The old man held up his hands, the knuckles bent and swollen with arthritis. “Well, these fingers can’t hold a needle steady enough, and my eyes ain’t what they used to be neither, lass, so it’s either you start stitchin’ or we sit around hopin’ he don’t bleed to death afore that batman of his gets back.”

“I vote for Sparrow,” her husband put in, waving Jake’s flask.

“And I’m quite sure you’ve had enough of that, my lord, what with the laudanum and that other stuff that smells like spoiled eggs,” she answered, snatching the flask away. “Smoky, I just cannot do it. It’s not that

I'm going missish on you, you know I wouldn't. But remember all the samplers we paid your mother's maid to finish for me?"

"You still owe me twenty-five guineas. Maybe it was forty-five."

"And they tried and tried at Miss Meadow's, but I never got the hang of it, Smoky. The plaguey thread is always tangling and the knots come undone and—"

And Jake was already boiling water and laying out a gruesome array of scissors, knives, and powders from a pouch in his saddlebag.

"You old windbag," Emilyann accused him. "You said you could do whatever was needed. I wouldn't have brought you else."

"That's why I said it. Now, here, watch close. Tarnation, girl, open your eyes or you'll be sewin' him to the bed."

Emilyann felt bile rise in her throat as Jake pulled the bandages back and she saw the great gaping wound for the first time.

"It looks worse'n it is," he assured her. "At least you don't have to sew up any intestines or anything."

She excused herself for a moment to be thoroughly sick outside. When she came back, Smoky gave her a drunken, lopsided grin before sinking into unconsciousness, and she took up the needle.

"Smoky mightn't like looking like an altar cloth with little crosses up and down him," she murmured, "but, by heaven, where is Aunt Ingrid now that I need her?"

Chapter Nineteen

"And your aunt says she's praying for the major. And I says all to the good; he needs all the help he can get."

Rigg was back, all spruced up, his mustachios neatly trimmed, driving a donkey cart. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but it's a hell of a thing for a cavalry man to be reduced to," he told Emilyann, but it was the only rig for hire in the town that wouldn't get bogged down in the muck. Rigg brought food and supplies, a few chickens, a change of clothes for Emilyann, who still wore her crumpled riding habit, and news from town.

"It's settling down now; provisions are coming back in finally, and more of the men are being shipped

home, those that can travel. Oh, and little sister sends her greetings. She is busy entertaining the troops, though they be officers mostly.”

Emilyann glanced nervously toward the bedroom, and Smoky. “She’s not doing anything too outrageous, is she?”

“What, with the preacher-lady there? No, she sings church songs to them, and reads from the Holy Book. Of course, as soon as Lady Aylesbury heads out on an errand or somewhat, they switch to little ditties and waltzes and some novels the gel brought from home.”

“Nadine is not left unchaperoned, is she? That doesn’t sound like my aunt.”

“Now, how could the gal be unchaperoned with you billeting half a battalion at that palace? Every English lady in this country sits in your parlor of an afternoon, ‘specially those what has daughters, doing their share for the lads’ morale.”

“That’s all right, then.”

“Sure, and I used some of the money you gave me to have that rat-faced concierge unearth a few bottles for the men from that count’s cellars, and a couple of packs of cards. They’re all fine.” He looked at her more closely through shaggy brows, noting the dark circles under her eyes. “But how are things here?”

The major was awake when Emilyann took Rigg in to see, and he was wanting to know about their conversation. “I didn’t hear you mention my little sister, did I?” he accused her.

“Little sinners, Smoky, Aunt Ingrid is reforming the little sinners. That’s what you heard.” When he raised one eyebrow she hurried on, “I think I’ll ride back to town this afternoon to see for myself. Aunt Ingrid sent the wrong dress, anyway, and I—”

“Wear something blue, Sparrow. And tell Nadine to toe the line. I’m not grassed yet.”

Later, when Rigg went to change the bandages, he squawked, “By all that’s holy. Major, what the hell happened to you? You got more lacings than an opera dancer’s corset.”

“There was a little difficulty last evening. That nightmare, I suppose.” He looked down, admiring Emilyann’s handiwork. “Lovely, ain’t it? We’re aiming for tapestries next.”

“Cor, I hope you were unconscious at the time.”

“Most of it. I did wake up when she finished.”

"You mean the chit did this? I mean, Lady Stokely?"

"Aye, and knocked off a swig after, like a regular trooper."

"I thought all women knew how to sew. Thought they was born with it, like a dog wagging his tail."

The major laughed, and Rigg could have forgiven her anything for the sound, even making his major look like a Christmas goose that had been trussed by a jug-bit chef. "Well, it don't seem to have done you any harm, at least. Seems you look a mite better, in fact. Having the lady here must have done the trick."

Either that or Jake's whiskey.

* * * *

Smoky was healing. There was no doubt of that, nor that it would take a long convalescence before he was fully recovered. He was awake longer now that the laudanum dosage could be cut back, although the pain was still intense and he could not be moved. The fever never came back so violently, but he remained too debilitated to hold a spoon and too weak to care. He fell asleep during Aunt Ingrid's visits, albeit Emilyann thought he was shamming. Nadine's one visit certainly exhausted him, with all her chatter of the young officers whose recovery she was overseeing.

