



Seducing Eden

The Portland Chronicles, Book 1

Allison Lane

Chapter One

March 1816

Rain lashed the carriage window, driven by wind cold enough to freeze the marrow. Thunder crashed.

Shuddering, Eden pulled the rug closer about her shoulders and wished the brick at her feet retained any heat. She should have listened to Fellows when he'd advised a halt until the storm cleared. But they'd been only ten miles from Cliffside Manor. Two hours. Three at most. Halting would have meant yet another night at an inn, pinching her purse further...

Four hours had already passed, with no end in sight. If only she'd liste—

Crack!

The carriage tilted crazily, flinging her against the door as the world exploded in a blur of sound and motion.

Her maid screamed.

Fellows's curse abruptly ceased.

An eternity later Eden warily unwrapped her arms from around her head and opened her eyes. She was crammed into the angle where the roof met the door, the seat hovering crookedly above her. Cold water seeped around her hip. A heavy weight pressed against her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

The weight whimpered.

“Are you all right?” Eden demanded, wriggling free of her maid so she could stand. The carriage had come to rest half on its roof, springing the door. Muddy water bubbled through the gap as the carriage slid deeper into the ditch.

“Wh-what happened?” Carver shakily sat up, then stood to avoid the spreading puddle.

“We’ve overturned.” Only turbulent sky filled the window above them. Eden forced it open, letting in sheets of rain that banished her remaining dizziness. The screams of a terrified horse followed. But no soothing voice sought to calm it.

“Hoy! Fellows!”

Nothing.

Carver’s face turned even whiter. “D-do you think he’s d-dead?”

“How should I know?” Eden snapped before reining in her temper. The way her luck was running, he could well be, adding another disaster to a fortnight packed with disasters. Nothing had gone right since—

She shook off the memories and concentrated on this latest crisis.

“Boost me up, Carver.”

“But— It’s raining, ma’am. You’ll catch your death.”

“Fellows is injured. The horses are tangled in the harness at the very least. Are you volunteering to tend them?”

Carver recoiled, her skirt stretched to the full as she widened her stance to avoid the rising water.

“As I thought. Either I deal with it, or we must stay here until another carriage happens by. Given the weather and the state of this lane, that could be days. And we’ve landed in water. I’ve no idea how deep it is. Can you swim?”

Carver gasped.

“Exactly. Now give me a boost up, then pray that at least one horse is whole. I don’t relish walking for help in this storm.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Wishing she wasn’t cursed with a timid maid, Eden pulled herself through the window. The sight that met her eyes was daunting.

Angry black clouds boiled overhead. Rain fell in torrents, lashed sideways by the wind screaming through the few trees that grew inland of this desolate coast. Crashing waves topped the cliffs a hundred feet

in the other direction. Water was rapidly flooding the road as it sought a way around the obstacle presented by the carriage.

Fellows had been thrown beyond the ditch. He lay unmoving against a boulder, one leg bent at an unnatural angle.

Guilt swamped her for forcing him to continue, but she shook it away. This was no time to wallow in *if onlys*.

“First things first,” she muttered as she jumped to the ground.

Before she could help Fellows, she must see to the horses. The black was down, either dead or stunned. The roan was tangled in the harness. He was not taking kindly to the rising water or the tug on his head every time he tried to turn away from the downed black – the split ribbons connected both horses’ bits. He twisted, trying to rid himself of the restraints.

Eden’s breath whooshed out in relief when the black inhaled. Her first bit of luck. But she would have to work fast to free the roan before the black awoke. She couldn’t fight two terrified animals.

Lightning blasted a tree on the crest of the hill, the concurrent crash of thunder sending new panic through the roan.

Circling to approach his head, she grimaced at the carriage. The front axle was broken. Rolling had damaged at least one wheel and crushed part of the boot. Stifling a sigh – she had no money for repairs – she forced herself to relax. Horses could sense agitation. Though this one was weary from four hours of battling mud and storm, panic made him dangerous.

“Easy, fellow.” She pitched her voice low, for his grooms would all be men. “If you give me half a chance, I’ll help you.”

He plunged, snorting, but his ears pricked toward her.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Steady does it.” Ignoring the icy rain, she slowly unclasped her cloak and slipped it off. Her soothing murmurs kept those ears pointed firmly in her direction, drawing his attention away from his confinement. But his prancing hooves and twitching skin left no doubt of his continued terror. She waited patiently, talking all the while. Finally his feet paused—

She tossed the cloak over his head.

He shuddered once, then stilled.

“Good,” she crooned, arranging the cloak into a blindfold that she could tuck into his harness. “You stand still, and I’ll have you free in no time.” She caressed his neck, then unbuckled the ribbons from the black’s harness so they no longer tugged.

Loosening the rest of the harness was more difficult. It seemed an eternity before her freezing fingers could work the soaked straps to release him from the chains attached to the pole and doubletree. When she finally had him free, she tied him to the back of the carriage, removed the blindfold, then returned to the black.

He lay atop some of the buckles. She freed the chains at the other end, but they would clank against his sides when he stood. Since that might make him too skittish to handle by herself, she dragged a protesting Carver out to help.

“He’s coming round,” she warned when Carver reached the road. “I’ll stay at his head and soothe him, but the minute he stands, you must unbuckle those chains. We can’t risk him bolting,” she added to forestall another objection. “Having to chase him down will delay me from fetching help.”

Carver nodded, swallowing.

But in the end, the black offered little fight. He rolled onto his chest, then paused, panting, before scrambling to his feet. Eden crooned softly while Carver fought the buckles, but she did not need the blindfold. He was dead lame. At least nothing seemed broken. If they’d had to put him down—

Even thinking about the cost of killing a job horse set spots dancing before her eyes, so she concentrated on Fellows.

He hadn’t moved.

“He’s d-dead,” stammered Carver.

“I hope not.” Eden waded through the overflowing ditch and bent over her coachman. The good news was that he was breathing. But his leg was broken, one shoulder was dislocated, and several cuts still bled sluggishly. She had to get him warm and dry as quickly as possible. “Get the traveling rugs,” she ordered Carver.

“How?”

Clenching her fists, Eden waded back to the carriage. “Climb in and hand me the rugs,” she

ordered, boosting Carver up to the window.

This was not how she'd expected to spend the day.

* * * *

A quarter hour later, Eden studied the site to make sure there was nothing else to be done. She'd strapped the luggage above the water level in the boot to keep the papers dry. The black was tethered under a tree, as sheltered as she could contrive. She'd tucked one rug around Fellows and arranged the other to provide a modicum of shelter from the rain. He remained unconscious, which was just as well. With luck they could get him to bed before he woke.

"Watch him closely," she ordered Carver, who was stationed at his side. "If he wakes, give him brandy." She'd found a flask in the driver's box, three-quarters full.

"Where are you going?" demanded Carver.

"To fetch help."

"But—"

"Cliffside Manor cannot be far. The man in that last village told us five miles, and we must have traveled half that. This road goes nowhere else, so I can't miss it."

Allowing no further protest, she rucked up her skirts, mounted the roan, and left, thanking fate that Squire Keeling had given her the run of his stables when she'd been a girl, so she could ride both bareback and astride.

The temperature was falling fast, numbing her hands and cutting through the stockings on her now-uncovered legs – her feet had gone dead some time ago. She was amazed that the rain had not yet turned to ice. That was the way her luck had been running of late.

By the time she turned between ancient stone gateposts, her teeth were chattering so hard she feared they might shatter.

* * * *

Alex Portland unwrapped the latest package from his book dealer, wondering what the man had chosen this time. Moore sent anything he thought Alex would enjoy – an easy task since Alex read copiously to keep his mind occupied and hold melancholy at bay. Retirement was nothing like he'd expected.

Of course, he'd expected to have Helen at his side, caring for his needs, filling his hours and his senses,

turning Cliffside Manor into the Eden he'd envisioned during the worst moments of his career.

He shook his head. Two years of loneliness made it hard to forgive her for jilting him. She'd been all he'd had left after—

He stifled the memories. Regret always worsened his blue-devils, which were bad enough after ten days of rain. To banish them, he studied his library, letting its coziness seep into his soul.

There was no better place to be during storms. The crackling fire was made up with logs today so he could lose himself in dancing flames. Shelves laden with leather-bound volumes surrounded him. He'd added comfortable chairs and the finest brandy, then hung a portrait of his grandmother above the fireplace.

She was the only one who'd supported him against his father's tyranny. The only one who had never condemned him. The only one who'd known that his job with the Home Office had involved far more than copying letters and reports. She'd kept him focused, contributing to his many successes.

Now he was truly alone. She'd died three years earlier, leaving him Cliffside Manor and enough money to support him in style. A year later, he'd lost Helen, then retired, unable to face another assignment.

His father had been furious. The man knew nothing about him, but that didn't stop him from passing judgment on every word and deed. Even now, his charges echoed. *Lazy ... trouble seeker ... profligate ... no gentleman...*

Alex slammed the door on that despised voice. His father's hatred didn't matter. Retiring had saved his sanity by letting him retreat to Cliffside to lick his wounds, renovate the house, and relax.

It had worked. His scars were fading, Cliffside now boasted modern conveniences, and he no longer jumped at the slightest sound or kept a pistol always within reach.

His satisfaction hadn't lasted, of course, for solitude bred loneliness, a problem he'd yet to resolve. He couldn't return to the Home Office, no matter how much Home Secretary Sidmouth begged, and turning away all callers meant his neighbors now ignored him. Cliffside was so isolated that even liaisons were hard to arrange.

That was his biggest problem, he admitted,

recognizing the familiar restlessness. Lovemaking had long helped him relax, so he hadn't cared that it had also earned him a reputation as a libertine – another of his father's complaints. Liaisons had kept him on an even keel through the worst assignments of his career.

Raking was another activity he'd left in London. There were too few opportunities for acceptable dalliance in the wilds of Devonshire. He'd never approved of seducing servants, and he was fastidious enough to eschew the services of tavern wenches who accommodated every fisherman and passerby with a free penny. He was long overdue for a trip to Exeter.

Yet a few days in Exeter would not truly help, he admitted as wind rattled the windows. The loneliness would remain until he found someone to share the manor.

He needed a wife.

Staring into the fire, he castigated himself for not recognizing the truth sooner. Why had he thought that living alone might be possible? His plans for retirement had included a wife. Someone who would oversee his household and keep him comfortable. A sweet-tempered, conformable girl who would entertain him when he wished, yet fade away when he was busy. The sort of girl Helen had pretended to be...

He leaned closer to the fire, propping his chin on his hand.

Finding the ideal wife would be difficult, for everyone hid behind social masks. And falling prey to Helen's deceit called his judgment into question, something Boney's most devious agents had failed to do. So he must be more cautious this time, making absolutely certain that the girl would not become a demanding shrew the moment she accepted his hand. The only place to find multiple candidates was the London Season.

Even without his antipathy to ballrooms, the prospect was daunting. His reputation would work against him. His own fault, of course. He'd not only allowed exaggerations to stand unchallenged, but had added outright falsehoods to cover his frequent absences from society. The practice had protected him from speculation that might have betrayed his real activities, but the sticklers looked at him askance whenever they met.

And they weren't his only problem. There were too

many people in town he wished to avoid. Sidmouth. His family. Helen... Granted, society knew nothing of the jilt, for he'd kept their betrothal secret lest his enemies strike at him through Helen. Thus he needn't fear embarrassment, but still... Could he survive even a month in town with his sanity intact?

Shaking his head, he slit the first folio of the new book and turned to the title page.

Legendary Lands.

He cursed. Why the devil did Moore think he would be interested in this? Granted, Alex enjoyed reading about other countries. But real ones. Not myths.

The table of contents listed the usual fabled places – Atlantis, the Mountains of the Moon, Prester John's Kingdom, the Nation of Satan, Lyonesse, Sarsos, the Land of the Dogmen—

Sarsos. He snapped to attention.

He hadn't thought of Sarsos in ten years.

Setting the book aside, he stared into the red-hot core of the fire. A log collapsed, its fragments sinking into the coals just as Sarsos had supposedly sunk into the sea.

He'd first heard the legend while investigating a Leicestershire robbery and murder for the Home Office – the assignment that had established his reputation for brilliant deduction, ultimately elevating him to chief investigator by his twenty-sixth year.

Sir George Marlow's daughter-in-law Christine had stolen the Sarsos staff from his antiquities collection, then eloped with Sir Harold Iverson. Two days later, her body had turned up, shot in the head. Sir George had asked Sidmouth for help – calling in runners would have broken his habit of secrecy, inciting enough speculation about his extensive collection to put other family members at risk.

Alex had succeeded, of course, thanks to his grandmother, who could recite family trees as easily as breathe. She had pointed him to the cousin who had stirred Sir Harold's interest in an object reputed to have magical powers.

Snorting at people's gullibility, Alex locked the memory back in its box – his mind was cluttered with such boxes – and reached for a treatise on electricity. The Marlow case had destroyed any interest in legends. Men were base enough without filling their heads with fantasies that triggered greed or a lust for

power.

You are turning into a curmudgeon, his conscience grumbled.

Probably. But what could he expect? He'd dealt with greed too often. His brilliant handling of the Marlow case had moved him into a new office charged with preventing English military information from reaching the French. For eight years, he'd used his talent for disguise to work in secret, tracking down spies and unmasking traitors. By the end of the war, he'd desperately needed peace.

Now he needed a wife. It was time to reopen his town house. With luck, he could finish the business quickly. Then, at last, he could enjoy his retirement.

A sudden clatter drew him to the window as a horseman halted before the steps.

Not a horseman, he realized as skirts swirled on the dismount. A female. Riding astride. In a rainstorm.

This was no innocent maiden.

The wind ripped her cloak open, plastering her dripping gown against a shapely body that included a nicely rounded bosom. His groin stirred, banishing his blue-devils.

Had Fate just delivered dalliance to his doorstep? Perhaps it was time to rescind his policy of turning away all callers.

* * * *

Eden pounded on the door a second time, wondering where the devil the butler was. Or the footman. Or a maid. The manor wasn't large, but it ought to have a staff of at least a dozen. Light glowed behind several windows, so someone was home. But there wasn't even a groom to take her horse.

Another gust of wind tried to steal her cloak. Wiping water from her face, she again plied the knocker.

The two miles she'd ridden felt like two hundred, leaving her ice to the bone. Her hands were now as numb as her feet, and her face would crack if she smiled. But Carver and Fellows were likely in worse shape. At least she'd derived a little warmth from the horse.

Again she knocked.

When the porter at the Home Office had finally admitted that Mr. Portland had retired, she'd insisted on going to Devonshire to speak with him. Now she had to wonder if the doddering old fool was competent

enough to understand her problem, let alone solve it. For all she knew, he might be deaf as a post, and his servants with him.

The door finally creaked open.

“Are you lost, miss?”

“This *is* Cliffside Manor, isn’t it?”

The butler’s mouth tightened, but he nodded.

“Then I’m not lost. Tell Mr. Portland that Mrs. Marlow must speak with him on a matter of g-great urgency. I also need a groom to t-tend to this b-beast”—she gestured at the horse as she stepped inside—“and a c-carriage to fetch the rest of my p-party. We slid into a d-ditch. My c-coachman and a horse are injured. My maid is t-tending them, b-but with this storm—” She shrugged, or tried to. Her teeth were chattering worse than ever. The unheated hall was so much warmer than the storm that pain lanced her body.

“Of course, madam.” His irritation gave way to competence. “If you will step this way, the housekeeper will see you warm and dry. I will discover whether Mr. Portland is receiving.” His tone declared that it wasn’t likely. The villager had used the same tone. Apparently Portland was a hermit.

It was on the tip of her tongue to demand an immediate audience, but she bit back the words. The longcase clock on the landing read half past seven. For all she knew, he might have retired for the night. Many elderly men kept early hours. If not for the storm, she would have arrived before dinner, but ten days of rain left even turnpikes muddy, and the lanes that served this corner of Devonshire were all but impassable. If time had pressed less heavily—

But if the errand were less urgent, she wouldn’t be here at all, she admitted, accepting her relegation to the lower orders as she followed the butler to the kitchen. Beggars couldn’t take offense at snubs, and the kitchen would be warm. Besides, if she balked, she would likely never see Portland.

She couldn’t risk it. Her husband had followed Portland’s career and often sang his praises. If anyone could help—

The kitchen’s warmth doubled her over in pain. Darkness engulfed her, numbing her to the hands that caught her collapse.

* * * *

“What is it, Tweed?” Alex asked when his valet entered the library. His needs were minimal, so Tweed doubled as butler. A housekeeper, two maids, and Cook rounded out his staff.

Not for long, murmured his conscience. *A wife will demand a full staff, frequent entertainments, Seasons in town...*

Cringing at the very thought, he modified the description of his ideal wife. She must prefer the country and never make demands.

“A Mrs. Marlow to see you, sir,” announced Tweed, crossing to close the shutters. “She claims her errand is urgent.”

Marlow.

Tweed continued to speak, but Alex stopped listening. Was she connected to Sir George Marlow? The family didn’t frequent London, so Alex had heard nothing of them in ten years – except for a note from the younger son outlining his suspicions of a neighbor. It had helped Alex unmask a spy ring that included a high-placed traitor at Horse Guards, adding the biggest feather of all to his cap. He owed the son a favor.

But if John needed assistance, he would have written, as he’d done before. Any other Marlow who wanted his services would learn that they were no longer for hire. He had abandoned interest in other people’s problems two years ago.

A grateful wench is easy to seduce, whispered his libido.

True. So it wouldn’t hurt to listen. It might even be entertaining. He had nothing better to do this evening.

His groin stirred more forcefully. She had to be a widow. A wife would let her husband solve her problems. She would never address them alone and would certainly never call on a notorious rake. So Mrs. Marlow might be available. And if she was connected to the very priggish Leicestershire Marlows, she was likely as frustrated as he was.

“Feed her,” he ordered. “I will see her when she is dry. And have Mrs. Crump prepare a bedchamber.”

Tweed raised his brows, but left without further comment.

Mrs. Marlow.

Again Alex opened his mental box on the Marlow case.

She might have married any number of men. Sir George's grandsons had been unwed ten years ago. They all belonged to the heir, though, so if that was her connection, he would see that she left by morning. Richard Marlow was not a man he would willingly assist, a feeling that extended to his sons, who had been opinionated bores then and had likely grown worse with time.

Or she might have wed one of the cousins. There were dozens, all scrappers. In truth, he didn't wish to see any of them. The family had complicated the Marlow case by arguing constantly over what had happened, how to resolve it, and who deserved the blame. They'd been so vocal it was a miracle he'd kept the facts from becoming public knowledge.

She might have no connection, of course, for Marlow was a common name. It was mere coincidence that he'd been thinking of Sir George when she arrived – for the first time in years...

Chapter Two

"I haven't time to change," protested Eden as a shivering Carver shepherded her upstairs. "I must speak to Mr. Portland immediately."

"And why would he take you seriously when you look like flotsam scraped from a beach? Do you want to ruin his carpets?" Carver made shooing motions, somehow blocking the hallway when Eden tried to turn around. The girl might be timid in most ways, but when it came to how her charge looked in public, she could turn as high in the instep as the duchess she dreamed of one day serving.

Eden snorted. "You're the one who needs to change. I stopped dripping an hour ago. And you must check on Fellows. See that he is kept warm. I don't want him catching lung fever."

The kitchen fire and a plate of hot soup had rectified her near-faint, though nervousness over this meeting tempered any pleasure. Now that she was about to face Mr. Portland, doubts assailed her. Men rarely listened to women. What if he dismissed her as Richard had done? And what if he was too senile to help? Unless she succeeded, this journey was a waste of money she didn't have – doubly true now that she'd wrecked her only carriage.

Carver shook her head. "T'ain't nothing Mr. Portland can do tonight anyway, so you might as well make yourself decent afore you see him. Don't give him reason to turn you away. Tweed is looking after Fellows and claims he's set bones more'n once afore now. Fellows is in a right proper room with a good fireplace and all the nostrums you could want. There's nothing more I can do."