"Gads, the chit's got no taste," he told Em after she hustled the younger girl out, seeing how weary Smoky had become. "She thinks Lieutenant Andrews is cute. He's got freckles and no chin, and his ears stick out. Last time was Chippy Harrington, and he has spots."

So he encouraged Sparrow to spend time with the ladies back in town, to keep an eye on his sister, and because he hated to see the shadows under her eyes and the paleness of her face from sitting by his bedside for hours on end. He sent her, although he dreaded the thought of her laughing with the military youngsters who must be predisposed to adore her anyway, living on her bounty as they were. As if anyone would *not* adore Sparrow, knowing her lively charm, her enchanting dimpled grin, those blue eyes of summer and sunshine. He sighed.

And Emilyann went back to town occasionally so Smoky could not see her anguish at his pain, her frustration at not being able to do more for him. There was less to do anyway, once the farmer Merced came back with his wife, after Emilyann sent word that she would help rebuild the little farm, in gratitude for

Merced's kindness to Lord Stokely. Now the pair stayed with neighbors but came every day to take charge of the cooking and cleaning and keeping the fire going, in addition to seeing to new plantings and stock, so the major's nursemaids were tripping over each other in the small house.

In town Emilyann made sure Nadine did not go beyond the pale, but she had not taken a misstep, not with the men considering her an angel, and Aunt Ingrid only just reconsidering her opinion of Nadine as an imp of Satan.

Ingrid herself was seeing that Nadine's silliness did more to lift the officers' spirits than her own preachings, although not in the long run, of course. But for now she was toning down her fanaticism and finding friends among the English gentrywomen who accepted her as a kindhearted lady, not a dicked-in-the-nob eccentric who had to be tolerated because she was a duchess.

No matter the time Emilyann spent with her family, she hurried back to Smoky each evening, just to touch him in his sleep and watch his chest rise and fall, and make sure her love kept him safe. She sat for hours, memorizing his already well-known features, that firm jaw and not-quite-straight nose. She had to be there, she told her protesting aunt, because when he groaned with pain and drug-induced bad dreams, her voice still calmed him better than any other's.

For his part, Stokely fought sleep rather than dream of Sparrow laughing and singing with those park soldiers back in town, maybe getting up impromptu dances for the men so they did not fall into the doldrums. He tried so desperately not to dream of his wife in another man's arms that he ended up falling through grotesque webs to that other terrible nightmare of cold and blood and rain that would not stop. He was wet and—

"What the hell do you think you are doing?"

"Why, I am bathing you, of course, silly."

He grabbed for her hand that held the sponge before it could go any lower, and pulled the sheets up. "You shouldn't be doing that."

"But I've been taking turns with Rigg and Jake for weeks now, Smoky. They need their rest, too."

He still held her hand. The damn water was dripping on his chest. "But you're a lady."

She mopped at him with a towel and laughed, telling him, "No, I'm not, I'm your wife, remember?"

"I remember you are not quite," he said, which brought color to her cheeks.

To cover her embarrassment, Emilyann teased, "It's nothing I haven't seen before," and his hand clenched her wrist again.

"Who is it? I'll kill him."

"Are you feverish again? Shall I fetch the laudanum?"

"Couldn't you have waited, Sparrow?" he asked bitterly. "Or did some rake catch your eye?"

"A rake? Do you think that I ... ? Why, you ..." And she mashed the sponge down on his nose till he sputtered, then she wiped him off tenderly. "You really are a clunch. I meant that I had seen *you* these past weeks, with bandages and without. Besides, you forget that I am a country girl."

"I don't recall a lot of naked men running around the countryside in England either."

"Silly, I mean the animals. The milk-and-water misses in the towns may pretend not knowing where lambs come from, but every farm-bred girl knows when the cows are brought to the bull to be serviced or the stallion stands to stud."

Smoky lifted the sheet again. "Bulls? Stallions? My dear, are you in for disappointment!"

She fled the room, blushing furiously, while he laughed and laughed, despite the basin of water overturned on his head. Smoky was definitely healing.

Stokely was sick of being sick. He was tired of lemonade, bored with the same four bare walls, and irked at not being able to hold his wife. He was heartily disgusted with his dreams, especially the one where he could hear someone pounding nails in his coffin, so he decided to take no more laudanum, and then had to face *that* nightmare, after which he was even *more* blue-deviled, with more energy-draining pain. And the same bad dreams.

Emilyann tried harder to cheer him, bringing books and a chess set and all the news from town.

"Nadine is in alt. There are starting to be small dinner parties among the English and the returning local gentry. Nothing ornate, mind, out of respect for the wounded, but with England in the throes of victory celebrations, some festivity was called for."

"Never fear, Nadine could find a party in the Antipodes, dancing with the penguins."

"She even found a local modiste with the latest fashion plates from Paris, so we are having new things made up rather than sending home for our fancier gowns. I told her she might have a small evening entertainment herself next week, to repay our hostesses, since I am hoping the doctor permits us to move you soon, and then you wouldn't want any such commotion around."

He wouldn't want any of those other officers around either, but he didn't picture Sparrow tossing them out in the streets.

"Nadine and the count's fancy chef have been concocting menus for days. He is a true *artiste*, and I have half a mind to bribe him to return to England with us. What do you think?" she asked brightly.

Smoky thought she only had half a mind at all, to be asking someone who had not tasted the chef's cooking, being limited to gruel, gruel, and more gruel. He muttered something impolite, which she ignored, as she had the rest of his ill humor.

"You shan't mind our socializing without you, shall you?"

He minded a great deal, and also her insensitive, patronizing attitude, so he grumbled, "It must be costing you a fortune."

"I won't argue with you about it, Smoky, if you are looking to start an argument."

"Why, because I'm sick?"

"No, because you're too pigheaded. Geoff writes that the harvest was excellent, and he is getting high prices for the market stock, so you are well out of dun territory."

"Aye, and into petticoat financing."

"It's always the money, isn't it?" she asked sadly, and he reached for her hand, saying, "It's *your* money."

"Not according to Papa's will and English law. Those papers we signed give me a handsome settlement all my own, so I do not mind either. I might have if it was someone else, but—" She caught herself before she confessed too much. "Anyway, if you want to be so stubborn, you can pay yourself back after a few years of hard work and good management."

"That's fustian. What do I know of managing an estate, much less hogs? All I know about pigs is bacon

and gloves, Sparrow. I'm a soldier, dash it, not a farmer. There's no place for me in England."

She brushed a dark curl from his brow, tried to smooth out the frown lines there with a hesitant kiss on his forehead. He looked up into those incredible blue eyes, so serious now and troubled.

"Forgive me, my dear, I suppose I am just feeling sorry for myself," he said, reaching to touch her soft cheek. "It's just that you did not have the luxury of choosing where you and your fortune landed. You should have had a chance to look over the eligibles, fall in love, make a choice. You could have had your pick. You should not be tied to an invalid."

Emilyann tried to make light of it. "But, Smoky, I am the one who forced you into the marriage, remember? You should have been free to return home as the conquering hero and find a beautiful heiress to restore your fortunes."

"But that's what I did." He turned away, knowing that was how all of London looked at the marriage.

"You ... you really married me for the money?"

"I may as well have."

Devastated at the crumbling of her dreams, Lady Stokely rushed back to town. She looked so stricken, Nadine assumed Stokely had taken a turn for the worse and started weeping.

"Stop that yammering, you peagoose. He's fine and he is your brother, so you can go keep him company for a change. Tell him I am tired and need a rest. Tell him I have to see about travel arrangements home now that he is improving. Tell him anything you blessed well please, because he will believe only what he wants to anyway."

So Nadine went, and Stokely shouted at her; Aunt Ingrid went, and Stokely claimed a headache. He threw his breakfast pap at Rigg one day, and when the batman sent in Merced's wife with lunch, the major scandalized the farmwoman by refusing to wear his nightshirt. The farmer himself Stokely cursed—for being a farmer. After a few days only old Jake the coachman would volunteer to sit in the room with him sometimes, and Jake hardly said a word, just sat mending a bit of harness or polishing a piece of brass, and chewing his tobacco.

Just to make conversation, the thoroughly bored and sullen convalescent finally asked Jake about a

noise he heard at night sometimes. "I thought it was a dream, my coffin being nailed shut. But I hear it repeatedly, even when I waken. Who the hell is hammering when a sick man is supposed to be resting?"

Jake kept polishing. "I 'spect you mean a little tappin' sound."

"It's not so little in the middle of the night, dammit."

Jake spit into a bucket he kept handy. "I 'spect you mean Pug, then."

"What, that ugly little mutt of Sparrow's? Why in the world did she bring him to Belgium with her?"

"Couldn't leave him, he was that poorly."

"Blast it, man, will you finish the story! Heaven knows I've got nothing better to do than listen, lying here in this miserable bed. What happened to the dog and what's he doing, learning drumrolls for the infantry?"

Jake looked at the major, and saw the same resty youth he'd always been. He put down the leather and the rag, spit again while Stokely fumed, and told how the pup had fallen off the carriage one day and gotten his leg mangled by the coach wheel.

"Gotta be put out of his misery, I says. Pup looks up with big brown pop-eyes and missy looks up with those pretty blue ones of hers all misty and says 'Can't you fix it, Jake? Please, can't we try to help him?' "

He shrugged. "What's a body to do? So me and the boys did what we could, stitchin' and sewin' and feedin' the little mite brandy. Recovered, too, he did. 'Course he's only got three legs now. So the boys renamed him Peg. I made him a brace from harness leather, and whittled him a new leg when you was sleepin'." Jake spat again. "Little fool was fallin' over when he tried to show the other males his territory, if you know what I mean."

Smoky did, and got the point. "This mightn't be a moral lesson, like the prodigal son or something, would it?"

Jake went back to polishing. Smoky went back to brooding. That little bleater was standing on his own legs, no matter how many. And Jake was likely here because Emmy had begged him to "fix" her peevish husband. And if that tapping went on at night, she must still come to see him.

"Old man, can you whittle me a cane? One with a

donkey on the handle maybe.”

Stokely called for newspapers, stationery, and his clothes. He was going to see about a position with the Foreign Office, or perhaps the War Office in London, to avoid any more travel. He was going to make investments to repay his wife as soon as possible, and he was damn well going to stand on his own two feet to woo her back.

Chapter Twenty

They traveled home by slow stages for Stokely’s sake, and the journey was still agonizing for him, even when he rode in the second coach with Rigg instead of the carriage containing his prattlebox sister, his wife, whose dimmed spirits were a reproach to him, and Lady Aylesbury, whose tombstone, he felt, should read: *She Meant Well*.