Eden puffed out air in frustration, but Carver was right. She could hardly drag Portland into a storm. The chill alone would kill him.

Yet each new delay increased her fear that something awful would happen before she returned home. She should never have left Olivia alone. Her sister might be eighteen, but Eden had already been gone a week. And now that Fellows—

She harnessed her turbulent thoughts, for there was nothing she could do at the moment. It was harder to stifle anger and betrayal, but at least she controlled them long enough for Carver to replace her carriage dress with her warmest gown. She even feigned calm while Carver arranged her hair. But the moment the last pin slid into place, she was out the door.

"Take me to Mr. Portland," she ordered the maid waiting in the hall. "My errand is most urgent."

"This way, ma'am." Instead of leading her to the staircase, the maid ushered her onto the narrow servant stairs tucked in a nearby corner. Not until the girl tapped on a door adjacent to the stairs' bottom did Eden realize she had meant no insult, but had taken the demand for haste to heart.

"Enter." The voice was strong, setting one fear to rest. Mr. Portland was not quite doddering and might still retain his faculties.

"Mrs. Marlow, sir." The maid stood aside.

Eden stepped into the room, then froze, her heart sinking through the floor. The man rising from behind the desk was far too young to be retired. Had she tracked down the wrong Portland? Or was this his secretary?

"Why was Mr. Portland not informed of my arrival?" she blurted out, fear making her sound as haughty as Richard. "My errand is more important than his sleep. I've already been kept waiting far too long."

"I am Portland." The clipped words could freeze fire.

Her knees buckled, sinking her into a chair. “His son. Dear lord. He must have died.”

He shook his head. “It would appear that you are confused, but if you explain your problem, perhaps I can help.”

She examined her host. He was tall, dark, and muscular, but barely older than herself. Icy blue eyes glittered in a face that remained compelling despite several scars. The largest slashed his left cheek from temple to chin in a silvery streak. A more recent one crossed his forehead in a blaze of red. Was that why he was a recluse? Society did not tolerate imperfection.

His gaze trapped hers, sending shivers through her insides that felt decidedly odd.

Tearing her eyes away, she drew a deep breath. “There is only one man who can help me. The Portland I seek retired from the Home Office two years ago.”

“Then you are in the right place. I am he.”

“But—” She stared. “You’re too young. John swore—”

“John Marlow of Marwood Hill, Leicestershire?”

“Marwood Hill was his father’s estate and now belongs to his brother. We lived at Ridley Park.”

“Lived?”

“I still do.” She blinked away tears. “John died ten days ago.”

* * * *

Alex stared, her *too young* still echoing. But he would deal with that absurdity later.

Face to face, she exuded even more sensuality than he’d hoped. Not that it did him much good, for she was more proper than her arrival had indicated. Both a maid and coachman accompanied her, and she was very new to widowhood.

He studied her more closely. Firelight glinted from gold highlights in her light brown hair and added warmth to cheeks washed white by a high-necked black gown – few people showed to advantage in deep mourning. Her hands were motionless, but clasped so tightly her knuckles would be white beneath her black gloves. Mossy eyes brimmed with pain and grief, recalling his mind to business.

“My condolences on your loss, Mrs. Marlow. John was a good man.”

She nodded.

“What happened?” Her business must be connected

to John's death. Nothing else would drive her into a storm so early in mourning. She must have left from John's graveside to have tracked him down this soon. Few knew where he lived, for he kept his direction quiet to prevent French retaliation.

"It's a long story." She shivered.

"Start at the beginning." He adjusted the fire screen to throw more warmth in her direction. When Tweed appeared with a tea tray, he let her pour to give her time to pull herself together.

"Are you really the man who helped John's father?" she asked at last.

He nodded. "Why?"

"You seem so young. I can't imagine someone your age retiring."

"Age is not the only reason for retirement." He drank deeply to banish the chill that always accompanied memory of his final years with the Home Office. He might be only thirty-three, but he felt a hundred. Few knew what his job had entailed. None knew how exhausting it had been. Oh, Sidmouth thought he knew, but only someone who had worked in secret for months and years at a time could appreciate the strain of never knowing if one of the men he hunted would penetrate his disguise and kill him. Several had tried.

She pursed her lips, again sparking his libido. He fought it down – it was far too soon to test her receptiveness to a liaison – and forced his mind back to business. His age clearly bothered her, though why she'd thought a doddering fool could help, he didn't know. "If my retirement was a problem, you wouldn't be here," he said at last.

"True." Another pause ended when she blew out a deep sigh. "John said you were the best. He made me swear that if I ever needed help, I would go to you."

His premonitions suddenly coalesced into an icy knot in his stomach. Pulling his chair close, he laid a hand over hers and squeezed. "Start at the beginning, Mrs. Marlow. What is wrong?"

"Do you recall the theft at Marwood Hill?"

"Of course. Sir Harold Iverson seduced John's wife Christine and convinced her to steal two Celtic amulets, a Grecian necklace, a Minoan urn, a Roman perfume bottle, and a primitive staff, supposedly from Sarsos. He killed her, then fled for his home on the Isle of Mann, drowning when his ship foundered in a

storm. His accomplice was a distant cousin, who held a living ten miles from Marwood. When I uncovered his role, the cousin shot himself rather than face an inquiry.”

“He was my father.”

“What?” Alex snatched his hand away. “Who?”

“Mr. Higgins – Sir Harold’s cousin. I found his body when I returned from a month with friends.” She choked back tears.

Dear Lord! He hadn’t known Higgins had a family. Such ignorance tarnished an otherwise perfect handling of the case.

Alex brushed the thought aside. She’d been away during Sir Harold’s visit, so she would have known nothing useful anyway. By the time he’d identified Higgins, Sir Harold had already been dead.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t hear about his death until I’d left Marwood Hill.” That suicide had ended the case, sending him back to London.

Now guilt lashed him. His interview with Higgins had forced the man to crawl out of his books and confront the real world. What Higgins found had pushed him to take his own life – the first of so many deaths Alex had directly or indirectly caused. But not one he could dismiss.

Mrs. Marlow shook her head. “I didn’t know he’d been involved with Christine’s death until a year later – he’d only scrawled, *Forgive me* on a scrap of paper, without further explanation. I wouldn’t know yet if John hadn’t mentioned it while in his cups.” Pain threaded her voice. And anger. At whom, he wasn’t sure, but she had yet to set the past behind her. Her hands twisted in her lap.

He tipped her chin up until she met his eyes. “When did you wed?”

“A week after Papa’s death.”

John had remarried a fortnight after losing his wife? Something wasn’t right. “Had you known him long?”

“We met when he offered for me. I had to accept. Marriage was the answer to my prayers, for Papa left no savings, and the new vicar— If not for John, we would have ended in the workhouse.”

“We?”

“My sister, Olivia. She was eight.”

His guilt increased. For the first time, he admitted that he’d mishandled the confrontation with Higgins.

Though he'd long considered Higgins a full accomplice, in truth the man had not knowingly aided Sir Harold. Housing a cousin while he was in the area was an act of kindness. Talking about the neighborhood was equally innocuous – something every host did. Marwood Hill wasn't as well-known as Belvoir Castle a few miles to the north, but it was a large enough property to be of interest to travelers. And everyone for miles around knew that Marlow collected antiquities, so revealing the information was hardly criminal. It wasn't even dishonorable.

So it wasn't Higgins's fault that Sir Harold had preyed upon his naïveté. Alex had failed to make that clear, not realizing that shock and guilt would drive the man to suicide. It was a mistake he'd shrugged off at the time, or tried to. But it explained why he'd never forgotten the Marlow case and why he'd mentally exaggerated Higgins's role.

Now his guilt was worse. His sloppy interview had orphaned Higgins's daughters, forcing the eldest into marriage with a man already nearly sixty. No wonder she remained angry.

Yet she sought his help.

Mrs. Marlow continued her tale. "John was impressed with how you handled the situation. No rumors escaped to lure other greedy fools to his father's collection. No questions remained to haunt the family. He described you as efficient, thorough, and discreet."

Alex nodded. Those traits formed the core of his reputation at the Home Office. Sir George wasn't the only one who demanded discretion. The government never revealed how many spies had infiltrated its ranks. Nor did it confirm that traitors had occupied high-level positions. Few even suspected the government employed men like him. Alex had received the trickiest assignments because Sidmouth knew he would bring the culprits to justice while leaving the public in ignorance.

Mrs. Marlow clasped her hands to halt their twisting. "John was satisfied with your investigation. But he was not happy about his father. The theft changed Sir George. Deciding that the collection was evil, he locked it away, convinced that its influence had killed Christine. Even after his finances failed, he refused to sell any of it. John was annoyed, for there

were several pieces he wanted to buy for his own collection.

Alex rose to add several lumps of coal to the fire. “I didn’t know John had a collection.”

“It’s small – only ninety-three pieces. He never liked his father’s habit of buying anything that caught his eye. It made for a hodge-podge that was hard to display, hard to catalogue, and impossible to keep track of. John concentrated on items connected to legend or scandal.”

“Such as?” The ice ball grew. A man intrigued by legend would have revered the Sarsos staff. What if he’d taken advantage of his wife’s elopement to steal it for himself? That the possibility had never before crossed his mind stabbed his soul. Had he botched everything? Mistakes were never acceptable, and if one had crept into an official report...

He shuddered.

Mrs. Marlow shrugged. “He had a Borgia ring, the letters cited in the Uxbridge divorce, a spatter of Lord Percival’s blood—”

“What?”

“Percival’s assassination occurred at the House of Commons. One of the tiles where he fell was loose. John’s agent knew his interests...” She shrugged. “Those, at least, were real, but most of his items were of questionable authenticity at best, and some had to be hoaxes – King Arthur’s sandals, Boadicea’s sword... Others were real enough, but exaggerated in importance – a sliver of the true cross, the Sarsos stone...” Her voice cracked.

“The Sarsos stone.” He could barely force out the words.

“That’s why the earlier case concerns me. Sir Harold wanted only the staff. He took the other items to keep Christine from guessing his intent.”

“How could you know that? John said nothing of it.”

She grimaced at his tone, but continued. “Christine’s maid served me for a time after my marriage, eventually revealing more than she’d told you. Christine did not grab items at random. Sir Harold chose them after quizzing her about the collection, convincing her that each was priceless. He turned down dozens before she mentioned the staff.”

“That doesn’t make the staff his primary focus.”

“Of course it does. The other items could be

purchased for a few pounds from any London antiquities dealer. But a believer in legend would expect to tap the staff's power."

"Rubbish. Only a madman thinks a chunk of wood has magical properties," he scoffed.

"I agree – not that it matters." She glared. "Too many men do believe it. John feared that some of them were trying to reassemble the power of Sarsos – you must recall that the world was a dangerous place ten years ago. Napoleon controlled the Continent from Poland to Spain. He was poised to crush Portugal and invade England. Many people feared that French revolutionary ideas could incite rebellion here even without an invasion. The Sarsos power was attractive, for it could restore the natural order – whatever that was presumed to be. So in English hands, it would vanquish Napoleon, while in French hands, it could sweep away old governments, making Napoleon emperor of us all."

"Why would a believer try to save the world or empower the Corsican Monster? Surely he would set *himself* up to rule."

"Anyone interested in Sarsos knows that claiming personal power is disastrous." She set her cup aside. "One of the first antiquities John bought was a fragment of the Sarsos scroll. He shared the translation with other collectors, so its contents are well known. It warns that using the power in anger or greed will destroy the user and all he holds dear. It can protect those who deserve it, and it can rectify injustice, but no more."

Alex shrugged. Bits of the scroll had been around for centuries, the remnants of what had probably been an ancient hoax – or maybe the world's first novel. It was time to concentrate on reality. "How did John die?"

"Before we discuss that, Mr. Portland, you have to understand the Sarsos legend. Whether it is truth or myth doesn't matter, for it drove John to his death."

"Did he believe it, then?"

"It would be more accurate to say he feared that it might be real. I know—" She cut off another protest. "I tried to talk him into being sensible, but he was terrified that the power could fall into unscrupulous hands, so he instructed his agent to track down Sarsos relics, particularly the other objects of power."

Alex frowned. “As I recall the legend, the sorcerer Sarsos took over an island, named it for himself, then used his power to build a peaceful society in which everyone remained happy, healthy, wealthy, and wise.” He couldn’t keep sarcasm from his voice.

Mrs. Marlow nodded. “It sounds silly when phrased like that, but that is the premise. The sorcerer did not make the mistake of eliminating all ills, nor did he try to defeat death, but Sarsos was a congenial land lacking epidemics, strife, and poverty. To protect his people once he was gone, he locked his power into four ceremonial objects – chalice, spoon, staff, and stone – then set down detailed instructions for their use. To prevent their misuse, he added spells that would curse anyone who employed his power for personal gain or to harm others. That led to Sarsos’s downfall, of course, for when outsiders discovered its wealth, they attacked. The island had no defenses, and when the high priest tried to kill the invaders, the power turned back on Sarsos, destroying the people and sinking the island into the sea.”

“Where it remains conveniently gone, like Atlantis and Lyonesse and other fabled islands. The tales likely have a common source – same perfect society, same watery grave. Wishful thinking added elements of magic, creating the fairy tale we have today.”

“You missed the point. Sarsos did exist – at least, a city of that name did. Sarsosian trade goods can be found in many places, as can items possibly taken during a sack – including the objects of power. You saw the staff for yourself.”

“I saw a sketch of a primitive scepter. I have no doubt that it was ancient. I have grave doubts that it had any connection to Sarsos. Not that it matters. The staff sank along with Sir Harold’s ship.”

“My apologies.” She drew in a deep breath, then doggedly continued. “John started searching for Sarsos relics a year after the staff disappeared.”

“Did he find anything?”

“A trail of blood.”

Chapter Three

Alex jerked to attention. Greed was something he understood, as was a lust for power. Such goals had driven the men he’d hunted. It didn’t matter that

Sarsos sorcery was a myth. The gullible would believe anything, even that a chunk of wood could make them rich. If someone was killing people in a misguided pursuit of the Sarsos relics, he had to act.

“Tell me about it.”

“The upheaval following the French revolution ignited interest in Sarsos. Rumors flooded the antiquities shops about its customs, its tragic end, and especially its treasure. Some of them were clearly spurious, but others seemed genuine. John collected the most reasonable, then sent his agent to Italy, where a cup matching the description of the Sarsos chalice had been used for centuries by a monastery – it sat on the altar full of sacramental wine that banished melancholy when sipped.”

“Sarsos happiness, I suppose,” he scoffed.

“Christian charity in this case. The monks believed it was the chalice Christ drank from during the marriage feast at Cana. Anyone who made a suitable offering to the monastery could have a sip – until twenty years ago, when a shoemaker stole the chalice. He’d been blue-deviled since his wife and son had perished in the fire that destroyed his business. The trek to the monastery was lengthy, so he wanted to have the chalice nearby.”

“Poor devil.”

“His ill luck continued,” she said, pouring more tea. “Barely a mile from the monastery, he stumbled into a lake and drowned. The chalice was never recovered.” She shook her head when he started to speak. “Nineteen years ago, a French mob dragged a count and his family to the guillotine after ransacking his estate. The plunder included the odd bronze spoon used for administering tonics to the household. The spoon was credited with the family’s remarkable health and longevity. The peddler who took it drowned when his cart overturned into a river as he was leaving the estate. The spoon disappeared.”

Alex couldn’t quite control a shiver.

“The staff you know about. Sir George bought it from a Moorish sailor while on his Grand Tour. Ten years ago, Christine stole it. Sir Harold killed her, dumping her body in a water-filled ditch.”

“Are you saying that he also had the chalice and spoon?”

“No. His heirs would have found them. John

believed that Sir Harold was one of several men seeking the treasure. The thefts are connected by the scroll. One of its protective spells curses thieves of the sacred relics to death by inundation. John suspected that each of the thieves was working for a collector who carried out the curse once the item had been voluntarily handed over, thus preventing the curse from attaching to him.”

Alex had had enough of magic and curses. “What about the stone?”

“Rumors of the stone turned up two years ago when the army returned from Spain. John’s agent traced it to a convent in the Pyrenees. It was an isolated place, virtually forgotten until Wellington chased the French through the area. But it survived the battle relatively unscathed. The nuns credited their holy stone.”

“John bought it?” he asked, hoping this wouldn’t be another tale of plunder.

“Yes. By then, his quest had turned to obsession. But he was too aware of the curse to behave dishonorably.”

“How did he know those tales were true? Someone might have spread lies to discourage competition,” he suggested. “Identifying a handy body as the thief could divert suspicion.”

“In which case I have an even larger complaint. John was too obsessed to think rationally by then.” She rose to pace, her voice hardening. “When the nuns refused to sell, John raised the price again and again, until they finally agreed. He bankrupted his estate, thinking it would be easy to recoup his finances once he had the stone. Unfortunately, he died before he could do so.” She rounded the table, her fury still hot. “He kept his purchase secret, even refusing to display the stone with the rest of his collection. But someone realized he’d found it.”

“Hard to keep it secret after searching so diligently.” He frowned.

Sighing, she dropped back into her chair. “The culprit caught up with him ten days ago.” Pain flickered in her eyes. “When I arrived in the study for our usual after-dinner coffee, John was bolting through the French window shouting, *Stop, thief!* The safe stood open, and I later discovered the collection room in shambles. I roused the staff, but they lost the trail in the woods. When hours passed with no sign of

him, I set out for Marwood Hill to seek Richard's help – their father died some years ago, so he is now the magistrate. Three miles from Ridley, I found Richard bent over two bodies.”

“John?”

She nodded, drawing a deep breath before continuing. “He lay on his back, his head against a rock. The second body was a roughly dressed stranger who had been found on his stomach, the hand beneath him still gripping a pistol. It had discharged, putting a hole in his chest.”

“Highwayman?”

“That's what Richard believes. Based on hoofprints in the road, he swears that a highwayman leaped out, spooking John's horse, which reared, throwing John against a rock and knocking the highwayman off balance. His gun discharged when he fell.”

“You don't believe that.” It wasn't a question. Her voice dripped sarcasm.

“No, I don't. Richard is lazy, stupid, and stubborn. Not only does he eagerly grasp the most obvious explanation for any problem, but he never changes his mind and never admits fault. He also believes that females are incapable of logic. Especially me – he never approved of John's second marriage. If I hadn't been in shock—” Her voice broke.

He silently handed her his handkerchief, then massaged the back of her neck. But touching her proved to be so disorienting that he removed his hands the moment she regained her composure. Lust he understood, but this wave of protectiveness...

“Thank you,” she said at last. “I try not to dwell on it, but it's hard. As I was saying, Richard is stubborn. I made the mistake of questioning his conclusions. The moment I opened my mouth, he dug in his heels and closed his mind to the evidence lying before his eyes. After all these years, I should know better.” She rubbed her temples.

“Was he the only man at the scene?”

“No, not that it helps. The farm worker who found the bodies was there. And the local constable, who's sixty if he's a day and has trouble remembering what he's doing half the time. Neither would dare contradict a baronet.”

True. Sir Richard Marlow was the highest-ranking landowner for miles. If he swore that pigs could fly, few

would counter him. "Describe the scene."

"Before they rolled the highwayman over, he'd been slumped across John."

"Odd. If the horse threw John, then knocked the other man down, they should have fallen in different directions."

"So I thought. And John's body was stiff, yet the other man's was not."

He raised his brows. "How did you discover that?"

"When they rolled John onto his side to examine the back of his head, his arms stuck up at an odd angle and could not be lowered." She demonstrated, raising her arms over her head. "His face was cold. I didn't touch the other man, but his arms flopped loosely, like the neck of a freshly killed chicken." Her voice caught.

Alex nodded. He'd seen death often enough to understand her observations. "Was the stranger lying in the sun?"

"Yes, which is why Richard dismissed my observation. But it was barely six in the morning, and the sun had broken through the fog only minutes before I arrived."

The men must have died several hours apart. "What else?"