They were all happy to halt the trip in London rather than continuing on to Stockton, which would have taken three or four more days at their current rate. Geoff came down and enlivened the household, and Aunt Adelaide fussed. Thornton did his best to depress the high spirits of the younger members of the family as unsuitable for Stokely’s recuperation, but Geoff and Nadine reestablished their contacts in the ton and began the rounds of routs and assemblies, morning rides and afternoon promenades.

The regent’s own physician ordered Stokely to bed for at least a week, and he was glad to go, albeit the room he was given was on the ground floor for his convenience, and not attached to his wife’s suite for his comfort. The faithful Rigg was in attendance and the household staff stood ready to cater to his every whim. His siblings were good for a few minutes of gossip or talk of pigs, depending on which was coming or going, and his wife breezed in and out of his room with brittle courtesy. She did not want to tire him, she said.

Emilyann did not want him to see her hurt. He had his pride about the money, she had her pride in wanting to be loved for herself. She knew Smoky was fond of her in an offhand, brotherly way at least, and he had shown definite interest in sharing her bed, but she wanted much more. So she started racketing about town to show him—what? That she did not need

him, that others found her desirable, that a woman grown did not die of shattered dreams. She felt like a china shepherdess broken by a naughty child and glued together clumsily. She was afraid that if she moved too fast, pieces would crumble; too slowly and everyone would see the cracks.

As she told Smoky, she had to keep an eye on Nadine, and, furthermore, it was not good ton for a wife to be in her husband's pocket.

The Earl of Stokely, for he was already writing letters resigning his commission and was no longer to be called major, scowled and bided his time. As soon as he was able, and before the surgeons thought he should, he was calling on cabinet members, government officials, bankers and brokers, and his tailor. The uniforms were packed away and his other clothes would have to be altered to fit his gaunt frame. He walked with his cane when possible, both to rebuild the wasted muscles and because riding a horse was still forbidden to him and getting up and down into carriages was too painful. He looked with envy at Emilyann's phaeton, like a child with his face against the glass of a confectioner's shop, and practiced going up and down stairs when she was not around to say him nay.

He also walked to his clubs to hear the latest news, and found that he was it. Thanks to Nadine and Geoff, all of London had heard of his heroic wounds and Emilyann's valiant nursing, and the gossips were wondering why the Little Countess was not sitting dutifully by her injured husband's side. No one forgot, it seemed, the fireworks of their last public appearance together, and the tattlemongers were holding their collective breaths.

Emilyann also got wind of the *on dits*, and found she did not like her marriage being held under public scrutiny. She also resented the speculative looks she received from dissipated libertines. If Stokely wasn't interested, they seemed to imply, his lady was fair game. She could handle the encroaching toads, but would rather show a handsome husband than a cold shoulder.

"Do you think we might hold some form of entertainment?" she asked Smoky one night as they met for sherry before dinner. "Nothing too strenuous, of course. No receiving line," she told him solicitously.

"Perhaps a musical gathering."

"Not if Nadine is going to torture the pianoforte," he answered, "but I think that would be ideal. I cannot get around yet to the balls and such, and there are men I would like to speak with who are too busy during the days. I have been wanting to talk to you about that, Sparrow." He filled her glass while she waited.

"What would you think if I took my seat in the Lords? Someone has to speak for the returning veterans, and their pensions, and then there is the reform movement. Petersham thinks there may be a position as an undersecretary next year if I prove myself this term."

Emilyann was pleased to see him looking excited about something again. He was beginning to fill out and looked elegant in his black satin jacket and dove-gray pantaloons, and all the better for the enthusiasm of his plans. "I think that would be wonderful, Smoky. You'll have to see about the child labor laws and those awful workhouses, and the climbing boys and—"

"Hold, my dear," he said, laughing. "I have not told them yes yet." He studied his glass, swirled the liquor around to see the glimmers in the fire's light. "You do know it will mean being in London most of the year, and you have been talking of returning to the country any time these past weeks."

Emilyann dreaded his next words. Here would come the part, she thought, when he politely ordered her to ruralize, so he might resume his rakehell ways in town. Behind nearly every profligate in London was a wife in the country, raising babies and roses. She was not about to become one of them.

"I do enjoy the country, but I have always aspired to become a political hostess," she lied. She never once thought of it until now, but let him wriggle out of that!

He did not squirm a bit, raising his glass to her and saying, "I knew I could count on you."

"Then you want me to stay?"

"Of course. I want you by me. I would not take the position if it displeased you."

Dinner was announced just then, and Emilyann, seated at the opposite end of the polished table from her husband, savored his words more than the turbot in oyster sauce or glazed squab. He really did care!

A few nights later Smoky asked if he might accompany her and Nadine to Almack's.

"Whyever would you want to go there?" Geoff asked. "It's deuced dull, and you have to dance with all the fussy-faced females."

"Not I," claimed his brother, waving the silver-topped cane. "I have but to limp in, in my knee breeches, of course, then I can adjourn to the card rooms."

"But they play only for chicken stakes, Ev. You could go to White's or Boodle's, or Crocker's even."

"Yes, but my beautiful wife will not be at those clubs, so I shall go to Almack's and practice my fiercest jealous-husband looks."

Trying to keep her voice as light as his playful tone, Emilyann inquired, "And shall you be jealous?"

He turned serious. "I pray I have no cause to be."

* * * *

Lady Stokely's maid was putting the finishing touches to her mistress's toilette that evening when Smoky rapped on the door. Toinette curtsied, giggled, and left. Emilyann was in a gown of soft blue crepe with a gauze overskirt that had sequined butterflies embroidered on it. Another butterfly rested in Emilyann's cloud of tousled curls. Stokely had to catch his breath a moment.

"What are you doing here? You should never have attempted the stairs!"

It was definitely not the stairs that had him breathing so hard. "I brought you something," he managed to say, handing her a long box. "I realized I'd never seen you in the family diamonds. You had the combination to the safe, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I never felt I should—oh, Smoky, they are exquisite!"

"I'd rather see you in the sapphires, your eyes, of course, but your maid thought these would be more suitable for this gown."

"That's why the wretch was acting like a schoolgirl with a secret all night." She lifted out a bracelet and he came to help her do up the clasp, kissing her wrist while he held her hand. Emilyann gasped at the delicious sensation, and blushed when he chuckled, turning away in confusion.

With her back to him he placed the necklace around her throat, and kissed the nape of her neck. She

trembled.

"Let me see, Countess."

She turned, and now he was shaken to see how perfectly the center stone nestled in the curvature of her breasts, above the gown's low neckline.

With his eyes fixed on that diamond, Emilyann worried that he intended to kiss her there, too. She nervously turned back to the mirror, admiring the effect. "And they are even real," she surprised him by saying.

"Of course they are, widgeon. Did you think the family heirlooms were Austrian glass?"

"The Aylesbury ones are. Uncle Morgan has been turning the gems into paste, for the money."

"That old court-card will stop at nothing. How you got such a loose screw in your family is beyond me."

"How you got Thornton in yours is just as strange."

"Touché. But what are you going to do about the jewels?"

"Oh, I have taken care of that. I have an arrangement with Uncle's, ah, jeweler."

Smoky adjusted his cuffs. "I assume you mean his pawnbroker, and I most assuredly do not want to hear how you came to do business with him. I have enough gray hairs as is."

She smiled and told him, "But you look so distinguished. Anyway, I have been buying the pieces back whenever I could, and the trip to Brussels gave me the opportunity to poke around Aunt Ingrid's jewel box and switch them for the copies."

"You'll make a politician's wife yet. But tell me, poppet, did you mind not having the Arcott heirlooms?"

"I minded seeing them go out of the family, but I never expected to have them, you know, and I do have my mama's things."

"And the Stockton heirlooms. Why did you never take them out of the safe?"

"They were yours and I, ah ..."

"And I forgot to give them to you, slowtop that I am. Forgive me, Sparrow. They are not mine, however; they belong to the Countess of Stokely."

"But I didn't think I ought to wear them."

"I cannot imagine why. You are the loveliest Lady Stokely ever, and I could not be more proud to have you wear them."

* * * *

There were no juicy tidbits for the talewaggers at Almack's to chew that night. Lord Stokely was the lion of the evening, and his wife, the sparkle in her eyes matching the glitter of her jewels, hovered at his side. She urged him to sit down, to use his cane, to rest, nagging "like an old married couple." He teased and carried her hand to his lips again, just to see her cheeks grow rosy. She danced with some of her admirers, but mostly she made them known to her husband if they were unacquainted, and the glow between the lady and her lord discouraged the most self-confident seducer.

She was also determined to bring Smoky to the attention of her father's cronies, those men with influence in political circles. Uncle This and Dear Lord That were brought to Smoky's chair. Stokely's evident chagrin at his wife's meddling did more for his career than his war record. Those hide-bound old men who used to dandle little Lady Em on their knees saw her dimples and her tender affection for this hero of hers; they saw Stokely's eyes follow her every movement when she was gone from his side, and their own hearts were glad. Their old friend, the late Duke of Aylesbury, would have been happy with this marriage, as proud as if he'd arranged it himself.

* * * *

The current Duke of Aylesbury was at *point non plus*. During his wife's absence, when he could have been free of her pontificating and pestering, his own incapacitation kept him at home. He was thrown into his own company more than he liked, and found he could not even play cards with himself, left hand against right, because both hands could read the shaved decks. His only consolation was in dismissing half of the household staff—nobody ever went in all the rooms anyway; who cared if they were clean?—and using their wages to buy gin. There was nothing left in the cellars, he had checked them ages ago. Gin it was, cheap gin, and lots of it.

It came to pass on one cold, dark night when no one came to light a fire in his room, likely because he had fired anyone who could, Morgan Arcott gave his body to the bottle and sold his soul to the devil.

Funny, he thought, Satan looked like one of those crouching gargoyles he remembered from his grand

tour. Notre Dame, maybe. Ugly memories were all he got out of the grand tour anyway, that and the French pox. The devil's eyes were fires—cheap help in hell, Morgan mused—and his voice was like coal rumbling down a chute.

“What do you want?” Morgan asked.

“It's not what *I* want,” came the reply, as if from a distance, “it's what you want. I heard your prayers, and I came to help.”

“I know about your help. You helped Adam right out of Eden, didn't you?”

The devil waved a taloned hand. “This ain't Eden, Morgan, and I can do better for you.”

Now Morgan knew he did not have a snowball's chance in, well, hell, of going to heaven, so what did he have to lose? If Old Nick didn't already hold markers on his soul, the system was in trouble. “So what do I have to do?”