"Several things. Blood had run onto John's face, though he lay on his back. The farm worker swore he hadn't moved him, as did the constable, so why was there blood above the wound? Then there was the horse. It was from our stable, but it's used only with the housekeeper's gig. No one rides it. Nor would John saddle a horse himself. Even if he decided to ride out in the middle of the night, he would have awakened a groom."

"Unless he was in a tearing hurry. You last saw him chasing a thief."

"If he was *that* rushed, he would never have chosen that horse. It's a plodder. And it wasn't John's nature to do anything a servant could do for him."

Alex frowned, but her observations fit the man he'd known ten years ago.

Mrs. Marlow blinked away tears. "The highwayman also seemed wrong. Despite shabby clothing, his hands were well-tended and his hair fashionably cut. His pistol reminded me of the Manton dueling pistols John owns – an ornate weapon of the sort only a gentleman can afford. It might have been stolen, of

course, but John's both remain in the gun cabinet."

"You've a good eye for detail." John had probably died shortly after leaving the house. For some reason, the culprit had risked exposure by stealing a horse to move the body. "Are you absolutely certain John wouldn't have sought his brother's help? If he thought he'd been robbed, Sir Richard was the magistrate."

"There is no question that he'd been robbed. The collection room was in shambles, and the stone was missing from the study safe. I'm amazed no one heard the thief, for he must have made quite a racket."

"All the more reason for John to hightail it to Marwood Hill."

"No." A raised hand stopped further questioning. "Richard despises John's collection. He blames his father's collection for draining the family fortune and fears that John's interest in antiquities will corrupt his sons and grandsons. He was furious when John offered for several pieces after their father died. Richard threw him out, then sold the pieces at auction. John bought them through an agent – not his usual one. When Richard found out, he banished John from the family. He's sold nothing since – at least not openly. He considers the collection a curse. If John owned it, it would still threaten the family."

"He doesn't sound quite sane."

"When it comes to antiquities, he's not."

"So John would not have been riding to Marwood Hill."

Mrs. Marlow frowned. "The only reason he might was if Richard was the thief."

"What? But you just said—"

"Richard may dislike antiquities, but he abhors Sarsos. He becomes completely irrational at any mention of the staff. If he knew that John had purchased the stone..." She shook her head. "In support of that, a stranger would have to be insane to enter a gentleman's stables, for a groom is always nearby. But Richard could explain his presence. Also, the farm worker who fetched Richard at five in the morning found him fully clothed with mud on his boots. He is not an early riser."

"Then perhaps he was not yet abed. There may have been an emergency."

"But—" She cut off her words, then tried again. "He claims he was going shooting. But nothing is in

season.”

“We will keep him in mind, but if he was the thief, how do you explain the second corpse?”

“Perhaps he was a traveler who happened along while Richard was moving the body – no one knows him. If Richard killed him, then set the scene to resemble an accident, it would explain why he was so adamant that it *was* an accident.”

“That’s too much of a coincidence. Don’t make this more difficult than it is.”

“The scene had to have been staged by someone,” she insisted, undeterred by his set-down – or his scars, which made even men back away when he scowled. “That horse is very docile. I can’t imagine it shoving a man even if he jumped out unexpectedly. And why would anyone hold a cocked pistol while moving a corpse? The only explanation is that the second man was also murdered, with the gun placed near his hand afterward. A partner fits the pattern of the other thefts. And it explains why the dead man carried no papers and had no camp nearby.”

Her logic was unusually sound for a female. “What does the stone look like?”

“Bluish gray. About the size of my fist. It seems crystalline, yet it isn’t crystal.” She frowned. “I can’t quite find the words to describe it. It doesn’t look like much, to tell the truth. I’d expected a giant jewel or a fancy carving, but it’s more like something you would pull out of a river than anything else. Yet it feels surprisingly warm, as if it’s been sitting in the sun for several hours, even when it’s been locked in a safe.”

The hairs stood up on Alex’s neck, though he knew it wasn’t magic. He’d read of a substance called sunstone that always felt warm to the touch. To the superstitious, it would seem magical and probably accounted for half the legends of sacred stones.

“So you want me to identify the thief’s partner,” he said calmly. He was amenable. Faced with a challenge involving action and puzzle-solving, he had to admit that life had become dull. Besides, he owed John a favor. Investigating his death was the only favor left.

She nodded. “Or his employer – he was more likely hired to steal. Another possible suspect is Christine’s nephew. Then there are the other collectors who sought the stone, some with almost frightening determination. Any of them could have hired a London

thief.”

“It isn’t that easy, you know,” he said chidingly.

She scowled. “Perhaps not. But I must recover the stone. John spent everything on it, and then some. Unless I can sell it to a museum, I will lose the estate.”

Alex sighed. Poor Mrs. Marlow. Death had left her penniless twice. “I thought you feared the stone falling into the wrong hands.”

“That was John’s fear. But his obsession convinced me that the stone *is* dangerous because too many men will go to absurd lengths to possess it. I’ll not be responsible for putting others at risk. But I am hoping the British Museum might buy it.”

“Unless you can prove it has magical powers, they won’t pay much. And even if they do agree to buy it, you could grow old and die before receiving a groat. Lord Elgin bargained for more than a decade before they bought the Parthenon marbles – for less than his costs. He has yet to receive the money.”

She shuddered, seeming to shrink as his words sank in. “It is early days to consider the stone’s disposal. First we have to find it.”

“It will be easy to investigate Sir Richard and this nephew, but who are the collectors?”

“I don’t know, for most hide behind agents. But John tried to keep track of the more ruthless ones. I brought his papers. Perhaps you can decipher what he knew.”

“We will peruse them in the morning.”

“Delay is dangerous,” she warned.

“Perhaps, but rushing into action without facts can be fatal. Choosing the best place to start requires a clear mind. We will go through the papers after breakfast. Come.” He helped her to her feet. Electricity flowed between them, heating his hand.

Not yet, he reminded his libido, releasing her and stepping back. Solving her problem might lead to a liaison, but rushing his fences would guarantee failure. She was exhausted, terrified, and needed sleep.

* * * *

Eden stared at her hand, shocked at the sparks that sizzled clear to her toes and stood her hair on end, reminding her of a friend’s description of the electricity machine he’d touched at Oxford. What an intriguing phenomenon. John had never—

Guilt engulfed her. Responding with excitement to the polite gesture of a stranger was ridiculous. She owed John more than she could ever repay.

Yet despite his goodness, John's death had triggered relief that never again would her nights be interrupted or her tongue bleed from biting back protests over his obsession with Sarsos. Now she was free to run Ridley as it should be run. Forever free, for never again would she put herself under a man's thumb. Not even a decent man's.

But first she must settle Ridley's mortgage and find a dowry for Olivia. The only asset that might do both was the stone. She had to find it, which meant working with Mr. Portland, despite this new danger.

She'd never met anyone who scrambled her wits so easily. His scars should have made him harsh, almost threatening. Yet he exuded so potent a masculinity that she barely noticed his face. His eyes should have been cold, like the blue ice they resembled, yet his glance ignited fire wherever it touched. And his hand burned like a live coal.

Shocked, she turned to leave, catching her toe on the carpet.

"Careful." Mr. Portland caught her as she fell, slamming her against his chest.

Warmth seared her from shoulder to knee, melting her bones until she swayed.

His arms tightened, inciting unfamiliar sensations, and promising ... friendship? She needed a friend. A confidant. Someone to rely—

"You are weary," he murmured. "We will speak again in the morning." He set her gently on her feet.

Yearning engulfed her, ordering her to turn back into his arms. Only then did she recognize the hardness that had briefly pressed against her hip.

Dear Lord, he was a rake. A highly accomplished and thus extremely dangerous rake. Who else could raise such intriguing sensations without even trying? Who else could silence her conscience with a touch?

Without a word, she fled. John should have warned her that Portland was a rogue. She should have asked more questions before coming here. If she'd at least known his age, she could have protected herself. Now she was in trouble indeed, for she needed his help too desperately to leave.

* * * *

Alex stared at his trembling hands. One unexpected touch and he wanted to throw her to the floor and ravish her. Never had he allowed lust to rule his mind. Yet setting her away from him had been the hardest act of his life.

It didn't help that she was one of the most sensuous women he'd ever met. Worse, she didn't even realize it. She'd done nothing to raise his awareness. No coy glances. No teasing innuendo. No flirtation. Yet he was harder than he could ever recall. He must use what promised to be a sleepless night to reevaluate his intentions. Anyone who could affect him this much was dangerous.

He must also consider how to tackle her problem, for she needed more help than she realized. He'd held his tongue, reluctant to add a new burden to her slender shoulders. But she was in grave danger. A fool who believed rocks had magical powers was mad enough to turn his frustration against Mrs. Marlow when he discovered that this one didn't. There was no way to convince the fellow that the destruction of the Sarsos staff had stripped power from the other objects. So Alex had to find him before he turned vicious.

Chapter Four

Alex cursed when he returned from an early morning ride to find Mrs. Marlow impatiently waiting in the library. It was her fault he'd suffered his worst night in a year.

He'd always been a light sleeper, a trait that had saved his life more than once. Dreams often woke him. Some clarified puzzles or warned of danger. Others relived disasters, reminding him that only perfection was acceptable – his hand automatically traced his most visible scars, public proof of mistakes that contributed to his family's hatred. Not until a year ago had the dreams finally stopped, affording him deep sleep for the first time in his life.

Now they were back with a vengeance. But it wasn't nightmares of past investigations that had sent him galloping over the fields. He'd been wrong about the sleepless night. Very wrong, to his regret. Mrs. Marlow had invaded his dreams. The one just before dawn had been the last straw.

Firelight turned her hair to spun gold and brightened

her mossy eyes as she released the last tie on her gown. It slithered seductively to the floor, baring long, long legs and ivory breasts tipped with rose. She lifted them in offering, stroking the puckered nipples to lure him closer... His tongue dipped into her mouth, savoring her sweetness, reveling in her ripe passion. He dragged his hands through the hair cascading in waves to her waist... Her hands closed around him, stroking until need exploded into madness, shattering his control... As he plunged into her fiery depths, she bucked, shouting in glory, clamping—

He'd awakened so hard that brushing against his nightshirt had threatened him with completion. Only a long ride through the fog had calmed his wayward body. Yet this proved the danger she posed.

Lust was a familiar sensation, easily invoked and easily sated. But there was nothing easy about this bout. No one had ever crawled into his head so quickly. Not even Helen. Granted, six months of celibacy left him needy. But it didn't explain the other emotions Mrs. Marlow raised. How could he feel protective of someone who courageously addressed her own problems and found solutions? Her abilities shone clear to anyone who cared to look. She had sought his expertise to resolve a specific problem. She did not want his help for anything else.

His head spun. He badly needed release if he was to think clearly enough to address John Marlow's death. And he wanted to find that release with the widow Marlow. At the same time, he feared that bedding her would redound on him in unpleasant ways, and not just because her recent bereavement would make seduction difficult.

He never touched innocents, and despite what rumor claimed, he avoided married women as well. A man who held his own word inviolable could hardly ask a lady to betray hers. Mrs. Marlow might technically fall into neither of those categories, but that was no help. She exuded innocence, hinting that John had used her sparingly. She was not the sort to have ignored her marriage vows, so she would have no experience with affairs. And with John's death so recent, she would not yet feel widowed. Thus seeking comfort from another man would seem disloyal. Could he push her to betray her virtue? Should he?

In his favor, she was a warm, sensuous woman.

John might have been the best of the Marlows, but he'd been aloof to the point of coldness, and his age would have made that worse. Mrs. Marlow was starving for affection, if last night's reaction was any indication. Alex could gently stir her passions until she'd put John far enough behind her to be receptive, then take her to bed until they were both sated. How long would it take? Weeks? Months?

The very thought left him panting.

Yet he felt threatened. Lust was only one of the sensations he suffered whenever he thought of her. He might be better off visiting a courtesan, then resolving John's death as quickly as possible so he need not see the disturbing Mrs. Marlow again.

His libido protested.

To leash his need, for neither option was available at the moment, he forced recollection of last night's other dream in which a sorcerer flung him into a maelstrom with one flick of his jeweled staff. As currents sucked Alex down, the sorcerer's laugh hammered his ears, punctuated by the charges he'd heard so often at home. *Lazy ... worthless ... blind to anything you don't wish to see...*

He'd awakened in a cold sweat, no longer able to deny the truth. He had botched his investigation of the Marlow case ten years ago, never once wondering if a larger problem might exist. He should have known that greed could drive weak-minded men to accept myths. He should have seen that those who lusted after power might turn to Sarsos to acquire it. Why hadn't he asked whether Sir Harold had wanted more than a few ancient oddities? If he'd considered the man's theft in light of a war that had already raged for thirteen years, he would have recognized the danger posed by the Sarsos rumors and eliminated their threat then.

Now two more men were dead, and others might follow.

His fault. The only way to rectify it was to review the original case to see how it fit into the larger problem and to make sure it posed no other danger – not that he would do so openly. Any public acknowledgement of his error would tarnish his reputation at the Home Office by making people wonder how many other threats he'd ignored. While he would never return to his post, their respect diluted the lingering fears that

maybe his father was right, maybe he *was* worthless, maybe—

He shook his head, dispelling that despised voice. Alex Portland had been the best investigator the Home Office had ever employed. Every assignment in his ten-year career had brought the villains to justice. Quickly. Efficiently. Without drawing notice. He would reconsider the earlier case, but no one need suspect that he'd missed anything.

* * * *

When Alex entered the library, Mrs. Marlow stood at the table, sorting John's papers into neat stacks.

He smiled. "You look lovely this morning."

"Hardly." But she blushed quite deliciously and licked her lips as if they'd suddenly turned dry. Before he could consider why so prosaic a comment might embarrass her, she pointed to the nearest pile. "These are the reports from John's agent about the Sarsos relics. That stack at the end might contain names of other collectors. And this is the translation of John's fragment of the scroll." She held out a single sheet.

His leg brushed her skirts as he plucked the page from her hand.

She froze, then retreated nervously.

He cursed himself for succumbing to temptation, then dropped his eyes to the page. If John's killer was a believer, knowing the details of the supposed curse might prove useful.

But the translation was too fragmented to help. Only an avid believer could twist its disjointed phrases into anything approaching sense.

Mrs. Marlow leaned over the trunk, stretching her gown across a delectable rump.

He studied her until a new wave of lust threatened to push him into dishonor, then sighed. "This translation is useless." His voice was too husky, so he cleared his throat before continuing. "So many words are missing that I could as easily twist it into an irrigation plan or a recipe for removing bloodstains."

She glanced over her shoulder. "It's the most complete translation anyone has managed."

"I don't doubt it, but inferring a curse from this is a stretch."

"But it fits events perfectly."

"Does it?" He turned her to face him fully, dropping his hands before they could change the touch to a

caress. "When did John publish this translation?"

"Nine years ago."

"And when did his agent discover the fate of the chalice and spoon?"

"Six years ago."

"So those tales might well be lies crafted to fit his interpretation of the scroll."

She stared as if he'd run mad. "Lies? They weren't stories his agent heard in London. Despite the war, Mr. Jasper went to Italy and France and spoke to those who had known the victims. No one could get away with lies of such magnitude. And since Jasper posed as an American, no one would have connected him to John."

"But these sorts of lies are easy to carry off," he insisted. "Stories that tarnish a family's reputation become closely guarded secrets locked away with other family skeletons. So even if the supposed thieves really did die after stealing Sarsos artifacts, few would know of the thefts, and fewer would suspect a connection. When Mr. Jasper arrived to ask questions, it would need only one man who claimed to be the thief's cousin or best friend to confirm the tale. Even if others scoffed, the agent would still believe him." He'd pulled off larger lies more than once, including impersonating a Frenchman while meeting three of the fellow's acquaintances.

"That's ridiculous," she snorted.

"Not if you understand human nature. I would wager that Mr. Jasper is a gentleman born. Honorable himself, he will believe anything that other men swear is true, for it will never cross his mind that they might lie. Like most members of the sheltered upper classes, he won't understand how sordid the world is or how uncivilized the lower classes can be. Lies are common. To a starving man, a lie that wins him food seems laudable. You have no idea how most of the world lives." He gripped her arm.

She slapped his hand away. "I grew up a long way from the sheltered upper class, so don't condescend to me, Mr. Portland."

"No need to be so formal. Call me Alex."

She glared. "*Mr. Portland*. I've seen poverty and despair from all sides. I've seen people condemned to the workhouse because they have nowhere else to go. I've seen widows carted off to the Marshalsea because

their husbands died in debt. And every one of them retained both dignity and honor despite it all. So don't preach that the poor are abject creatures with no concept of civility. You, with your fine estate, couldn't possibly understand the reality of poverty."

"Wrong." He squeezed her shoulder hard enough to leave bruises. "I've pursued many investigations for the Home Office, often in secret. I've lived in the stews. If I hadn't made myself one of its denizens, I would be dead."

"Pretense. You never became one of them, Mr. Portland. No one who can return to a better life will ever truly understand hopelessness. But we've drifted rather far from the point. The staff disappeared ten years ago, and that case also fits this translation."

He snapped his mouth shut. What was the matter with him? He must be losing his touch. Never had his temper shattered so easily. The last thing he wanted was to reveal details of a past few knew existed. Her ability to trip his temper proved again how dangerous she was.

She wouldn't care that he'd lived in poverty even in Mayfair, thanks to being tossed out by his father. There were times he'd lived better posing as a servant than as Alex Portland. For too many years he'd lived in a single room on a mean street, paying most of his modest income to the moneylenders lest they make an example of him.

He thrust the memories aside. Those years were done. The lenders had recouped every shilling several times over, and society had never discovered just how far he'd sunk. Three years ago he'd used the inheritance from his grandmother to buy a town house so Helen would not be shamed after their marriage—

But Helen had jilted him anyway.

He forced his mind back to business. "Did you read the papers as you sorted them?"

"I just skimmed for general content. Why?"

When his hand again reached for her, he stepped back and sat. "Was there a list of collectors?"

"Not really. The closest is this." She tapped a letter. "Mr. Jasper mentions others interested in Sarsos."

Alex frowned at the sheet. The agent claimed only three serious collectors – an elderly lord, an industrialist, and the unknown man who employed Mr. Emerson. The report was dated a year earlier.

“Did Jasper ever identify Emerson’s employer?”

She glanced at the page. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Where is Jasper now?”

“Rome – or so his secretary claims. I’d hoped to speak with him while in London, but he left last month.”

Alex swore under his breath. The agent would have been his best source of information. Now he would have to call at the shops, though too many proprietors knew him under too many names. Could he devise a new persona no one would connect with the others, or could he risk calling as himself? It was a riddle he must solve before reaching town.

Eden pursed her lips. “I tried to call on the antiquities dealer who told John about the stone, but his shop was closed that day.”

“Which one?”

“Peterson – in the Strand.”

“I’ll speak with him.” Alex turned back to Jasper’s reports. They told him nothing useful, nor did the gruesome descriptions of the thieves’ deaths – Jasper must revel in ghoulish details. Yet they seemed oddly familiar.

His neck bristled, for he’d known nothing of these cases...

A quarter hour later Mrs. Marlow laid the last scrap of paper on the table. “That’s the lot. I didn’t find anything else about that third collector.”

“With luck, Jasper’s secretary will let us check his papers, though Jasper should have told John if he learned anything. Would John have told you?”

“Probably.” She clamped her lips into a tight line as if battling emotion.

He cursed himself for reminding her of John’s death. He tried laying a comforting hand on her shoulder, but she slipped away, placing the table between them. She was on guard today, avoiding his touch.

She’ll ignore anything that seems disloyal to John, he reminded himself. This is one woman who won’t succumb to seduction, so strap down your libido and leave her alone. He made his voice matter-of-fact. “We will begin with Peterson. He’ll know all the agents and might know the third collector.”