“Remember that old saying about the Lord helping those who help themselves?” The archfiend did not wait for a reply; he was off on a gripe of his own. “It's a lie. *I* started the myth. Get people thinking for themselves, I told Him, and they are bound to stray. ‘That's a gamble I am willing to take,’ He said.”

Morgan gaped. “God gambles?”

The devil smiled, not a pretty sight, all yellow fangs and threads of saliva. “I cheat, of course. Is it a deal?”

When Ingrid came home, she was on a tear: the house, the servants, her beloved Beauregard led off the straight and narrow. Home? She would have been at home in the Inquisition. Hell, she would have been at home in a hair shirt, even if she was looking better, from what he could see through bloodshot eyes. Something about her dresses, maybe, or else she was wearing her hair in a softer style. Her heart had not grown any softer, that was for sure. Morgan found himself and a packed bag at one of his clubs before the cat could lick its ear, certainly before he could ask for a loan.

Chapter Twenty-one

“I think I shall ask Rigg to move my things upstairs today,” Stokely announced at breakfast. Geoff was already off for a few days to a horse fair at Epsom and Nadine was gathering sustenance and the last of the

Bath buns for a shopping expedition with some friends.

"How is it you can go up the steps today when we had to come home so early last evening?" she asked around a mouthful of muffin.

"Almack's can weary anyone, minx," he told her, but Emilyann, sipping her chocolate, wondered if it was wise. "You really were quite done up by the evening, it seemed."

Smoky detected a note of disappointment in her tone and grinned. "I intend to have an easier day, so I think I'll be able to manage by tonight." The look he gave his wife said he'd crawl if he had to.

"I don't see what all the pother is about," Nadine said on her way out. "Your room downstairs is closer to everything you need, after all."

Smoky choked on a bit of toast, and Emilyann excused herself hurriedly to see Cook about the menus. She kept busy all day, going over her accounts and making lists for the musical reception she planned. If her mind was not fully on her tasks, she told herself, it was merely due to the distraction of things being moved and commotions in the hallway. It had nothing to do with Smoky's knowing smile or the tender kiss he had placed on her lips before breakfast. Nothing whatsoever.

No one noticed that Nadine did not return from the shops until teatime. "Dratted girl," Emilyann fumed, "she knew I invited those Durhart twins just for her. I cannot even tell them apart, and they haven't ha'pence of conversation between them."

Luckily the Durhart brothers did not stay long, with the object of their call not present, for shortly Aunt Ingrid rushed into the room, offending Mr. Butler by slamming the door behind her. She was waving a note in the air and shouting, "Ruined, ruined. My baby is ruined."

Stokely and his lady exchanged glances. Someone had finally clapped Bobo in gaol for prigging their watch or something. No one except Aunt Ingrid would be surprised, or distressed.

"I just knew it would happen! That hoyden of yours has led poor Beauregard into sin. Oh, whatever shall I do?"

Emilyann led the distraught woman to the sofa and Aunt Adelaide handed her a cup of tea. "So soothing,

my dear. I always find—”

“Damn and blast!” Smoky looked up from the note he had been reading. “She’s really done it this time. Here, listen to this: ‘Have taken Nadine to Gretna. Only way. Don’t worry.’”

The next sound was a loud thud as Aunt Adelaide hit the floor.

“But why would they do that?” Emilyann wanted to know as she and Stokely struggled to get his aunt onto a sofa. “Nadine knew we would not stand in her way if her heart was really set on it. We might not have been thrilled at the match”—Stokely coughed—“but in a year or so ...”

“And I even told Beauregard I thought the chit was coming along. He could have done a great deal better, of course.”

“Aunt Ingrid,” Emilyann cautioned, “Nadine is my sister-in-law.”

“And my daughter-in-law!” Ingrid wailed. “She will never be accepted. Dear Lord, I will never be able to hold my head up again.”

“Hold off on the dramatics, ma’am,” Stokely told her, studying the letter. Lady Aylesbury sniffed and even Em thought he was acting with high-handed insensitivity, but he never was one for Cheltenham tragedies. “This does not sit right with me. They cannot have been gone long, so why would the clunch—pardon, ma’am—leave a note where we could find it? Why would they leave in the middle of the day at all, when they would be missed so soon?”

Emilyann glanced cautiously at her aunt and said in the politest terms she could think of, “Bobo never was one to, ah, worry over practical matters.”

“You mean he hasn’t got the brain power of a bedbug. And this is just like some fool romantical notion Nadine might enjoy.”

“I told you the girl was no better than she should be,” Aunt Ingrid countered. “Novels, hah!”

Rather than listen to the two of them trade insults, Emilyann went up to see if Nadine’s things were missing, or if Toinette knew anything. This suggestion won her an approving nod from Stokely, who was rereading the note, and muttering that he didn’t know the bacon-brained Bobo could write.

When Emilyann returned with the maid and Aunt Adelaide’s restoratives—hartshorn, vinaigrette,

feathers for burning, a flask of ... rum?—Stokely was already calling for the carriage, a change of clothes, his pistols.

“Nothing much is missing that I can tell. Even her jewelry is left here, and there is a ten-pound note in her glove drawer.”

“That’s what I thought. Nadine would never elope without her wardrobe, not voluntarily anyway. I am going after them, my dear. Don’t worry, I shall bring them back safe and sound. They cannot have much of a lead.”