Peterson was the most honest of London’s many dealers, his clientele including much of society. He was

also a purveyor of rumors and other information, but since his knowledge did not extend into the murkier corners of the trade, Alex would have to interview other dealers as well. He knew them all, for royalist émigrés often sold items salvaged from their former lives. Thus when France had sent fake refugees to England to seek the identities of royalists remaining in France, they, too, had sold goods to provide an income. Even spies posed as émigrés. Unmasking them meant Alex had cultivated informants in the antiquities and used-goods shops.

“We will leave for London at first light,” he said, then continued before she could comment. “What is in the third pile?”

“Papers that don’t pertain to Sarsos.” She lifted the top page. “A notice of last week’s assembly. A receipt from the blacksmith, a—”

“I don’t need an inventory. Read them again to make sure nothing pertinent is mixed with them, including notes scribbled in margins, then toss them in your trunk.”

Resuming his seat, he dispatched a message ordering that his town house be readied, then studied Jasper’s reports, determined to figure out why they seemed so familiar.

An hour passed in silence.

Damnation! He barely kept the oath from leaving his lips. His instincts had grown dull. The familiarity had nothing to do with John’s death.

If he stripped the ghoulish exaggeration, Jasper’s descriptions could as easily have applied to Sir Harold’s corpse, which Alex had examined three days after it washed ashore. All three men had drowned. The similarities reflected the effects of immersion on human flesh.

“What is your name?” he demanded, tossing the reports aside.

“What?”

“Your name. If we must work together, I need to know more about you.”

She blushed. “Eden.”

“What about it?”

“That’s my name. Eden Higgins Marlow.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Eden. And you can call me Alex.”

Her blush deepened. “No.”

“But you must. We will be traveling together. If you treat me like a stranger, you will draw notice.” Not that he cared that much, but he would wager *she* did.

“I— But—” Her face flamed bright enough to light a dungeon. “If I must—”

“You must. Say it, Eden.”

“Alex.”

“Good.” He moved behind her chair, effectively caging her between him and the table. “Describe the road where John was found. The entire scene. Every detail.” When she shuddered, he rested his hands on her shoulders, gently massaging her neck to lessen her tension while assuring himself that this had nothing to do with seduction. It was vital that she relax, for he’d learned that relaxed witnesses recalled details more easily. “I know you told me about it last night, but I need to hear it again.” He widened his massage to include her shoulders.

She repeated the tale, keeping her voice steady.

“Richard cited tracks as proof of an attack. Describe them.” He kept his touch light and his voice mesmerizing. Out to her shoulders, then back up her neck, feathering his fingers along her jaw...

She turned her head to look at him. “Why?”

“Did you see the hoofprints?”

She flinched.

He deepened his touch, pulling her head back against his chest to caress her throat, then moving down her arms. Her pulse jumped. So did his, until his heart pounded in his chest. Touching her ignited the fires of hell in his loins. He was way overdue for release. If only he could tell her how she affected him...

But that was impossible. And this was business, he reminded himself.

“Describe them, Eden,” he murmured into her ear. “If I’m to find the man responsible, I must know everything.” His fingers brushed the outside of her breast. Cursing under his breath, he returned his hands to their task.

“Right.” She drew in a shaky breath as if she was too aroused to think.

“Hoofprints,” he reminded her, reining in his imagination.

“Right.” Her breath shuddered out. “There were many of them. Too many, I thought. Other parts of the road showed few marks. But a herd of horses milling

about would have left fewer tracks.” She frowned toward the window as a new storm arrived to rattle the panes.

“Close your eyes and picture the scene.” His hands kept up their seductive stroking, bare skin against bare skin. Warmth against warmth. Arms. Throat. Jaw beneath her ear. She was incredibly soft. Incredibly smooth. Delectably fragrant. A hint of honeysuckle tickled his nose. “Where are the marks?”

“Everywhere.” Her chin stretched up, baring her throat to his touch – like a cat rubbing against a willing hand.

He tightened the curb on his desire.

“The deepest pranced next to John. Five or six steps. But not— They weren’t made by our horse!” Eyes wide with shock, she broke free and lunged for the door, apparently forgetting that Sir Richard was several counties away.

He cut off her escape, bracketing her head with his palms so she had to meet his gaze. “Why?”

“The shoes. The prancing horse was missing a shoe. Right front hoof. Ours wasn’t.”

“Good girl.” He dropped a light kiss on her forehead. “You are the most observant witness I’ve ever interviewed. Is there anything else?”

“N-no.”

“Are you sure? Marks? Clothing? Comments?”

“Co— That’s odd.” Her eyes lost their focus.

“What?” He barely breathed the question.

“Richard. He was staring at John when I arrived. And muttering, *I warned him dabbling in evil would lead to a bad end.*” Her eyes speared his, suddenly sharp.

“No wonder you suspect him.” His arms tried to slide around her, so he stepped back out of reach.

“There was so much about that day that was suspicious,” she agreed.

“His words don’t prove guilt, Eden. Did you ask John if he’d identified the third collector?”

She moved to the fireplace, putting half the room between them. “We last discussed it the day Jasper delivered the stone. He claimed not, though his voice sounded evasive. I’ve since wondered if he suspected a friend, or someone closer.”

“Are we back to Sir Richard?” He drifted toward her.

“No. If he’d suspected Richard, he would have said

so – it would be so contrary to everything we knew. Richard might steal the stone to protect the family, but he would never deliberately seek it out.”

“Then who?”

“Christine’s nephew, Jeremy Highbottom. I mentioned him last night. His mother was a Marlow cousin, by the way, so he’s related twice.”

“I don’t recall him. Was he one of the cousins who argued so fiercely ten years ago?”

“No. He’s barely twenty-three so was still in school when Christine died. He’d been orphaned young and raised by an uncle, but he was close to Christine, so her death was a blow. He refused to believe she’d willingly stolen anything. For a time he studied everything he could find on Sarsos, hoping to prove that she’d been under a spell and had not acted on her own volition.”

“It is dangerous to think that spells can make someone steal.”

“I agree, but John liked the notion and helped him investigate it. Perhaps it soothed his pride to think she couldn’t help herself.”

“So you think Jeremy might be the third collector?”

“Perhaps. He visits several times a year to discuss antiquities with John. And he was of age by the time we inquired about collectors. On the other hand, his finances are strained, so I doubt he could afford an agent, let alone relics. That is an excellent motive for theft, though.”

“Do others know of his interest?”

“Richard. He blames John for corrupting Jeremy – he has long accused John of trying to corrupt his sons. The youngest isn’t properly disdainful of antiquities and was once caught in the attic where Richard stores the collection.”

Alex nodded.

“I think Jeremy’s interest started as a link to Christine, but now he knows almost as much about the subject as John does. With John gone, Richard is selling his father’s collection. He hired Jeremy to prepare it for auction.”

Eden’s fears suddenly became clear. Her reasoning hadn’t made sense before. Sir Richard would hardly steal a stone he believed was evil, for that would bring the evil closer to his family. “You think Sir Richard murdered John so he could sell the collection, don’t

you?”

She paled, but nodded. “It is his most likely motive. He would be afraid to possess the stone for even a brief time. But he’s desperate for money—” She turned away as her voice broke.

This time he pulled her hard against him, patting her as she cried. It was a wonder she hadn’t collapsed sooner.

Her arms wrapped around his waist. He shifted her away from his erection and kept his touch comforting even as his base nature reveled in the touch. Holding her awakened too many of his senses, though that growing protectiveness helped him keep lust in check.

This new twist made Sir Richard a viable suspect. He’d not believed that so pompous a man would believe the Sarsos myth – or even toy with believing it. But greed...

If Sir Richard was guilty, he was using the stone to deflect attention to a motive that would never apply to him. That seemed a bit complex for the man’s stodgy thinking, but possible.

“Forgive me,” she said at last, drawing back.

“Of course.” He handed her a handkerchief, then turned away while she blew her nose. “Sir Richard is a baronet, so I will need hard evidence before I can accuse him. What can you offer?”

She let out a shaky breath, then clasped her hands and continued. “When Jeremy arrived at Marwood only two days after John’s death, I feared that Richard had staged the theft to cover murder. He must sell the collection, for his pockets are too tight. I didn’t realize how serious it was until recently. Last year’s harvest didn’t bring enough to finance his daughter’s come-out. His only remaining asset is the collection, yet he has long refused to sell anything that John might buy.”

“Is that aversion strong enough to condone murder?”

“Perhaps. Their rift began long ago and was well established before Richard began looking askance at his father’s collection. Killing John would explain why he insisted the incident was an accident. And it would explain his lies.”

He paced to the window and back. “Let me get this straight. You think Sir Richard might have killed John so he could sell the collection, covering his tracks with a staged theft. Or Jeremy might have been seduced by

the myth, stealing the stone to use it. Or other collectors might want the stone badly enough to steal it.”

“And Jeremy might be one of those collectors. Perhaps his financial woes arose from searching for Sarsos objects. Christine’s family was not impoverished. Jeremy should have come into a decent income two years ago.”

“Do you have evidence to support any of this?”

“Of course not! If I had evidence, I would be talking to a magistrate rather than you.” Eden glared at him, wishing he was the elderly man she’d expected. His touch was dangerously seductive, and tears made her too susceptible to sympathy. “We should leave immediately.” She strode toward the door.

He again cut off her escape. “We will leave in the morning, Eden. It is still raining. Give the weather a chance to clear.”

“Waiting is dangerous. What if the thief tries to use the stone? He could wreak all sort of havoc.”

“How? It is a rock with no more power than a blob of sealing wax or that bottle of brandy on my desk. If the thief meant to use it, he’s had eleven days to discover that it doesn’t work. His immediate concern must be to avoid arrest for murder. That should keep him occupied for now.”

She sighed, barely resisting the temptation to sag against him. “This rain has lasted eleven days and shows no sign of ceasing. Time is truly important.” She was ridiculously worried about Olivia.

“Perhaps, but I have business I must settle before leaving Cliffside. And you need rest. The journey will be difficult enough without exhausting ourselves.”

Put like that, she had no choice. “Very well.”

He dropped another light kiss on her forehead and stepped aside, but remained so close that she could feel the heat radiating from his body and flaring in his eyes. She stared, unable to move as every nerve in her body vibrated wildly. What kind of spell had he conjured? She wanted to tear off his clothes and devour him. Now.

Her hand started to rise.

Shaken, she fled the library. If she had any sense, she would remain at Cliffside when he left for town. How was she to work with him when a simple touch could draw more response than John’s most ardent

lovemaking? It was immoral – and disloyal. She'd been a widow less than a fortnight.

He's a rake, she reminded herself. *Rakes thrive on seduction*. To be this good at it, he must have years of practice. How old was he? Thirty? Thirty-five? In twenty years, he could have conquered hundreds.

Her face burned.

He was the first rake she'd met, so she'd not seriously considered them before. Had not even thought about what they did to become rakes. Now she knew. They weren't gentlemen, yet they ignored rules in ways that made it difficult to object. She had never realized how a rake's touch might affect her. A gentle caress. A comforting hug. Even a steady gaze that took in every detail of her appearance, seeing clear to her soul. He was so different from John...

Stop this! she berated herself. Rakes had one goal. Seduction. She couldn't allow it. Mourning aside, she would be no man's mistress. Nor would she again don the shackles of a wife. Starvation was preferable to repeating that particular folly.

Not that starvation would be necessary. She was strong. Even if she lost Ridley, she would survive.

But no matter how much she wanted to deny it, her skin still tingled. Warmth pooled in her womb. Her hand trembled as she opened the door to her room.

* * * *

Alex stared at the library door. Why did he keep touching Eden when he'd already decided she was too dangerous to pursue? He could find a dozen willing wenches when he reached town. Willing and highly skilled.

But would they stir your senses?

Shaking his head, he returned to the table and stared at Jasper's reports. But he saw only mossy green eyes turning gold with temper. She was likely a termagant when roused. Since he'd never liked argumentative women, he found it odd that her spirit attracted him.

Or perhaps not odd. Feistiness would cut up his peace if he had to live with it, but he never lived with his liaisons. Her blazing passion would turn explosive in bed, heightening pleasure for both of them. It was that promise that hardened him whenever he looked at her. Eden would never put on a polished performance that lacked soul. If she came to him, the results would

be well worth the wait.

But it had to be her idea. Seducing John's wife when John was barely cold was not the way to repay his debt. Honor cringed at the very idea.

Adjusting his pantaloons to ease his discomfort, he pulled out Debrett's *Peerage* and Debrett's *Baronetage* and began tracing the men Jasper had mentioned. Who were they? His grandmother would have known with hardly a moment's thought.

Damn but he missed her.

Chapter Five

The gentleman rode away from the village, cursing vehemently enough to startle his horse. Three days he'd spent slogging through mud, risking lung fever or worse. And for what? The bitch had slipped through his fingers. Again. She was long past being a mere annoyance. Yet admitting she'd become an enemy accorded her too much power.

He'd traced her to London, expecting to deal with her there. But she'd left town before he'd caught more than a glimpse of her. He'd followed, of course, but Fate had stepped in as she'd done so often in recent weeks.

"It's but another test," he reminded himself, kicking his weary mount to a trot. "Fate demands proof that you are worthy of such power."

A slow, steady inhalation settled his nerves. Fate would reward him in the end, for he was unquestionably worthy. This latest quest would leave no doubt. He would have caught up with her two days ago if mud and cold hadn't taken their toll on his horse. Not only had the beast cast a shoe, but the nearest smith had been too busy to attend him until the next morning. So he'd been stranded. He could hardly hire another horse without revealing his identity.

Thus he'd fallen behind, for Mrs. Marlow had changed teams often, pushing her carriage to reckless speeds and refusing to stop even when the roads turned to quagmires.

Did she sense he was following?

He shook his head. Impossible. He'd done nothing to draw notice.

Yet not only hadn't he caught up, he'd no idea of her

final destination and wouldn't learn it now. The ostler at the last coaching inn had recognized her miniature. She'd passed early that very morning, headed back for London, now accompanied by a second coach and a gentleman on horseback. What the devil was she up to?

"It doesn't matter," he reminded himself. They would conclude their business, then she would die. She knew too much about Sarsos. Once she was gone, he could regain the birthright stolen from his grandfather, then address his real task – restoring the throne to its rightful occupant. He was descended father to son in direct line from Edward IV. Scoundrels may have sworn that Edward's sons were illegitimate, but *he* knew otherwise. And he knew that the younger of those sons had survived the attack in the Tower, his battered body smuggled out and nursed back to health.

Again he cursed the hen-hearted milksops who had turned deaf ears on his ancestor's pleas for support, preferring the whey-faced Henry VII to their real king. Cowards! Poltroons!

The heavens again opened, drawing new curses.

His ancestors had been just as cowardly. Generation after generation had hidden their breeding, too weak-willed to demand their rights. They'd debased themselves, satisfied to accept insipid favors tossed their way by various monarchs. Even when the throne passed to the mad Hanoverians, they had remained silent.

But he would change that. The time had come to claim his place. Those who reviled the Regent – and they were legion – would rejoice that a real Englishman could claim the throne, an Englishman with a cool head and no taint of insanity to stain the future.

He patted the valise strapped to his saddle. With the Sarsos power on his side, all would rally to his cause. Once he dealt with Mrs. Marlow...

* * * *

Alex tied his horse to the back of the carriage, then ducked inside as the heavens opened. He'd begun the day on horseback, loath to trust his libido in such close quarters. Two years of retirement had eroded his self-control more than he'd thought possible. Until he could restore it, he must keep his distance from Eden.

Time had marred his judgment, too, raising questions about the intensity of his reaction. Was she truly as enticing as he thought? He'd met many women more beautiful, more accomplished, better versed in manners. Most of them had been better dressed. So why did Eden stir his senses every time he looked at her?

He'd also needed an hour alone to steady his nerves. It wasn't another night of lascivious dreams that bothered him – he'd been hard since Eden had turned up on his doorstep, so *those* dreams were now expected. His worst problem arose from a new nightmare.

Sir Harold's putrid corpse had swooped from the sky, fingers extended like talons. Again and again it had attacked, poking and prodding. Not until one rotting hand slipped past Alex's defenses to slap his face had he finally awakened, shaking and sick. A nasty interval with a basin had ensued, for the wrists had borne rope marks. How could he have been so blind?

At twenty-three, Alex had not recognized the significance of those bruises. Sir Harold's ship had been caught in a storm and sunk, his body washing ashore a week later, bloated, partially rotted, and bearing clear evidence of marine scavengers. It had been Alex's first sight of violent death. Lunch hadn't survived the experience.

But shock was no excuse for missing such obvious evidence. Sir Harold had been bound before his death, which made it unlikely that his death had been an accident.

The realization had kept Alex up the rest of the night. He had overlooked a crucial clue and closed an investigation that should have remained open. His arrogance had produced a superficial investigation at best.

Remembering the young Alex made him wince. He'd been intolerable, so sure he was infallible, so proud of his instincts that he'd not asked even basic questions – like why Sir Harold had been in Leicestershire at all. Higgins's explanation was patent nonsense. Yes, there was a spa nearby, but it catered solely to locals, remaining unknown elsewhere. If a sickly Sir Harold had needed to take the waters, he would have gone to Harrogate or Bath and would have lacked the time

and energy to seduce Christine.

Higgins had been smart enough to know that, so he must have been more deeply involved than Alex had thought. The man had skillfully diverted attention from himself by planting blame on Sir Harold, and Alex had blithely accepted every word. The man was a vicar, for God's sake! A gentleman. A man of honor...

Now he kicked himself roundly, for he'd fallen into the same trap as too many others. Birth did not guarantee honor. Nor did occupation. He'd unmasked traitors in trusted government positions. He'd watched lords lie and cheat and worse. Even at twenty-three, he should have known that no one was above suspicion.

Higgins's demeanor had changed markedly when the messenger reported that Sir Harold's body had been recovered. Had he known of those tell-tale rope burns? Why else would he shoot himself within hours?

Alex stared out the window as the carriage jolted into motion. He could force his face into an amiable expression, but his thoughts refused to settle.

If Higgins had killed Sir Harold, then it was *he* who had planned the theft. Using his cousin fit the pattern of the earlier thefts, as did Sir Harold's death by drowning. The temptation to acquire the staff would have been overwhelming. He'd had two dowerless daughters to settle. Consigning an unconscious Sir Harold to the sea should have been the end of the story.

But the body had washed ashore bearing clear marks of murder. Any competent investigator—

Alex cursed. How could he have been so stupid, so—

A bump tossed Eden against his thigh, interrupting his recriminations. "Are you all right, Mr. Portland?" she asked.

"Of course." He shifted to avoid contact even as heat exploded through his body.

"You're wet." She reached for a towel. "And you seem upset."

"I wouldn't say upset. But this storm does remind me of ten years ago. It rained during that investigation, too."

"I'd forgot." Her face twisted as if in pain. "The storm delayed my journey home for a full week. If only I'd returned on time!"

"No!" He pulled her around to face him. "It would

have made no difference, Eden. Once he chose to end it, nothing would have stopped him. At best he would have slipped away and ended it outside.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” At least he hoped he was. He’d made so many mistakes on that earlier case it was hard to be sure. And maybe he was overreacting to the nightmare. He wasn’t an imbecile, after all. Had the marks been on Sir Harold’s wrists in truth, or only in his dream? He might well have been right the first time, for Higgins had not had the staff in his possession when he died. Eden would have found it.

But this made reviewing the case more urgent than ever. His instincts – if he could trust them – insisted that it was connected to the current problem. Which meant he’d missed *something* ten years ago.

“Tell me about your father,” he suggested, tucking Eden against his side. She spoke more easily when he helped her relax – or so he told himself. And touching her might satisfy him enough that he could control his baser needs.

“Papa?”

“I only met him once, but he seemed an intelligent man.”

“Very.” She sighed wistfully. “He was a scholar – classics for the most part. I hardly ever saw him without his nose in a book or a quill in his hand.”

“What did your mother think of that?”

“It’s hard to recall – she died when I was ten. But she did grumble from time to time about duties ignored.” She shook her head and settled more fully against him.