“I am going with you,” two voices chorused.

“No, I’ll make better time without you.”

“But you’ll need help, Smoky. You cannot take a lot of servants along or this will be all over London,” Emilyann said, and added, “You’ll need me to lend countenance to this affair.”

So they set out in one carriage, Jake driving, Rigg up beside him with a rifle. Their first inquiries netted the information that yes, a young couple fitting the description had passed by, on the North Road, all right. They were not trying to hide their tracks, it seemed. Ingrid was not-so-quietly praying on the seat next to Emilyann while Stokely laid his pistols on the other and reloaded them.

“This is all my fault,” Emilyann lamented. “I should have watched her better.”

Aunt Ingrid sniffed her disdain and murmured something about bad breeding which, thankfully, Smoky either did not hear or chose to ignore. He reached for his wife’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Never think so, Sparrow. She was never meant to be your responsibility, my love. You’ve looked out for her interests like she was a chick of your own, and I can never repay you for that either. Except possibly by wringing the chit’s neck when we find her.”

He tugged on her hand until she moved to the seat beside him, where he could put his arm around her shoulder in comfort, and draw her close. “And you taught her more about being a real lady in this year or so than anyone else has managed in seventeen.”

And right there, in the hurtling carriage with Ingrid sitting in her black gown like a vulture across from them, Smoky thoroughly kissed his wife.

* * * *

At the next stop Stokely decided to ride ahead, over

Emilyann's loud objections. He felt he could better concentrate on the problem at hand if his wife weren't in his arms. The prayers and Ingrid's carping about Nadine were trying his already strained nerves, but he told the ladies, half truthfully, that his leg needed to be exercised or it would tighten up. With night soon falling, they needed to cover ground more quickly.

The only horse available at the posting house was a likely-looking animal, but with a sadly ragged gait. Before the aching earl could resume the coach ride at the next change, the nag unfortunately ran out of wind. Stokely and his mount fell behind the carriage, which probably was the only thing to save them all when the three highwaymen rode out of the woods, firing.

Rigg nicked one of them, who rode off, and the pistol in Stokely's waistband dropped the second dead in his tracks before the bandit could pull open the carriage door. The third man was already around the other side of the coach, pointing a heavy pistol, before Smoky could get him in sight. Then a shot rang out, and the highwayman fell, clutching his shoulder.

"I told you missy was pluck to the backbone," Jake said to Rigg as the two tried to calm the frightened horses. Emilyann was calmly reloading the pearl-handled pistol drawn from her fur muff while the earl tied the injured attacker, who looked a great deal like one of the footpads who had assaulted him and Geoff on the streets of London.

"You are lucky," he told the man, binding the cove's shoulder with the thug's own greasy neckerchief. "My wife always did pull her first shots a bit to the left. Of course, she never misses with her second. Do you want to put it to the test, or shall you tell us where your employer is hiding?"

When they went to leave they found Ingrid on the side of the road, on her knees.

* * * *

"Rigg will go around back," Stokely commanded when they reached the deserted hedgerow tavern, dark except for a faint candleglow in one window. "Jake holds the horses quiet and keeps an eye on our friend here while I try the front door. You"—he indicated Emilyann—"stay here with your aunt."

Limping badly, the earl made his stealthy way along the building's side, ducking under windows and

keeping to the cover of shrubs. He bit off an oath when he bumped into his wife inside the door of what was obviously the common room of the old tavern.

"Welcome, nevvv, welcome." Morgan chuckled, shifting the aim of his pistol from Nadine, tied in a chair and gagged, to Emilyann. Cursing, Stokely dropped his own gun.

Ingrid rushed to Bobo, unconscious on the floor, with an ugly bruise on the side of his head. She immediately began weeping and calling on divine intervention to save her baby.

"Ah, motherhood." Morgan sneered. "But that was the gist of the whole matter, wasn't it?"

The man had obviously shot the cat. Empty bottles testified to the battle for Morgan's mind. Morgan had not put up much of a fight, Stokely decided. It was only a matter of keeping him pacified, he figured, until Rigg could find a way in from the back. Emilyann had other plans.

"You'll never get away with this, you know."

Stokely tried to shush her. He would like to shake the little fool for arguing with a madman who held a gun, but he kept his hands in the air so Morgan would not feel threatened. Emilyann was in full spate now, though, and he could see Morgan's face growing redder with fury.

"Do you think Mr. Baxley doesn't know about all the so-called accidents? Well, he does, you addleheaded old tosspot. You won't live to see the next Duke of Aylesbury, you'll hang before my son is even born, you scurvy piece of offal, you makebait—"

Morgan leveled the gun vaguely at her heart. "So you want to be first, eh? I thought to have you all trussed up before lighting the place, but I can see I have to change my plans." He turned blurring eyes to Ingrid, keeping the gun mostly pointed at Emilyann. "You were right, m'dear, it's hard to find good servants. No one wants to work to get the job done. An honest pay for an honest day's work. Hah-hah. Those fools have ruined my plans countless times, aye, and taken my blunt ne'ertheless. Well, I'm done with them. Have a better ally now.

"Yes, niece," he continued, "you can see the fires of hell firsthand, as it were. I've seen them, you know. They're in little eyes on the great cathedrals, all over. Burning. Burning. Now you'll see them, pesky brat,

then it will be your crippled hero's turn."