He stroked her arm. “Duties?”

“Vicar’s duties – I’m afraid he *did* ignore them. I did what I could after Mother died. It was a poor parish but undeserving of neglect.”

He smiled. “So you are accustomed to caring for others.” She could care for him anytime, in any way.

His tone must have revealed his thoughts – it wasn’t like him to slip – for she suddenly recalled herself, pulled away from him, and frowned. “I did not give you leave to touch me.”

“Perhaps not, but you were relaxed and we were both warmer. I meant no harm. It will be a long day, for I want to reach London tomorrow. The only way to manage that is to spend the night at Hungerford. But

that is many miles away. So you might as well make yourself comfortable.”

* * * *

Eden couldn't help but cringe at his declaration. She'd made the reverse journey in two days, so she knew just how long it was. And today the roads were even muddier.

Yet she feared that accepting his suggestion was the first slippery step toward ruin. He'd done nothing to which she could honestly object, but she could feel his desire all too clearly. It called loudly to her own.

His insistence that he meant her no harm was ridiculous – he harmed her merely by sharing the carriage, for it raised feelings she should not entertain. And hadn't he told her only yesterday that the world was full of lies and those who told them? Why should she believe anything he said?

She almost suggested that she join Carver and Tweed in the baggage coach, but doing so would admit that she felt threatened. Pride wouldn't allow it. Yet could she survive two days in his company without succumbing to his charms?

She was shocked to admit she didn't know.

The carriage had seemed enormous at dawn, its leather seats softly luxurious, its door and windows so tight-fitting that it was free of drafts. The warm bricks made the interior toasty enough that she'd set aside the carriage rug by the time they'd passed the gates. And the springs! She'd been able to read with no sign of a headache.

Then renewed rain had forced Alex inside, making reading impossible. He dominated the space, shrinking it until she could scarcely breathe. It was impossible to ignore him. He was big and masculine, leaving her acutely aware of him even when she closed her eyes. He triggered needs she'd never before felt, needs beyond comfort and safety. Something about him commanded her to touch, to explore, to discover the differences between John and a man in his prime. Finding herself *again* in his arms didn't help.

Eden dug her nails into her palm while she fought for control, cursing her naïve idiocy. She had walked blindly into a situation that could ruin her. It had never occurred to her that seeking help might threaten her reputation. Alex—

Mr. Portland, she savagely corrected herself.

Mr. Portland was supposed to be old – older even than John. He was supposed to be avuncular at best, coldly disapproving at worst. He was *not* supposed to have the body of a god or the allure of a Selkie. He was *not* supposed to be a rake whose glance could call forth feelings she'd not known existed, whose touch weakened her knees, whose kiss—

The carriage swerved, tossing him against her and crushing her into the corner.

“Bad road,” he murmured, bracing his feet against the opposite seat as he pulled her closer. “Are you all right?”

“Of course.” Her voice sounded husky. The carriage felt even smaller. His arm burned through cloak and gown to singe her skin, spiraling bubbles toward her womb and quickening her breath until she panted as if she'd run a mile or more. Her breasts tightened, aching for a bolder touch.

Stop this, she ordered herself. You betray John with every thought.

She couldn't even blame Mr. Portland, for he made no advances, merely holding her steady so the rough road didn't knock her about. It was *she* who was misbehaving by letting his masculinity affect her.

Mr. Portland was a rake, a Satyr in the most debauched sense of the word. Carver had confirmed her worst fears – the girl had taken a shine to Tweed, and vice versa, so she'd learned much about Mr. Portland during their two nights at Cliffside.

His reputation for public licentiousness raised brows in polite society even among those who indulged in clandestine arrangements of their own. He'd fought duels over courtesans, seduced a duchess under the duke's nose, and continued sowing very public wild oats long past the age when most men learned discretion. His misdeeds had banished him from society more than once. He also gamed deeply, winning and losing fortunes without turning a hair. The Cliffside staff knew all the tales, for his grandmother had often chortled over his exploits – apparently she was the only relative who approved of him. If Eden had any sense, she would thank him for his escort to London, then turn her problem over to the Home Office and return to Ridley.

Another swerve tossed her into his lap, his arms brushing her bosom as he caught her. The stab of

pleasure dropped her jaw.

“Sir!” she gasped, pushing free.

“Beg pardon,” he murmured, straight-faced, though his tone sounded close to laughter.

“Perhaps if you sat in your own corner—” She snapped her mouth shut when her voice quivered – and not from fury. The man could seduce a statue. And he knew it, the cad. His eyes sparkled as they took in her flushed face.

He grinned, but slid over a full inch. Yet his arm remained along the back of the seat. She could swear his fingers were stroking her hair. Or did she just want them to?

Olivia. Think about Olivia.

Olivia was an innocent who needed an unsullied guardian if she hoped to wed. Embracing temptation would ruin Eden’s reputation and badly tarnish Olivia’s. It would be hard enough to find a suitor for a dowerless girl – a night of reflecting on Alex’s words had convinced her that she could not realize enough from selling the stone to cover both the mortgage and a dowry. So even a tiny blemish on her reputation would make marriage impossible. Unless...

She frowned.

Carver had discovered more than Alex’s reputation. “He needs a wife,” she’d added while Eden fought to stifle speculation on his talents as a rake – imagining him in bed made her feverish. “Thought he had one, he did, but the girl eloped two years ago. Now he’s trying again.” Carver had added his requirements – quiet, conformable, competent, undemanding. Someone who was accustomed to country life and wouldn’t disturb his peace.

Olivia would be perfect. The girl had spent ten years making herself into just such a paragon. They’d both known that John had wed Eden from pity, so they’d made sure he never regretted taking them in. He’d worked hard to turn them into ladies, and had succeeded with Olivia. Eden had believed he’d succeeded with her, too, but her reaction to Mr. Portland raised doubts.

She must strive harder.

Matching Mr. Portland with Olivia would solve her most pressing problem. Olivia had to wed. Eden could survive in a cottage if she lost Ridley Park, but Olivia could not. She lacked skills like cooking, cleaning, and

tending a kitchen garden, all of which Eden had learned at an early age. Alex could give Olivia the life she'd been raised to expect. She was sweet enough that he was bound to fall in love with her. To avoid hurting her, he might even abandon rak—

She instantly banished the thought, for his raking might make Olivia's life easier. Heaven knew Eden would have been content had John kept a mistress.

When they halted for food and new horses, she waited until the serving girl left their private parlor, then started her campaign to interest him in Olivia. "How long will we be in London?"

"I've no idea." He sampled his ale. "Peterson's shop might still be closed, and there are other dealers to see. They may direct me to still others. Or they may suggest collectors not on our list, all of whom must be interviewed. The interviews will provide conflicting information that we must evaluate. Sometimes that can take months. And new facts can change the focus of an investigation, pushing it in an entirely new direction. I might find that a dealer bought the stone this morning and can name its seller. Or I might spend a week tracking down men, only to learn nothing of import."

"I see." She bit her lip.

"Why does it matter? Other than impatience because the thief might walk free. Even if we recover the stone, you can't still expect the British Museum to buy it."

"No, but I left my sister at Ridley, expecting to return within the week. She can manage the household quite well, but the steward needs constant oversight – he is not very decisive, so if problems arise, he will dither rather than act."

"This rain will likely cause problems," he agreed, shaking his head. "But your sister would have no authority in any case. Write to him if you are concerned."

"Very well, but I do fret about Olivia being alone. It isn't proper, for one thing. She's only eighteen, and with me gone, she has no chaperon."

"Ah." He patted her hand, sending new tingles up her arm. She'd removed her gloves to eat, so his fingers burned her skin, recalling every touch since dawn.

She donned an earnest expression. "It's not that she

might misbehave. But you must know that even the perception of impropriety can cause trouble. She is of an age to wed. It will be hard enough to find a match now that her dowry is gone. Tarnishing her reputation will make it worse.”

“True. Rumors can do great damage.” He reached for the bread. “Try not to fret, Eden. Country manners are less rigid than London’s, and we will leave for Ridley as soon as possible. In the meantime, enjoy yourself. London offers experiences you will not have found in the country.” His eyes twinkled.

She cursed the sparks he could raise so easily. Despite that he was behaving like a concerned friend rather than a potential lover, she was convinced he wished to bed her. She could not afford to be interested.

Yet she couldn’t help but notice his long, tapered fingers as he tore a crust from the bread. They were so different from John’s short, blunt fingers or the broad, pasty ones Richard sported. These were elegant. She could almost feel them stroking...

He noted her gaze. “Have some bread. You need to keep up your strength.” He pushed the loaf closer.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Of course you are.” His gaze wandered leisurely over every inch of her.

“I wish Olivia were here,” she said to distract herself. “She adores mutton stew. Her tastes have always been rather simple. Country born and bred, and loves it.”

“Do you really want to drag an impressionable girl all over England?” he murmured, raising his brows.

Damn him! she cursed as flames danced up her arm. How could he divert her thoughts with so little effort? And damn her for her own weakness. Her gaze landed on his broad shoulders, raising speculation on what they looked like without his shirt and coat. It was a shocking thought, for she’d never seen even John completely unclothed. Always he’d worn a nightshirt—

Jerking her eyes back to her bowl, she made sure that every comment for the rest of the meal mentioned Olivia – her beauty, her sweetness, and the competence that had allowed Eden to leave for a time. She even told him how Olivia had stayed out of John’s way lest she disturb him.

He countered with comments on the weather, their prospects for reaching Hungerford before nightfall, and

his hope that the next team of hired horses would be better than the last. Though his words were prosaic, Eden remained off balance, for her treacherous imagination painted pictures that were damnably enticing. How could she suddenly find the act of biting into an apple erotic?

It was the oddity of the situation, she insisted. She had never actually watched a man eat before. John had held no visual interest, and her attention at dinner parties had always focused on maintaining perfect propriety. Now her eyes kept straying to Portland's mouth. His smiles displayed even white teeth framed by sensuous lips that looked surprisingly smooth. What would they feel like when pressed against hers? Their mobility was astonishing, turning the most innocuous activities into a sensual display. They curled around chunks of mutton as if kissing them before drawing them inside for consumption.

Her heart accelerated. And when he lifted his tankard...

Her gaze froze on his throat, watching the muscles work smoothly as swallow after swallow slid sensuously down to disappear behind his cravat. If only she could tear the fabric away so she could see...

Stop this nonsense, she admonished herself.

Yet she inhaled sharply when he lowered the empty tankard and smiled. And when he licked a drop of foam from his upper lip, her tongue swished across her own in response. How would he taste?

"Are you finished?" he asked. "We've a long journey ahead of us."

She nodded, unable to speak without betraying her thoughts. The last thing a rake needed was encouragement. Reminding herself yet again that she was in mourning for a man to whom she owed everything, she headed for the door.

They had barely regained the road before Alex closed his eyes and apparently fell asleep. She didn't trust that he was actually asleep, but used the time to rebuild her defenses and plan her campaign to interest him in Olivia. Such a campaign would keep her mind focused – but she must do better than she had at lunch.

Recalling how easily her mind had drifted from her purpose, she amended the assertion. A well-planned and well-rehearsed campaign would keep her mind

focused.

Alex was perfect for her sister. Strong. Attractive. Protective. His proclivities might make a stickler pause, but from comments John had made about his character, she doubted Alex would embarrass his wife by parading his mistresses in public. In this, as in other ways, he was every inch a gentleman. Yet he was far enough down the social scale to accept Olivia as an equal.

Social status was important, she admitted. Her father had been a vicar, his only connection to society a distant cousinship to Sir Harold. Hardly a connection she could point to with pride. Wedding John had been a huge step up for her, and not one the other Marlows accepted. Richard frankly despised her, and for more than John's remarriage so soon after Christine's death. Most of the family followed his lead, so they'd been openly relieved when years passed with no heir. She did not want Olivia to suffer the same antagonism.

But a vicar's daughter was closer to an investigator for the Home Office than to the second son of a baronet. It was clear that Alex had money and was well-regarded by the government, but he was at best lower gentry. So Olivia would never suffer disparaging glances and snide remarks from a family that considered her beneath its touch. And she'd mastered the demeanor and duties of a lady better than Eden ever would.

John had never known how much she'd endured – his family made sure that he didn't overhear their attacks. Richard was the worst, impugning her honor, suspecting her motives, keeping a firm distance between her and the rest of the family lest her inferior breeding corrupt them. His sisters backed him absolutely. Each had married well above her station – one to a duke – and they despised any reminder of their lower birth. Only Jeremy tried to bridge the gap. But he coveted John's collection, so she had to question his motives.

Two years ago, after John had ceased welcoming callers so he could pore over Jasper's reports on negotiations for the stone, Jeremy had cajoled Olivia into sneaking him into the collection room on at least two occasions – which meant he'd communicated with her in some way Eden still didn't know. Had he hoped

to seduce her into stealing the stone as Sir Harold had seduced Christine? He'd known that tale well enough.

So Olivia needed a strong husband to protect her.

As the miles passed, Eden sank deeper into thought and finally into sleep. She didn't notice when Alex again cradled her against him.

Darkness descended as Alex stared out the carriage window, wishing the rain would cease so he could ride. The day had been a constant battle between rampaging need and honor. Honor allowed him to bed willing widows, but honor also demanded respect for the recently bereaved. And he owed Eden more than mere respect. His clumsy investigation had orphaned her ten years ago.

But need had its own demands, and he'd lost some of his discipline over the last two years. It didn't help that she seemed even more needy than he. Her body tightened at even mild innuendo. When he'd brushed her bosom as he'd helped her into her cloak, she'd nearly convulsed from his touch. He'd never known a more responsive woman. Whether it arose from yearning for the warmth she'd now lost or from need that had never been properly satisfied, he didn't know. But the passion he could raise so easily made his position far more difficult. Her awareness at lunch had nearly driven him mad with desire. Six months of celibacy was far too long. If he didn't find release soon...

He would bed her in an instant if she asked, but he couldn't push – he repeated that decision several times so his body would accept it. She would never ask, of course. Every time a lascivious thought crossed her mind, she immediately fussed over estate problems or her sister. He understood her tactics. To avoid betraying John, she was clinging to worry.

Maybe he should send her home so he could concentrate on this investigation. He could find an experienced courtesan to relieve him.

His groin stirred in protest.

I know! I know! Her combination of passion and innocence – her shock at her response made her relative innocence clear – promised something different from the usual fare. Not that he would experience it, he reminded himself. Besides, he needed her help with the investigation. Her powers of observation were

acute, so her questions might focus his thoughts, preventing him from overlooking vital clues. Granted, she distracted him all too easily, but he could keep his mind clear if he tried.

Concentration would be easier once he resolved his physical discomfort, of course. And that would restore his discipline and judgment, too. It was bad enough that he'd overlooked his own naïveté ten years ago. He couldn't afford to enter a new investigation with his instincts dulled.

The only instinct still sharp was lust.

Damn, but he wished the rain would stop. The roads were so soggy that reaching Hungerford tonight was problematic. If they stopped sooner, it would be impossible to reach London tomorrow. Could he remain cooped up in the carriage for three days without attacking her? Every touch increased his need.

As if to torment him, she shifted in sleep, burrowing deeper into his shoulder. Her hand slid into his lap, bumping the erection that had plagued him since she'd arrived frozen and bedraggled on his doorstep. He nearly groaned.

Before he could shift her to a less dangerous position, her hand closed, kneading until he was blind and shaking. Heat blazed through his body. Excitement nearly convulsed him. He had to stop her before she woke, but it felt so good. Surely another minute couldn't hurt...

She changed to long strokes, her nails scoring his length, driving him mad enough to arch against her. He had to move, had to escape her torture, had to—

Without warning, his control shattered, spilling his seed in his breeches for the first time since his schooldays.

Shame burned his cheeks when he realized that Eden remained sound asleep. Had she been dreaming of John?

He couldn't tell her what had happened, nor could he let her see the evidence, for she would conclude he'd taken advantage of her. She would never believe that she'd caught him by surprise, driving him beyond thought.

Shifting her into a more dignified position, he arranged his cloak to cover his wetness and tried to sleep. Surely this would resolve his immediate

problem.

* * * *

Eden breathed a sigh of relief when Alex obtained two rooms at Hungerford. Granted, they were connecting rooms, but Carver was with her, so she would be safe. She needed time alone.

Falling asleep against Alex had been a huge mistake, for it had produced the most lascivious dreams of her life. Her cheeks flamed even thinking about them, for unprecedented curiosity had driven her dream image to touch him, exploring him as she had never done with John. Her imagination had exaggerated his proportions beyond all reason – which itself warned that she was in grave danger. Thank God he wasn't a mind reader or she could never face him again.

She forced her thoughts back to Olivia, determined to keep them there for the duration of their late supper. It had been nearly midnight when they'd arrived at the Bear. Any other time, she would have pled fatigue and skipped dinner, but she'd slept away the afternoon. He would brand her a coward if she lied.

Bracing herself for another hour of fighting lascivious thoughts, she headed downstairs to the parlor.

But Alex distracted her on his own, remaining the perfect gentleman even after the serving girl left. No hint of flirtation softened voice or features, and that blatant masculinity seemed banked tonight.

"Tell me more about John," he began. "Did he share all his research with you, or only the high points?"

"All. He enjoyed discussing his theories. Even after he began teaching Jeremy about antiquities, he used me to clarify his ideas."

"So he kept no secrets?"

"I don't know." She didn't want to talk about John, but something in Alex's eyes compelled her to continue. "I didn't like his obsession with Sarsos, especially his determination to find the stone. And I made my skepticism of sorcery clear. I've often feared there was an element of proving-me-wrong in his quest. Would he be alive today if I'd kept my doubts quiet?"

"Don't." He unexpectedly turned serious. "You cannot change the past, Eden, so it does no good to

mire yourself in *what ifs*. That way lies madness.”

“You sound as if you know.”

“I do.”

He said no more, and when she tried to pursue it, he firmly changed the subject, then bade her good night. She could only conclude that he remained mired in some regret he refused to face. Something connected with his broken betrothal perhaps. Would that affect Olivia?

* * * *

Alex spent a sleepless night staring at the inn’s cracked ceiling. He should have expected someone of Eden’s intelligence to turn his platitudes back on him. Before he’d realized his danger, her innocent comment had revived the ghosts of investigations he would rather forget.

Yes, he had regrets. And yes, he knew that dwelling on them did no good. But they refused to go away.

Masquerading as a French émigré or a French spy had placed him in constant danger of exposure. Twice he’d faced a kill-or-be-killed fight when an enemy tumbled to his duplicity. Twice he’d survived. But the questions never died. What had he done to trigger suspicion? How could he prevent a recurrence? Was he in truth the inept failure his father had so long declared?

The charges again echoed in his mind. *Lazy ... incompetent ... insult to your Portland heritage...*

He’d heard all that and more from the time he was a boy. Deep down he nearly believed it. If he’d been more competent, more vigilant, more ... *something* ... he would not now be laced with scars. How could a man with his flaws solve John’s murder and discover what had really happened ten years ago? Twice he’d been slow to assemble the facts, allowing traitors to continue selling information for weeks after they should have faced justice. Now he faced an even worse fiasco. Could he keep his weaknesses secret, especially from the sharp-eyed Eden?

He ought to send her away before she recognized his faults, but he couldn’t. Temptation continued urging him to seduce her. She was widowed. She harbored as much passion as he. Bringing that passion to the boil would blind her to everything beyond her own needs. And satisfying those needs...

Don’t do it! his conscience countered. *It is*

dishonorable. And what if the passion she so easily incites blinds you to all beyond your own needs?

Lust warred with his ghosts, keeping him on edge. That unexpected climax had done little to relieve months of pent-up need. If anything, it made it worse. Sleep was impossible.

At four, he finally gave up and called for his carriage. The sooner they reached London, the sooner he could immerse himself in work, driving lust back into hiding. Work had always come first.

“Just as well we’re leaving early,” said his coachman when Alex went down to check that all was ready. “Odd goings-on tonight.”

“Odd how?” Masters had been with him for years and had a good nose for trouble.

“Ostler caught a vagrant poking through the guest carriages an hour ago. Drove him off, but I don’t feel easy ’bout it.”

“Maybe he sought a dry place to sleep.”

“Maybe. But I’d bet this year’s wages he was looking for something more than shelter. Had a horse tethered down by the stream, so he’s not destitute.”

“No vagrant then.” Alex frowned. Former soldiers infested the countryside, turning to theft when they couldn’t find work. But what would one expect to find in an empty carriage? And why risk thievery at the Bear? Everyone knew it kept grooms on duty every night. It was one of the larger coaching inns on the Bath Road.

Yet he couldn’t believe his old enemies could have found him this quickly. Aside from the unlikelihood of stumbling across his trail two years after he’d left London, none of them knew the name he was using for this journey. Adopting false names was an old habit and another reason he’d demanded that Eden address him by his given name.

He couldn’t ignore Masters’s instincts, though. If he *had* attracted notice, slipping away before dawn should evade further interest. And it would let them reach London by mid-afternoon, giving him time to see Peterson today.

Chapter Six

Eden raised her brows as Alex’s carriage halted before an elegant London town house. Its red brick

glowed in the afternoon sun, set off by handsome quoins on the corners and around the door. An iron balcony extended the width of the façade on the first floor, backed by enormous windows that would flood the drawing room behind with light. The other houses lining the street were equally handsome. As was the street itself. Gas lamps dotted the pavement, promising light at night, too. She'd read about London's gaslights, but had never seen one.

But her overwhelming feeling was relief. She could finally escape the carriage. Hours of rubbing against Alex left her barely cogent. And it was entirely her own fault. He'd made no move to touch her and had barely exchanged a dozen comments since leaving the Bear. Yet her mind teemed with images of his hands on her shoulders, her waist, her arms, her thighs, her—

She dragged her thoughts from the heated mire lest she succumb to temptation.

She could not explore these feelings. No gentleman would court the sister of his mistress, so for Olivia's sake, Eden must keep her hands off his silky hair and broad shoulders. And for her own sake, too. John had worked hard to establish her as a lady. Revealing herself as anything less would blacken his memory, let Richard gloat because she'd proved to be unworthy, and undermine her position in the neighborhood she still hoped would be home for the rest of her life – assuming she could somehow pay off the mortgage...

"Here we are," Alex announced unnecessarily. "You settle in while I call on Peterson."

She wanted to, but now that she faced the moment, it was impossible. While a few hours alone would be heaven, she must participate in the interviews. Two sets of eyes and ears would better detect falsehood or secrecy. "I'm coming with you," she declared. "And it would be best to call first at Mr. Jasper's house. His papers might contain information we could use, and his secretary will have his current direction so we can write to him."

He frowned. "Very well." He called directions to his coachman, then turned to face her. "What do you know about Mr. Jasper's secretary?" His voice caressed her like warm velvet.

She ignored the new heat coiling in her womb, making sure her own voice was prosaic. "His name is Smith, and he's rude."

“Is he blind?” When she stared, he smiled. “Try flirting with him, Eden. Few men can resist a beautiful woman’s charms. A touch, a glance, an impish smile, and they will do anything.”

“Then they must be simpleminded. Women have no trouble ignoring gentlemen’s charms.”

“You are stronger than most. Too many will do anything in exchange for a little flattery.”

“As you know from experience,” she said without thinking, then cursed herself for a fool when his eyes lit with laughter. He must know quite well that she was fighting so hard to control her breathing that she could barely speak. Only focusing on Olivia kept her hands in her lap and curses from her lips. Why the devil had she challenged him? Men thrived on challenge. Even John rose to a challenge like a man half his age. By raising his rakish reputation, she was all but asking him to prove it.

But Alex confounded her yet again, adopting a matter-of-fact tone and keeping his questions strictly on business for the remainder of their journey.

Smith answered their rap on Jasper’s door.

“Come in, come in,” he said once Eden made introductions. “My condolences, Mrs. Marlow. And my apologies for any disrespect I offered at our last meeting. I was so shocked to hear of Mr. Marlow’s accident that my wits fled. Mr. Jasper will also be shocked.”

“That is why we are here,” said Eden, taking the chair nearest the drawing room fire so the men could sit. Only Smith took advantage of the invitation, though. “We need information that only he can provide. Do you have his direction?”

“Information about what?” Smith’s voice sharpened. “Mr. Jasper’s affairs are completely in order, as your solicitor can attest. We will, of course, supply copies of our contracts with Mr. Marlow if your man of business thinks it necessary.”

Eden glanced at Alex, grateful that he’d anticipated trouble after she’d described her earlier call. His refusal to sit let him dominate the room, radiating superiority. He made a formidable ally.

He pinned Smith with a steely glance. “Our business has nothing to do with contracts. One of Marlow’s artifacts disappeared. Jasper knows who else wanted it.”

“Do you mean the Sarsos stone?” asked Smith.

Eden nodded.

Smith slumped, head in his hands. “The thing is cursed.”

“Why would you think so?”

“That last trip was the unluckiest of Mr. Jasper’s life. He nearly died twice.”

“What happened?” Despite Alex’s negligent pose against the fireplace, his intensity increased.

“The purchase went smoothly, though Mr. Jasper had to offer Mr. Marlow’s highest price before the sisters would agree to sell. Fortunately, they needed money badly enough to part with it – many girls sought shelter at the convent to escape the war, forcing them to expand.”

“So they sold the stone freely?” asked Alex.

“Yes. Mr. Marlow was adamant that there be no hint of coercion. Only temptation. It wasn’t until Mr. Jasper began the journey home that the trouble started. The first night, his inn burned down, nearly killing him. If he hadn’t hidden the stone in the heel of his boot, it would have been lost with his luggage. As it was, he was stranded without money or lines of credit.”

Eden shuddered.

“He joined a caravan, caring for the horses in exchange for food and protection. Two days later, bandits attacked them.”

Alex turned to Eden. “Many partisan bands turned to robbery once the French left, just as former soldiers roam the countryside here.”

Smith sighed. “The caravan guards fought them off, but not before two men were injured, including Mr. Jasper’s servant. The journey did not improve. The caravan left him in the next town, where he stayed until new letters of credit arrived. He’d no sooner left, when his horse went lame. Contrary winds added weeks to his voyage home. Food poisoning killed one of his fellow passengers. It was one of those journeys that seemed ill-fated from the start.”

“Where is he now?” asked Eden.

“Headed for Rome. Mr. Marlow asked him to examine a piece of parchment recently discovered there. It might be another fragment of the Sarsos scroll.” Smith shrugged. “He should have left Paris last week.”

“Does he advise you of his location?” asked Alex.

"I usually receive a post every fortnight or so, but it is impossible to predict how fast he can travel. His last note arrived from Paris three weeks ago. He'd intended to stop there for a fortnight." He frowned.

"If this incessant rain extends to the Continent, it is no wonder that the post is slow," said Alex calmly. "It might even delay his departure from Paris. Where will he stay in Rome?"

"I've no idea. I always send to the British ambassador."

"Then we will post our questions there."

They spoke for another half hour, but learned nothing of interest. Smith knew no other collectors – or so he claimed. He would not let them see Jasper's papers, but promised to check them himself and send any names he found.

The moment they left, Eden laid a hand on Alex's arm. "It bothers you that Smith has heard nothing in three weeks, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "Granted, the weather has been foul, but Paris is not that far away."

"Perhaps there was nothing to report."

"There probably wasn't, but he was accustomed to apprise Smith of his location and should have sent a report of any business he conducted before leaving town. I will dispatch a man to make sure he's all right."

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"Illness. Accident. Attack. Former French soldiers infest the countryside – it is a universal ill just now. They bear no love for the English."

"That is not what you fear." She didn't know why she was so sure. Perhaps this odd sensual connection also revealed parts of his mind.

He frowned. "No. It's not. Jasper suffered too much ill luck after buying the stone. Someone may have tried to take it by force."

"But they failed. Jasper delivered it to John, ending anyone's interest in him. Whoever sought it now has it."

"Unless there is more than one potential thief. But that is not my present fear. We don't yet know why John was killed. If your thief killed him to hide the source of his expected power, then Jasper is also in danger."

Eden nodded. "We must warn him."

“I will do my best,” he promised, lifting her into the carriage.

She hardly noticed his touch. She’d not considered that the thief might kill all who knew of the stone. Olivia was alone at Ridley. Would people accept that she knew nothing? Most men kept business away from female ears.

But those obsessed with Sarsos were not rational...

* * * *

The gentleman remounted his horse, then sat in indecision while he brooded over his latest failure. A coachman cursed him for blocking the street, but he paid no heed.

Fate would turn her back on him if he didn’t complete this task soon. She’d already begun. By allowing the ostler to notice him at the Bear, she’d given him fair warning that her patience was running out. Either he demonstrated his competence, or she would withdraw her support completely. Her tests were not showing him in a good light.

But he hadn’t understood the warning. Thus he’d failed to anticipate that Fate would awaken Mrs. Marlow well before dawn despite that she’d been on the road until nearly midnight. What the devil was driving her?

She was traveling with a Mr. Eversley – not that learning the name helped. He’d never heard of the man. Now he’d even lost track of her entourage. They had passed the toll gate at Hyde Park Corner two hours earlier, heading for Piccadilly, but none of the venders along the street recalled seeing her. How could they miss two carriages with a saddled horse tied to the first?

The coachman yelled louder, urging his team to shove the obstruction out of the way.

But it wasn’t the nudge that finally set him moving. It was the admission that he’d been stupid. Again. Eversley had doubtless sent his horse and baggage coach to his lodging while he and Mrs. Marlow addressed her business. So there was nothing distinctive he could use to track the carriage.

He did know one of her destinations, though. The errand she’d not completed before leaving town. If he hurried, he might yet catch them...

* * * *

“I’ll drop you at the house,” said Alex as the carriage

left Jasper's cottage. "You'd best leave Peterson to me. Antiquities shops are located in areas unsuited to ladies."

"I am not one of those sheltered society innocents," she reminded him. "Since Father spent most of his time studying, it fell to me to tend his parish. I regularly encountered the dregs of humanity."

"In Leicestershire?" He laughed. "I've seen your father's parish. Its worst areas are Paradise compared to much of London. The stews are beyond your comprehension. There are men who would kill you in broad daylight in front of a dozen witnesses merely to steal your gown – pawned, it could keep them in gin for a week."

"Which is why I won't walk unescorted down the street"—she ignored his attempt to speak over her—"not even through a reputable business area like the Strand. But I must visit Peterson. He can hardly discuss John's private affairs with a stranger. John's widow is another matter."

"Why?" She was naïve indeed if she thought Peterson would keep John's business private. "He doesn't know you from Eve. Anyone can claim to be John's widow, my dear. I could claim to be Sir Richard, concerned that this theft might affect selling my own extensive collection. If there is anything to loosen a dealer's tongue and pique his interest, it's the thought of new business. Lots of new business."

"Of all the mad notions— No one in his right mind would believe you were Richard."

"You think not?" He turned toward the window as he recalled the current baronet. Drawing a deep breath, he fished out a quizzing glass, then faced Eden, waving one hand limply as the other lifted the glass to his eye. "I will not listen to another word, madam." His voice mimicked Richard's boorish tones, lightly overlaid with a Leicestershire accent. "As head of this family, I must protect it from upstarts and knaves, so cease prattling about subjects beyond your understanding. Return to Ridley and trouble me no more."

"My God!" Her cheeks paled. "How do you do that? Even your face looks different."

He discarded Richard's persona. "Practice."

"But it's like magic. You can't have seen Richard in years. He never goes anywhere."

“He is a memorable man,” he said dampingly, cursing himself for demonstrating his skill. Her eyes blazed with excitement.

“But how did you learn to impersonate people?”

“I’ve always done it.” It had been a useful talent in his days with the Home Office. But for now, he’d wasted enough time. “Travel has left you weary, so please go inside and rest. I will discover everything Peterson knows.”

“Which will be easier if I accompany you.” She seemed more eager than ever, clearly anticipating watching him perform.

Alex cursed under his breath. He had no intention of impersonating Sir Richard – Peterson knew Alex too well to believe it. But the tactics that worked best with the dealer were unsuited to mixed company. Eden was too innocent to condone either bribery or intimidation – not that Peterson called it bribery; information was one of his most lucrative commodities.

But Eden’s firm jaw proved she wouldn’t back down. If he forced her out of the carriage, she might well follow – with disastrous consequences. How she’d survived three days in London with only that ridiculous maid for company was a mystery. He could not count on luck to protect her in the future.

Damn her stubbornness! It was a complication he didn’t need, but short of tying her to a bed, he had no choice.

Tying her to a bed... That had a nice ring to it.

But he’d foresworn seduction, he reminded himself. And perhaps gratitude would make her amenable to an affair once John’s killer was in custody. He could handle Peterson without threats. The man was a consummate gossip.

“Very well, but say nothing, and stay close. Wandering off could cost you your life.”

“Thank you, Alex.” She smiled.

Alex said little as they drove to the Strand. Eden’s presence affected more than his approach. By appearing as himself, he risked Peterson mentioning previous meetings, which might prompt to Eden to reveal his name, something Peterson didn’t know. That would not only endanger his life, but drag more of his past investigations into the light of day. His own wagging tongue had already revealed too much. Sidmouth would not be pleased.

Which proved just how dangerous Eden was. She slipped too easily under his guard, evoking admissions that would be better hidden. If she told others about his impersonations, it could draw the attention of those he'd tricked, identifying personas still wanted by the Bonapartists. Worse, he could become a scapegoat for cases he'd not handled.

How could he have been so stupid? He'd always sneered at idiots who let lust unlock their tongues – among the spies he'd exposed had been two courtesans who'd collected valuable secrets while servicing government and military men. Now he'd fallen into the same trap. He had yet to meet a female who could keep a secret.

He was still wondering how to convince her to remain quiet, when they reached the Strand and halted in front of Peterson's Antiquities. Sunlight streamed through the shop's bow window, illuminating a bust of Apollo flanked by a pair of urns and surrounded by boxes, jars, and a square of mosaic depicting a graceful hand.

Antiquities had influenced fashion in furnishings for a century, creating a huge demand for Roman, Greek, and Egyptian artifacts. Many society drawing rooms reflected those cultures. Ladies whose husbands had returned from their Grand Tours empty-handed had to buy artifacts in London. And since the merchant classes copied the fashion of their betters, the demand for such items had soared.

Real antiquities had always been in short supply, a situation worsened as war disrupted trade, so enterprising merchants produced copious copies. The honest ones called them copies, satisfied with the lower price they could get for such products. But plenty of men faked provenance as well as urns.

Peterson was one of the honest dealers. His shop had two rooms, one for antiquities, the other for Coade stone statues and other copies. That didn't guarantee authenticity, of course. There wasn't a merchant in London who hadn't fallen prey to forgers. But at least Peterson tried – which was another reason John would have sought information about Sarsos here. Peterson also distinguished between rumors that might be real and those that were clearly improbable.

"Don't say a word," he reminded Eden, offering his arm once she'd descended from his carriage.

She nodded.

But Alex's plans vanished the moment he pushed open the door. The shop was in shambles, with merchandise jumbled on the floor and several urns in pieces. A foot protruded from behind the counter.

Eden gasped.

"Lock the door, pull the blind to block the window, then stay here," he ordered, again cursing that he'd brought her with him. The last thing he needed was a hysterical female. He hurried around the counter, praying that he wouldn't find a corpse.

He didn't – quite. Peterson sprawled on the floor, bleeding from a deep cut on his temple, still alive, though his continued survival remained in question.

Pulling out his handkerchief, Alex pressed it firmly against the gash to stop the flow of blood. A ripping sound pulled his eyes to Eden. "I told you to stay by the door."

"He'll need both of us." She handed him the flounce she'd ripped from her petticoat, then set about removing the next one. Though pale, her face reflected determination. "Is that Mr. Peterson?"

"Yes." He formed a pad from the flounce, then examined the man more closely. Peterson had been struck several times, probably by a knife. More blood welled from his side.

"Damnation!" Alex bit back the stronger curses unsuited to female ears. "Hold this," he ordered Eden, pointing to the pad.

She handed him another strip of fabric, then bore down on the head wound. "Why would someone attack him?"

"I don't know." He unbuttoned Peterson's waistcoat and pulled his shirt free to reveal a stab. "The shop's been ransacked, but a robber does not strike in daylight as a rule. This can't have happened more than an hour ago. Probably less." He fastened a bandage around Peterson's side, though he doubted the man would live. Perforated intestines usually proved fatal.

"So the attacker wanted more than money?"

"That would be my guess. Peterson has always been an avid gossip, constantly scavenging for bits of information that he sells to anyone willing to pay his price. But information can be dangerous. Some people will do anything to protect their secrets. I warned him

more than once to be careful.” He shook his head.

“So you know him well.”

“Well enough. I used him to keep track of suspected Bonapartists.” He snapped his mouth shut, berating himself for again revealing details of a past that was better forgotten.

“The bleeding has stopped,” she noted. “Is there somewhere more comfortable we can move him?”

“Motion will break open the wound.” And probably kill him. He still hoped for information. “He lives upstairs. Find some water so we can clean him up.”

“Good idea.” She left.

Alex made a more thorough search for injuries, finding several cracked ribs and marks on Peterson’s hands that proved he’d landed at least one heavy blow. So there had been a fight.

But his condition was bad, his face white, his breath coming in shallow pants punctuated by rattles that might have been moans. He would be dead by morning, though if he felt enough pain to moan...

Eden returned with a basin, stooping to lay a hand on Peterson’s shoulder. “He’s worse.” Her voice shook.

“He’s not going to make it,” Alex said bluntly. He’d seen death often enough to recognize its progress. “My only chance to find out who attacked him is to revive him enough to talk. It won’t be pleasant for any of us. Can you manage?”

She paled further, but nodded.

He dipped the rag into cold water, then wiped it across Peterson’s face. The dealer’s breathing hitched in response. So he *was* conscious, just pulled into himself to escape the pain.

Five minutes and most of the water later, Peterson screamed.

“Can you hear me, Peterson?” demanded Alex.

The eyes blinked open and tried to focus. “Finster? What ... want?”

“Information, but that can wait.” A gesture kept Eden silent. “Who attacked you?”

“Wha—?” Peterson inhaled raggedly, fighting back groans. “Hurt.”

“You’ve been badly beaten,” said Alex. “Who did it?”

Moans escaped. His hand spasmed into a fist.

Alex laid the cloth on Peterson’s forehead. “Who attacked you, Peterson?” he demanded, his voice hard.

“Man ... stranger...” His eyes rolled back into his

head.

“What man? What did he want?” Alex sloshed cold water across the undamaged side of Peterson’s head.

Peterson jerked. “Mad ... ranting...” He gasped weakly, his eyes blurring with pain.

“About what?” demanded Alex.

“Looking ... Marlow...”

Eden choked.

“John Marlow?” asked Alex.

“Wife...” His throat rattled as he sucked in air. His hand again spasmed. Then his breath escaped in a long hiss, “Sarsos-s-s...”

Alex laid shaking fingers on Peterson’s neck, then pressed an ear to his chest. “He’s gone.”

“Dear God.” Eden clutched the counter.

“Don’t faint,” he ordered, closing Peterson’s eyes and climbing to his feet. His eyes raked the shop. Had the attacker wanted information, money, or something else? A Moorish samovar lay on its side. Several urns were likewise overturned as if someone had searched inside each one. “Find something to use as a shroud while I check his desk.”

Eden drew in a deep breath, then returned upstairs.

Alex wasn’t interested in Peterson’s business files, but finding the intact ledgers proved the attacker hadn’t wanted his customer records. He’d long suspected that Peterson wrote down rumors, secrets, and other potentially valuable information. How else could he keep track of tidbits gathered over long periods of time? He’d likely also kept notes on the buyers of that information, for he set his prices according to the buyer’s urgency. He always knew just how keen someone’s interest really was.