The gun kept wavering. He needed two hands now to hold it steady, and his eyes shut to pull the trigger.

Emilyann pulled the little pistol out of her muff just as Smoky dived to push her aside and knock the gun out of Morgan's hands. Both guns fell to the ground, but not before discharging both shots. One grazed Smoky's shoulder, the other his cheek.

"Of all the cork-brained, misbegotten moves," Smoky started while Emilyann began shouting, "You knew I had the pistol, you ninny. What did you think—"

Then they were in each other's arms, laughing, hugging, and even weeping a little in relief.

Rigg coughed, bringing their attention back to the dingy room. He was dragging the third highwayman behind him. "Sorry for the delay, Major. I had to take care of this fellow before I could see to the rear door. Everything satisfactory here now?"

They looked around. Uncle Morgan was flat out on the floor, and Aunt Ingrid was still bashing him over the head with a grimy long-handled cookpot from the fireplace. "I'll show you hell, you jackass!" *Whap!* "You want an heir so badly you can go—"

"Aunt Ingrid!"

Whap! "How's that for an eye for an eye, you spindleshank ale-spigot? The devil's on your side, eh? Well, here's one for him, too." *Whap!* She put the much-dented pot down only when Bobo groaned, and Emilyann and Stokely both said amen.

* * * *

"What will happen to Uncle Morgan now?" a very tousled Lady Stokely asked later, safe in her much-bandaged husband's lap, at a comfortable inn some miles down the road.

Stokely's injured shoulder was not keeping him from holding her tightly. He smiled. "Ingrid mentioned a new interest of Brother Blessed's. He is sending missionaries to bring the word to some new native outpost. Esquimeaux I think they are called."

"And Uncle is going along? The Lord certainly does work in mysterious ways."

"His choices were that or Newgate. Bedlam maybe. He would have to relinquish the title and any future claims to the dukedom in any case. Otherwise you would never be safe."

“Nor you, as my husband.” She shivered at the thought and Smoky pulled her closer. He brushed a kiss across her head and set her a little away from him so he could look into her eyes.

“As for that, my dear,” he said, “we have to come to some kind of terms. I mean, now that the threat is gone, you do not need me anymore, except for target practice, of course. Therefore I, ah, will agree to the annulment if you wish, so you may have your freedom and your fortune back.”

So he was going to be noble, was he? “I was going to say the same thing to you. Now that we need not be married, you must be wishing your carefree bachelorhood restored, so I would agree to the annulment. After all, I did trick you into the marriage. I knew you were disguised and I kept your cup filled with brandy so you would not be thinking clearly. And I threatened to sue you for breach of contract and libel you in the newspapers and ruin your family. I would not have done any of it, of course.”

“Don’t you think I knew that, peagoose? I’ve known you all your life.”

Emilyann hoped he did not know how strangely her body was acting, growing warm and cold, tingly and numb. “Well, but I cannot hold you to a promise made while in your cups.”

“I have a harder head than that, Sparrow. I knew what you were doing, and more important, I knew what I was doing.”

“Then why did you marry me? You certainly did not love me.”

“No, I have to admit I did not love that ragtag brat, not in the way you mean. I was not in the marriage mart, in any case, not with the war going on. On the other hand, I never thought of marrying anyone else. You were mine, always, to cherish and protect, and if giving you my name was what it took, there was no big sacrifice. Then when I realized you were all grown up, I stopped feeling brotherly altogether. You knew that.”

“And you do not want an annulment?”

“Not on your life. Lord, when I think of your precious life, facing that lunatic’s pistol ...” He ran his fingers through his disordered hair. “Confound it, girl, don’t you ever listen to orders?”

“Don’t you ever stop giving them, my lord?” she asked sweetly.

"I cannot help worrying, Sparrow. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to you."

"And me you," she told him, gently touching the bandage and placing a shy kiss on his cheek.

"Besides, where else could I find another woman who could stand to look at my body?"

"Your body is beautiful!"

"Not so very beautiful, after you made your mark with chicken scratches up and down it."

"I am very proud of my handiwork, I'll have you know."

"So you did look after all," he teased, grinning before his gray eyes turned serious again. "Then you will be my wife?"

"Silly, I am your wife."

"But I never proposed to you, and you never answered. You are supposed to tell me what a great honor it is."

"And you are supposed to go down on one knee."

"You would only have to help me up, Sparrow. But, truly, we have been engaged by managing parents and wed to avoid another relative's machinations. We've never been consulted, really, and you have never had a choice. And I'll most likely always limp, and have more scars, and I can't promise to stop acting like a drill sergeant or resenting your fortune, but, Lady Stokely, I am humbly asking you to be my wife, in every way, forever, because I cannot live without you."

"And you truly love me?"

His lips met hers in answer, in a long, burning kiss that spoke of yearning and sharing at last. "More than life itself," he said finally.

"Then, Lord Stokely, if you don't mind that your countess will never be a meek, even-tempered, obedient little female who hardly bends the rules, and your son will have to be a duke, then I would be honored to be your wife, in every way, forever." This time she showed him, with her innocent, eager passion.

"And you love me." It was more a statement of his wonder than a question.

"I have loved you all of my life, Smoky. I am not about to stop now."

...And some marriages are made just where they should be, in the hearts and minds of joyous lovers.

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