It took him half an hour to find the thick journal hidden behind the office paneling. He tucked it under his cloak. If Peterson had identified Emerson’s employer or learned any other secrets connected to Sarsos collectors, the information would be inside.

“Let’s go,” he murmured, rejoining Eden in the shop. She’d straightened Peterson’s legs and covered him with a sheet.

“You mean to leave him here?”

“As soon as I take you home, I’ll fetch the authorities. But you don’t need your name associated with this, especially after an exhausting day.” The words reminded him of just how long it had been since

he'd slept.

She cast a last doubtful look at the shop, then unlocked the door and stepped outside.

Alex followed, taking her arm to escort her to the carriage now parked a block away. But his mind was dull from sleeplessness and shock, leaving him less alert than usual. Not until a scream rose from across the street did he lift his head—

—to find a horse charging straight toward him.

Terror lent energy to his muscles. He lunged sideways, slamming Eden into a recessed doorway, where he pressed her hard against the wall as he flattened himself around her. Something slammed into the wall an inch from his head as the horse clattered past, then swerved back into the street and sped away.

Alex was suddenly aware of the delectable body plastered against his own. Heat blazed in a river of fire, only partially quenched when he caught sight of her face.

Eden's eyes bulged in horror as she gasped for breath. "Lord! You were right. London is a dangerous city. That's the second time I've nearly been run down."

"What?" Alex checked the street, then hustled her into the carriage, waiting until she was settled before continuing. "What do you mean by *second*?"

"The same thing happened last week. Peterson's door was locked. As I turned back to the carriage, a rider swerved around it to pass a slow-moving cart. He bumped Carver, knocking her into me. Don't riders stay in the street here? Carver nearly fainted. She doesn't like horses in the best of times, and to be hit by one didn't help."

"Did the man apologize?"

"No. Galloped off like his tail was on fire without so much as a wave to acknowledge our existence."

"What did he look like?"

She shrugged. "Brown horse, black cloak, hat pulled low."

"Same as this one."

"And half the men in England," she snapped. "You can't possibly believe there is a connection. You fit that description when you were riding yesterday, as does that man and that one." She pointed out the window.

She was right, he admitted. Six riders passed them in the space of seconds, five on brown horses. Three

wore cloaks, two greatcoats, and the last only a riding coat, for the air was finally turning balmy. If he'd had his wits about him, he would have looked closer at the fellow, but—

"I can't believe how reckless people are in this town," Eden babbled as her hands began to shake. She was falling apart before his eyes. "Horsemen swerving off the street, drivers bellowing for people to move faster. And crime! How do Londoners stand it? Carver would have lost her reticule if I hadn't caught that cutpurse by the ear. Kicked something fierce, he did, and escaped before I could find the watch. But to walk into a shop where there's been robbery and murder..." Her voice broke.

Alex scooped her into his lap. Intrepid she might be, but this was too much. "Cry," he suggested. "You are so jumpy you want to fly apart. Tears will help."

"I'd rather hit something." Her attempt at humor bordered on hysteria.

"I wouldn't advise it," he murmured. "You would just hurt your hands."

"I'm so mad I want to rip that rider to shreds." Her fingers bent into claws, tearing at the air.

Alex sighed. She needed to release the burst of energy that always accompanied terror. Tears were one way, but if she wouldn't indulge in those, there were others. Exercise. Lovemaking...

Tempting. Very tempting. He tried to put the image out of his head, but he was shaking, too. Two years of retirement had reduced his tolerance for shock.

Her tremors increased, sending frissons of awareness across his thighs and into his groin. She would break at any moment, screaming. He couldn't afford to draw that sort of attention, and she would hate being the center of all eyes – or so he told himself. And he was human.

He kissed her.

Lust exploded in a conflagration that swept him from head to toe. And her, too. The hands that had been shredding imaginary opponents latched onto his shoulders as she returned the kiss, opening to the barest pressure from his tongue, then sucking it so deeply into her mouth that she might have inhaled his soul. She was everything he sought in a lover – fiery, passionate, and so exciting that the mere pressure of her hip nearly shattered him.

As she threaded her fingers into his hair, he pushed her cloak aside and cupped a breast.

She moaned, driving him closer to the brink.

A spark of honor pulled him back. Her mind wasn't rational just now. She would hate him if he took what she was currently offering. Forcing his own need aside, he concentrated on distracting her long enough that she could reach her room before collapsing. So he took the kiss deeper, fencing with her tongue while one thumb stroked her breast.

"Alex," she moaned when he left her mouth to trail kisses across his face. "Alex! What—" She pressed closer, raising so much heat it was a miracle the carriage didn't burst into flame.

"Ah, my sweet Eden," he panted. "So beautiful. So passionate." He returned to her mouth, fighting to maintain control as her hands raced across his back. Her tremors vibrated against a rampant erection he tried valiantly to ignore. Her hands fisted in his hair, pulling him closer, her kiss as abandoned as in his most lascivious dreams. The heat of her arousal scorched him.

He wanted her more than he'd wanted anyone in his life, desperately needed her contracting around him. But he'd vowed to do nothing she would regret come morning. Keeping that vow would likely kill him.

Another deep kiss drew her loudest moan yet. He teetered on brink of dishonor...

The carriage rocked to a halt before his town house.

Drawing a long breath, he helped her to the ground, supporting her past a lamplighter, past the footman holding open the door, too aware that her legs were buckling even worse than his own. Not until they reached the foot of the stairs did he trust his voice. "I'll order you a bath, then deal with Peterson. We'll talk at dinner."

She nodded without a word.

Alex requested that his horse be brought around, then went upstairs to soak his head in a basin of cold water, praying it would clear his mind.

Chapter Seven

Eden smoothed her dowdiest gown over her hips, then sent Carver away, frantic to be alone. She was appalled at her behavior.

Actually, she was worse than appalled. She was aghast, terrified, awed—

No! She could not be awed by something so base. Where had her morals gone? If they'd not been in a carriage on a busy London street, she would have begged for more than kisses, abandoning her training, manners, and responsibility, and proving that John's faith in her had been misplaced. She'd nearly begged for more anyway.

She squeezed the back of a chair until her fingers hurt.

Only luck had kept her from the ultimate folly. Luck and their arrival. Al— *Mr. Portland* might blame shock, but she could not accept excuses. No lady allowed shock to drive her into unacceptable conduct. Writhing in his lap while he fondled her breast and kissed her senseless went far beyond unacceptable.

The blame was hers alone. And the guilt. She could accept guilt, but only if she learned from it. The lapse must not be repeated. To hold temptation at bay, she must stay away from him. Far away.

Her body protested.

"Traitor," she snapped, wrapping a bulky shawl around her shoulders to further disguise her figure and provide another barrier between her and the world. It was infuriating to realize that Richard had been right all these years. She *did* harbor the vulgar wantonness typical of humble birth. John might never have evoked such feelings, but he was a gentleman who had treated her like the highest born lady, expecting only that she lie quietly beneath him while he found his weekly release. The matter rarely required more than a few minutes.

Alex was no gentleman. He'd recognized an opportunity, raising her restlessness to such a fever pitch that she'd forgotten everything in her need for more. If they hadn't reached his house, she would have ripped her clothes off and demanded that he take her then and there.

How vulgar.

No lady experienced such abandon. No lady failed to control herself, no matter what the provocation. No lady turned sensual encounters into cherished memories.

She was clearly no lady. Instead of relaxing with a lady's passivity, she'd let his mouth drive her mad.

Even thinking about it tightened her nipples.

“Stop this,” she ordered herself, pacing to the window and back. “Olivia deserves better. Pull yourself together and act like a lady, even if you aren’t. You cannot throw away this chance to see her wed. She is perfect for him, as he will certainly agree once they meet. So stop distracting him.”

Drawing a deep breath, she collected her book and headed for the drawing room. When Alex returned, she must make it clear that this must never happen again. He would likely argue the point – no man enjoyed having his wishes thwarted, particularly when she’d already succumbed once. But she could convince him by maintaining complete control over her senses. And she would prevail. Too much was at stake to tolerate failure.

She paused on the stairs, surprised when someone pounded on the front door. Alex had not put up the knocker, so who would be calling? It was long past visiting hours, and no one knew he was in town. Unless...

Peterson had claimed that his assailant sought Marlow’s wife. Was he the man who had nearly run her down? Had he followed her here, then waited until Alex was gone?

Ridiculous, she told herself. He would hardly have waited in the Strand on the slim chance that she might call on Peterson today. And this wouldn’t be another collector seeking to buy the stone, either. Even if one knew she was in London – which would mean he’d called at Ridley – he would have no reason to seek her at Portland House.

It might be Smith.

She’d been wrong to think no one knew she and Alex were in town, and he’d promised to look through Jasper’s notes. Might he have found something important so quickly?

Yet it didn’t feel right. Her instincts feared that whoever was outside represented danger. Forewarned was forearmed, so she slipped down a few steps, craning over the banister to see into the hall without being spotted.

The view was severely limited. All she could make out was Tweed’s legs as he pulled the door open.

“My lord?” Tweed sounded even frostier than when she’d arrived at Cliffside.

“So he is here.” The unknown lord stepped forward – or tried to.

Tweed blocked the way. “He is not at home.”

The caller growled.

Eden leaned farther, her curiosity stronger than ever. This lord sought Alex, so she was safe enough as long as he didn’t see her. Yet that feeling of danger lingered...

He wore satin knee breeches and stockings heavily padded with sawdust – a device Alex would never need. His gloved hand clutched a *chapeau bras*. Oddly formal dress unless he was headed for court.

“I will tell him you called, sir.” Tweed’s voice remained cold.

“He will dine at Stratford House tomorrow evening.” The caller shoved a card into Tweed’s hand.

“He has other plans.”

“No. This defiance must cease. Either he behaves like a gentleman, or Stratford will take steps. Tomorrow. At seven. No regrets will be accepted.” He stormed away.

Eden rushed to the drawing room window, but only the man’s back was visible in the glow of the gaslights. He was taller than Alex and quite slender. Brown hair curled from under his hat, brushing the collar of a coat that had amazingly padded shoulders. Even from behind, his shirt points were visible, for they encased his ears, ending just below the eyes.

Obviously a dandy.

She hated him on sight. He was as pompous as Richard and probably useless. The tight coat and breeches would require at least two assistants to don.

His walking stick slashed out, beheading three crocuses growing under the area rail.

Disgusted, she turned away, but putting him out of sight did not thrust him out of her mind. Why would a lord carry messages like a common footman? Especially to someone he so clearly despised.

When Tweed passed the door, she called him into the drawing room. “Who was downstairs just now?”

“Lord Palfry, ma’am.”

“I couldn’t help overhear...” She let her voice trail off, then tried again. There was no polite way to pry, but she needed information. If nothing else, curiosity gave her something new to think about. “Who is he?”

“Mr. Alex’s brother, ma’am.”

His brother? A lord? She frowned. "I know it is none of my business, but why was Lord Palfry so angry?"

"It is no secret that Stratford disowned Mr. Alex some years ago."

"Stratford?"

"Their father, the Earl of Stratford. Palfry is the heir, and Mr. Jason is with the army – a major, the last we heard. Mr. Alex is third in line. Stratford was incensed when Mr. Alex retired from the Home Office – not that he thought much of the post to begin with."

"Why? I understood Mr. Portland showed exceptional cleverness in his search for spies and traitors."

His gaze sharpened. "Few know of his duties, Mrs. Marlow. Any public acknowledgment of them would put him in grave danger. And not just from those who remain furious over Napoleon's downfall. Society would also despise him. Spies are not gentlemen. Those who unmask them are similarly tainted."

"I see. But surely his family—"

"It would make no difference. Stratford considers Mr. Alex lazy, stubborn, and incompetent. Palfry agrees with everything Stratford says."

Eden's mouth was hanging open. *Lazy? Incompetent?* Stubborn she could believe, for she'd encountered that trait herself, but the injustice of Stratford's condemnation sparked fury. Alex had risked his life in service to the crown, giving dandies and opinionated bores the luxury of wasting their own lives on trivialities. Yet they dared condemn the very actions that protected their cozy little worlds. And how could any parent...

Tweed left before she reined in her anger. Only then did she consider the full import of his disclosure. Disowned or not, Alex was an earl's son. A younger son, to be sure, but several steps above John. Would he look twice at Olivia, a lowly vicar's daughter?

His secrecy might deflect condemnation of his work, but wedding beneath him would draw society's scorn and worsen the rift with his family. An insufferable lord like Stratford would never countenance a mésalliance.

Olivia had been fragile as a child. Could she tolerate scorn? Eden didn't know. The girl had stayed in the schoolroom while living at Marwood, thus she'd never encountered the full range of aristocratic disdain.

* * * *

Alex frowned as he headed upstairs to dress. He'd done what he could for Peterson, alerting the authorities to his demise, then questioning nearby shopkeepers in hopes that someone had seen something useful. But all he'd learned was that no similar incidents had occurred anywhere in the area, which confirmed that the intruder had been seeking information rather than money.

Unfortunately, no one had noticed any customers at Peterson's shop that afternoon, not even him and Eden. So he had no clues to the attacker's identity.

A brief stop at his club nearly eliminated the lord and the industrialist from complicity in John's death. Lord Oakdale had retired to his country estate two years earlier after a mild apoplexy, becoming a recluse who refused to see even friends. Rumors that he was ill were impossible to verify, but the man was nearly eighty, so it was likely. Few knew the industrialist personally, but a recent fire at his woolen mill was keeping him busy overseeing repairs. He had a reputation for keeping a close eye on his business.

So Alex was back to Emerson's unknown employer.

The moment Tweed finished fussing with his evening clothes, he grabbed Peterson's journal and headed downstairs. Instead of lingering over his port after dinner, he and Eden would pore over its entries, giving him a chance to ease any regrets she might have from the afternoon.

He paused in the drawing room doorway to study her before she was aware of his presence. Her regrets were obvious. She'd donned a high-necked black gown of heavy worsted, whose long sleeves covered her black gloves, leaving not a single glimpse of skin. She'd pulled her hair into an uncompromising knot on her neck, then added a black lace cap to leech the last bit of color from her cheeks. A bulky shawl masked her figure from prying eyes. A full suit of armor and ten-foot lance would be less effective at holding others at bay. At least the gloves would come off while she ate, offering him some relief from the black that threatened to smother him.

A book lay open in her lap, but she was not reading. Instead she stared sightlessly at the hearth, probably rehearsing set-downs.

So he would confound her. Unless she raised the

subject herself, he would pretend that the journey from Peterson's hadn't happened.

"Are you ready for dinner?" he asked mildly, crossing to poke at the fire.

"Of course. Is Pe—" She halted.

"His son has taken charge of his shop."

"Good. I didn't like just walking away."

"But neither would you have liked having your name associated with his death."

Tweed announced dinner.

"Shall we?" Alex held out his arm.

Manners forced her to take it, but she moved stiffly and remained so far away that she nearly ran into the doorjamb. When she saw her place set next to his instead of at the opposite end of the table, she scowled.

"We have much to discuss, and I would rather not shout," he said calmly. "About Peterson," he added, producing the journal when she blushed and tried to pull back.

"Of course." Curiosity replaced suspicion in her eyes. She sat, then smiled at Tweed when he placed a plate of soup before her. Once they were alone, she resumed speaking. "Did you pick that up in his shop? What is it?"

"Records of the information he sold. He was known as the best source of information in town, both for rumors associated with antiquities and tales unsuited to the ears of society's ladies. With luck it will contain notes on his buyers, which will allow me to identify Emerson's employer. I've all but eliminated the other two collectors." As Tweed returned to pour wine, he explained what he'd learned at his club.

"Peterson's death made them less viable anyway," she said, shrugging. "I doubt anyone known to be interested in Sarsos would risk attacking him."

"That's only true if the attacker expected anyone to connect Peterson's death to Sarsos. But he didn't. No one saw him enter or leave. No one arrived while he was there. He left behind no evidence to raise suspicion. And Peterson's penchant for collecting information made him dangerous to any number of men. If Peterson hadn't revived long enough to mention Sarsos, we would know nothing."

She flinched. "Peterson claimed the man was a stranger."

“Which means he was not one the agents Peterson knew well. He also claimed the man sought information about you.”

“Why would anyone go for Peterson for information on me?”

“The easy answer is that he sought your direction so he could offer for the stone now that John is dead. But since that’s a legitimate request, he would hardly attack Peterson no matter what Peterson’s response. They might have come to blows over the price Peterson demanded, of course, but I don’t think that likely. I suspect that he either plans to steal the stone once he verifies that you have it, or he already has the stone and fears that you can connect him to its theft – your sudden trip to London could raise suspicions either way. Killing Peterson would prevent you from comparing your information to his.”

* * * *

Eden laid down her spoon, sipping wine to combat her suddenly dry mouth. Had Peterson died because of her?

“It wasn’t your fault,” Alex said firmly, apparently reading her mind. “You are not responsible for the thoughts and actions of a madman.”

“I know, but—”

“—it’s a shock,” he finished lightly. “Not to worry. I know an excellent remedy for shock.”

The twinkle in his eye made her whole body tighten. “No!”

“See? I’ve diverted your mind already.” He sobered. “On a serious note, it is prudent to assume that Peterson’s killer is seeking you and that his intentions are not good.”

“How bad is *not good*?” She almost wished he would continue flirting, for it was frightening to think that someone who had just killed a man was now seeking her. She’d not truly believed that the horseman had aimed at her.

She still didn’t believe that. Why would he have expected she would even be there? Why would he risk his own neck waiting for her to call? Had they arrived so soon after he left that he’d seen them? The thought that they might have discovered him still in the shop made her blood freeze. And the idea that he’d recognized her in the middle of a busy London street was worse.

Tweed removed the soup, replacing it with squab.

Alex studied her for a long moment. “The worst case is that the stone’s current possessor has decided to eliminate everyone who might know John had it. That would explain John’s death, the thief’s death, Peterson’s death, and both of your encounters with horsemen.”

“Olivia!” she gasped, bolting from her chair.

He caught her, holding her close until she ceased struggling. “Don’t panic,” he murmured. “Even if that is his goal, he is in London, so Olivia is perfectly safe. He will hardly hare off before dealing with you.”

She sat. “Of course. How silly of me. But—”

“Relax. Olivia may be in no danger at all. That was merely the worst scenario. And frankly, it stretches credulity to think that a madman has been trying to kill you for more than a week without doing any real damage. In the meantime, I’ve set men to watch the house in case someone *is* after you and knows where you are staying. So eat your dinner. Afterward, we will study Peterson’s journal. Tomorrow will be soon enough to leave for Ridley.”

“But— You are dining with your family tomorrow.”

He glared. “What gave you that idea?”

“I was in the hall when the invitation arrived.”

“There was no invitation.” All warmth had fled his voice.

“But—”

“Orders are not invitations.” He continued speaking, allowing her no further objections. “We will stop at the Home Office on the way out of town. They can conduct the London investigation I’d planned.” He didn’t look happy about it.

“You really *are* concerned about Olivia.”

“No. *You* are concerned. You are of no use to me when you are terrified for her safety. And seeing that she is protected is prudent. Today’s attack all but eliminates Sir Richard as a suspect, but I do want to look more closely at young Jeremy, and for that, I need to be at Ridley.” He bit into his squab, terminating the subject.

Eden followed suit, concentrating on dinner as she mulled his information. Why had today’s events focused his attention so closely on Jeremy? She couldn’t see the connection, but perhaps he had another reason for leaving so precipitously. Was he

fleeing Stratford's command?

His cook had produced a delightful meal, considering that she'd been on the job only a few hours. Alex had given so little notice of his arrival that the caretaker had hired the staff just that morning. Yet the table groaned under nearly as many dishes as Eden served at a dinner party – squab, braised pork, scalloped oysters, rosettes of potato, broccoli florets, asparagus in butter, and a plate of hothouse strawberries arranged around a bowl of thick cream. The new cook must be showing off her skills.

* * * *

Alex ate automatically, tasting little. He'd been mired in unwanted memories since the moment Eden had mentioned Palfry. It was bad enough the man had invaded the sanctity of Alex's house, but how had he known Alex was in town? Had the bastard convinced the caretakers to keep him informed?

He cursed himself for not considering the possibility earlier. Closing his town house had meant replacing his trustworthy staff with an elderly couple whose primary job was to air the rooms once a month and forward any mail to Cliffside. Most of his former staff now served the man who had stepped into Alex's position at the Home Office and thus needed servants capable of absolute discretion. But though Alex no longer needed secrecy, he would not tolerate disloyalty. Tweed must pension off the caretakers immediately, and if any of the new staff worked for Palfry or divulged information on his activities...

Tweed would put the fear of God in the new hires.

As for dinner, Palfry would grow old waiting for him. Alex would never enter Stratford House again. It had taken him weeks to recover from the last visit.

That had also been a dinner invitation, issued the day he'd tendered his resignation to the Home Office. He would not have accepted if thirty others had not also been invited, which should have protected him from Stratford's lashing tongue. He'd planned to leave London the following day and still hoped somewhere deep in his core that Stratford might eventually come to accept him...

But Stratford had abandoned all pretense of manners that night. The moment the ladies withdrew, he'd launched the most vicious tirade yet, recounting in exaggerated detail every mistake his worthless son

had made in thirty-odd years. That he would do so in front of Palfry, several cousins, and four unrelated lords had made it worse. That Palfry and the cousins echoed every charge, adding new criticisms of their own, made it intolerable.

He should have known Stratford's hatred would push him beyond civility, but he'd been too injured to think clearly – two brushes with death in the previous week had cracked his ribs and left him so bruised he could barely move. So he'd had no choice but to sit there.

Explaining himself would have been useless. Stratford hated quitters. Never mind that Alex had been a wreck after living double and triple lives for ten years. All that mattered was that Alex do what Stratford wanted. Injuries were proof of a reckless nature. No gentleman would be so careless. No Portland could condone his behavior. Every ancestor must weep to see the dishonor he was heaping on the family name.

Stratford had disowned him, loudly and viciously, in front of thirteen witnesses. There was nothing further to say.

His hand clenched, snapping the stem of his wineglass.

Eden gasped, pulling his thoughts back to the dining room.

"Forgive me," he said as Tweed mopped up the spill. "It is rude to let my mind wander when a beautiful lady graces my table."

"Are you all right?"

"Of course. Not even a scratch." He grinned. "Would you kiss it and make it better if there was?"

"Of course not." But her harsh tone must have bothered her, for she glanced at his scars, adding, "You obviously heal easily enough without assistance."

"Never easily. Some injuries can take months, but I'm sure your help would hasten the process." His gaze held hers, sinking into the mossy depths of her eyes, letting their tranquility drive his memories back into hiding.

Tranquility sharpened to something potent. Desire?

He resumed eating, but he couldn't pull his gaze from Eden. The bands on his control loosened...

* * * *

Eden cursed her flaming face. He had an uncanny

ability to rouse awareness. And he did it deliberately. His gaze penetrated every barrier she'd thrown up, devouring her essence. When he'd stripped her bare, exposing her most secret desires, his gaze wandered slowly, seductively, to her breasts, setting her flesh ablaze as it passed. When her heart raced in response, he smiled that crooked rake's grin and lifted a broccoli bud to his mouth.

Tweed slipped from the room.

Alex's teeth closed around the bud.

Her nipples surged painfully to attention. Heat burst from her core, instantly flushing every inch of skin before pooling in her womb. She tried to tear her eyes away, tried to remember Olivia and responsibility and her resolution to ignore him.

But she couldn't. The memory of those teeth sharp on her tongue revived every detail of that carriage ride, swamping her with lust.

He swallowed audibly, then met her gaze and licked his lips.

Not until her plate scraped across the tabletop did she realize she'd leaned closer to follow the motion, recalling his lips warm against hers.

Cursing her loss of control, she straightened. But nothing could tear her gaze from Alex. He mesmerized her, his eyes so hot she wondered how she could ever have thought them icy. Even his scar seemed enticing tonight, a moonlit path drawing her gaze to his mouth where mobile lips pursed, waiting to drive her to even greater pleasure.

Smiling seductively, he raised the dish of oysters, inhaled deeply to savor the aroma, then scooped one onto a spoon. Pausing a moment, he licked it clean, his tongue curling this way and that to capture every drop, then sucked it into his mouth with a loud smack.

Need enveloped her, scorching her skin. She fought for calm, determined to overcome the tremors that tried to shake her hands. She could not afford to lose control of her senses again. To maintain her dignity and carry out her responsibilities to Olivia, John, and Ridley, she must remain strong.

And she *was* strong, she reminded her treacherous body, wrenching her eyes away to glare at her plate. How else had she endured finding her father's lifeless body? How else had she accepted marriage to a

stranger old enough to be her grandfather? How else had she raised a fragile infant to become a diamond of the first water?

Use that strength, she urged herself. *Don't let him turn you into a boneless wanton willing to do anything he asks if only he'll touch you again. Turn this game against him.*

She might have inadvertently triggered his desire by watching him too closely, but he'd eagerly leaped to appease it. It was time to teach him that she would not succumb. He was at least as susceptible to lust as she. If she frustrated him enough, he would turn his eyes elsewhere. Men could not risk remaining unsatisfied for long...

Boldly meeting his gaze, she speared the fattest stalk of asparagus, then licked it slowly from end to end, savoring the butter. Her teeth delicately nipped off the tip.

Alex's eyes nearly popped out.

Smiling, she dredged it through the buttery sauce, making sure it was thoroughly coated, then curled her tongue to wipe it clean.

Heat exploded across his face, raising an answering heat in her.

Steady, she admonished herself, brutally thrusting her body's rebellion aside. Her purpose was to frustrate him into abandoning all thought of seduction, not to fall into his arms. But her control wavered as he scooped up another oyster, sucking it in and out of his mouth before devouring it.

She nearly whimpered.

Determined to bring him to his knees, she selected the ripest strawberry, dipped it in cream, then mimicked him, sliding it in and out of her mouth to remove every drop, savoring the flavor and texture.

He moaned.

She sighed in exaggerated ecstasy, then dredged up more cream. This time she laid the strawberry against her cheek, then stretched her tongue to lap it dry. A drop of cream slowly drizzled toward her chin.

"If it falls, it could stain your gown," he choked hoarsely, reaching for her.

"It won't." Batting his hand away, she scooped the drop onto one finger and rubbed it across her lips. Her womb throbbed as his eyes followed.

"It's still there."

“Not for long.” Her tongue traced the path with agonizing slowness, his intent gaze making her lips tingle.

“Are you finished?” he panted, face flushed, eyes bright. His fingers actually trembled as he laid his napkin on the table.

“I believe so. Time to read Peterson’s journal.”

“Later.” He pulled her into his arms.

She wanted to arch into him, taste him, tear his clothes... But she rallied her determination and stepped away, then stared intently at his groin. Already rigid, it thickened further under her gaze, making him shudder from head to toe.

Somehow, she found her voice. “You do have a problem, don’t you, Alex. While you find someone to take care of it, I’ll read the journal. We can discuss its contents when you return.”

He froze. “Witch. You’ve been teasing me.”

“No more than you’ve been teasing me.”

“I’m not teasing.”

“But you are a gentleman. You won’t force a lady. Since I’m not interested in assisting you, you must seek relief elsewhere.” She stepped back, meeting his eyes. “I’ll be no man’s mistress, Alex. And no man’s wife. I’ll not destroy my reputation for you or anyone.”

“No one will know.”

“You think not? Servants talk. Tweed might be trustworthy, but no one else in this house even knows you.” Relief weakened her knees when intelligence replaced the heat in his eyes. “Olivia has no dowry, making it difficult enough to find a willing suitor. The slightest tarnish on her reputation *or mine* will make it impossible. I’ll not condemn her to a life of spinsterhood.”

When he made no comment, she turned for the door. “I’ll study this in the library so your staff can clear the table. If you wish to discuss business, you may join me. But leave the flirtation behind. All of it.”

* * * *

Alex followed, castigating himself for losing control. The encounter in his carriage had shocked Eden into rigid virtue. The change in her gaze had likely been shock rather than desire, which made his response unacceptable.

Olivia was a bigger problem than he’d realized. But she provided an opportunity to ease some of the guilt

he'd suffered since discovering that his mistakes had contributed to Higgins's death, leaving both girls orphaned. Olivia needed a dowry, and he could easily supply one. He could also find her a husband.

The decision wasn't altruistic, he admitted. Eden would never consider her own needs until Olivia was settled. Only then might she consent to explore her passion. It was stronger than he'd suspected. She'd been so aroused he was amazed she'd found the strength to pull back. He was equally amazed that he'd been capable of doing so. Never had a woman so nearly brought him to his knees without even a touch. He had to have her else his heart would burst.

But for the moment, he stifled his need and let Eden enjoy tonight's victory. That odd protectiveness was growing. He could do nothing to hurt her.

They spent an hour sitting on opposite sides of the table, the journal open between them. Peterson's writing was terrible, making it difficult to follow. And he'd jotted down information as he acquired it, linking related bits with a complicated system of codes that took time to work out. But as Alex absorbed the contents, excitement made even the scent of Eden's hair recede into the background. The book contained dozens of secrets that ranged from embarrassing to criminal, hundreds of observations on the men who hid those secrets, and uncounted notes on financial transactions related to the information. Peterson could have blackmailed half of society – and probably had to some extent. At least three lords had purchased Roman statues despite having no interest in antiquities.

Many of the recorded embarrassments involved sexual peccadilloes, so Eden was getting an unexpected education. If he'd realized the scope of the contents, he never would have showed it to her.

"That is appalling," she gasped when they reached a list of men who patronized a brothel specializing in very young girls. A shorter but more dangerous list named men interested in young boys.

"If he used this knowledge, I'm amazed he lived as long as he did." Alex shook his head.

"He must have used it. Why else would he keep it?"

"I don't see any sales connected with this section. For some men, merely knowing secrets is enough. They can feel superior without revealing their

knowledge.”

“But Peterson sold secrets freely.”

“Not all of them.” The man had seemed to know which secrets could be lucrative and which were too dangerous.

Another quarter hour passed before they reached the first entries on Sarsos.

“Finally,” said Eden.

If collected together, the notes would fill a dozen pages. In addition to cataloguing dishonest dealers who sold fake Sarsosian antiquities, Peterson listed every rumor about the place, the sources of those rumors, and their buyers.

“Lucrative,” murmured Alex, noting Peterson’s prices. “The four serious collectors bought every tale.” And for considerable prices. He squinted at the dates. “Emerson has been buying information the longest.”

“Twenty-five years.”

“That industrialist has been active for twenty-one, and Lord Oakdale for twenty.” Those were the years during which the toppling of the French throne had raised serious concerns. Until then the French demands for citizen involvement in government hadn’t been much different from the English Parliament. But beheading a monarch... “John doesn’t appear until nine years ago.”

“Just after we moved to Ridley to escape the arguments with Sir George over the collection. That was also when John began blaming the staff for his father’s decline – it controls wealth, according to legend.”

“Why would he blame the staff? It was gone.”

“Before the theft, Sir George was renowned in financial circles. Everything he touched prospered. He paid bargain prices for antiquities. Those he sold made huge profits. If he invested in shares, their value rose. Selling shares earned him the top price, for ventures usually sank after he pulled out. John could not recall a single investment that did not put money in Marlow’s pocket.”

“There are others with similar expertise,” Alex pointed out. Helen’s father had built one of the largest fortunes in England from nothing.

“True, which is why John never remarked on his father’s acumen. But the moment the staff disappeared, Sir George’s luck changed. Investments

failed. Sales fell through. Crops languished. His fortune dwindled until all that remained was his collection and the estate. The decline took only a year.”

“Don’t blame the staff,” Alex warned. “He was eighty and mentally fragile. Theft leaves its victims feeling violated. Murder is worse. Suffering both in so short a period likely shredded his confidence and destroyed that sense of immunity from harm that pervades the aristocracy. Age would exaggerate the problem. It is no surprise that he became hesitant, making poor decisions that he probably compounded in an effort to turn things around. The war didn’t help. France won campaign after campaign, toppling governments across the Continent, making it seem inevitable that they would conquer the world. Many investments failed then that might have prospered at another time. As for crops, those were lean years everywhere. If John blamed the staff, it may have been from guilt that Christine stole it, shocking Sir George into hesitancy and triggering the decline.”

She shrugged. “He never felt guilty over Christine. In legend, the staff was wielded once a year to bless the crops and stimulate trade. A man who safeguards the staff without greed benefits from its power, as does one who wields it only for others. Wealth will be his, though it will never rule him. It was the abrupt change in his father’s circumstances that convinced John the staff was real.”

Alex shook his head, furious that Eden had been tied to an obsessed dreamer for ten years. His fault. All his fault. “Much as I hate to disparage the dead, it sounds like John was as barmy as he claimed his father was.”

“Perhaps. I remonstrated with him often, but it did no good. As you can see” —she tapped the page— “he spent large sums to trace Sarsos artifacts, ostensibly to keep them from falling into the wrong hands. His obsession grew until he could think of nothing else, leaving me to restore the gardens, run the estate, and supervise the steward – though in his name, of course. He thought of nothing but Sarsos.”

Alex nodded, though had to wonder how John could have ignored so delectable a wife for the cold comfort of fantasy. But he stifled the thought and concentrated on business. “If the stories about the thefts of the chalice and spoon are true, then Emerson’s employer

is the most likely culprit – at least among the English collectors. People would have noticed if the others had left for even a week, let alone the months necessary to carry out those plots. Oakdale was too active in Parliament, and the industrialist spends much time at his mill.” He pointed to an entry. “Oakdale’s interest in Sarsos began when he found a reference to Sarsos refugees in Egypt. He hoped Sarsosian scrolls might contain clues that would help him decipher hieroglyphs.”

“Didn’t someone recently find a key for that?”

“At Rosetta. There is a stone carved in three languages, one of them Greek. It’s at the British Museum now, but so far no one has cracked its code.” He turned another page. “Aha!”

Eden stared. “He identified Emerson’s employer!”

“Maybe. See the question mark?” But Alex doubted Peterson was wrong. The man was uncanny when it came to uncovering secrets. “Percy Montagu,” he read. “Do you know anything about him?”

“Never heard of him.”

“It gives us a place to start. I’ll set the Home Office on his trail in the morning.”

“Good.” She leaned back in her chair, relaxing.

He wanted to hold her – not for lovemaking, but for comfort and relaxation at the end of a trying day. But he stayed his hand. The thought raised new danger signals that had his instincts jerking to attention. By following her to the library, he had tacitly agreed to her terms, at least for tonight. Breaking his word even for comfort would destroy her trust and turn her against him. So he sent her to bed and spent another hour studying the Sarsos entries before skimming the rest of the book...

Very interesting. It might prove useful once he’d settled Olivia.

Chapter Eight

“Stay in the carriage,” Alex ordered as they pulled up before the Home Office the next morning.

Eden shook her head. “I would rather wait inside. It’s cold today.”

“Eden.” He raised her hand to his lips. “You claimed concern for your reputation. Everyone inside knows me, and some of them will remember you. Do you

want them to think we're a couple?"

"No." She retrieved her hand.

"So stay here. I won't be long. Any chill won't last long. Sir Michael Iverson's house should be warm."

"Sir Harold's son? What has he to do with anything?"

"We will call on him shortly."

"Why?"

"Because he is your cousin, so you should pay your respects. And because there are questions about Sir Harold I was never able to answer."

"Such as?"

"His name is not in Peterson's book, so where did he learn about Sarsos? Did he go to Leicestershire determined to steal the staff, or was the theft a spur-of-the-moment plot conceived when he heard about it on arrival?"

Eden nodded, impressed. "Excellent questions. I never considered them before."

"Nor did John or his father," he said, jumping down. "They were satisfied that Christine's killer was dead." The door closed behind him.

She relaxed into the corner, hoping he would return soon – but not too soon. She needed time to settle her nerves. His touch was still too enticing. It would be a long, frustrating journey to Ridley. Would her will hold out?

I hope not...

The thought shocked her. She was in more danger than she'd feared.

She was still reeling when a drawl sounded outside. "I see you've ceased hiding from the world. Are you ready to behave like a gentleman at last?"

Palfry. His tone could freeze the sun and made the chill wind seem balmy. A quick glance showed him facing off with Alex.

Eden reached for the door latch, but paused when Alex's eyes touched hers. He wanted her to stay out of sight.

Fuming, she clasped her hands in her lap.

"A dandy's idea of gentlemanly behavior is not to my taste." Alex's voice could chip ice. "There is more to life than hours of preening."

"Better a dandy than a wastrel or an empty-headed fribble. You are both." Palfry's face hardened. "You have embarrassed the family long enough, Alexander."

But perhaps there is hope.” He nodded toward the Home Office. “I expect to hear at dinner that you have returned to your position. It will distract you from pouting and brawls.”

“Sorry to deflate your expectations, Palfry, but I’m calling on a friend. No more.” Eden could see tension building in his shoulders.

“A gentleman would restrict social calls to social settings and refrain from disrupting honest men’s labors,” snapped Palfry.

“A gentleman would refrain from passing judgment when he is clearly ignorant,” snapped Alex in return. “You make a fool of yourself every time you open your mouth.”

“Ignorant! You ungrateful bastard! How dare you vilify me when it is *you* who shames the family with every breath you take. Who has subjected us to scandal after scandal since he was in short pants? Who fought that ridiculous duel over a whore? Who starts brawls at every turn? If you weren’t such a hot-headed fool, your face wouldn’t make ladies faint.”

Alex slowly shook his head, his every pore radiating pity. “Who at this moment is creating a scene worthy of Siddons by drawing attention from every passerby? It wasn’t me who accosted you on a very public street. Nor is it me whose voice can be heard even through closed windows.” His voice hardened. “You are not and never will be my keeper, Palfry, so toddle on home before you make a bigger ass of yourself than you already are.”

Palfry’s mouth wagged, but nothing emerged.

Eden wanted to smack his insolent face, but revealing her presence could hurt Olivia. The baggage coach carrying Carver and Tweed had already left, so she was quite alone.

Palfry finally recovered his voice. “We will finish this discussion at dinner. You can start by explaining why you are housing a light-skirt.”

“As usual, your spies are completely inept, but I’ve no time to correct their mistakes,” drawled Alex. “Nor will I be at dinner. I have other commitments this evening.”

“Of course, you will be there. Stratford will be furious if you aren’t.”

“All the more reason to send my regrets. He’s a dead bore.”

“But—”

“What can he do to me?” Alex shrugged theatrically. “He already disowned me, and even *he* lacks the power to make society disown me. Which leaves challenging me to a duel, since killing me is all that’s left. I respectfully decline.”

“A reasonable man would seek his good graces. He can make your life abominable if he chooses.”

“Only if I let him.” When Palfry frowned in puzzlement, Alex grinned. “Don’t strain yourself trying to think. You haven’t the ability. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“You have to dine with us. Jason’s back.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Alex turned toward the Home Office.

Palfry grabbed his arm. “He’s received two more medals since he was last in England. Now he’s accepted a post at Horse Guards, so he’s home for good. He’ll wed Lady Elaine Fortescu in June – the Duke of Hartshoal’s daughter. Her sister would be ideal for you. It’s long past time you set up your nursery, so—”

“Remove your hand from my coat.” Alex’s glare sent Palfry back several paces. “I will remind you one last time: You are not my keeper, so take your delusions and your wagging tongue and trot on home like the good little puppy you are. Tell Stratford you failed. But don’t ever touch me again.” He strode away, disappearing into the Home Office.

Palfry stared after him for a full minute before turning to resume his walk. Eden flinched farther into the corner, for hatred contorted his face.

She stared out the window long after he was gone.

It was clear that Palfry was nothing like Alex. Or like Jason, who had returned a hero. Palfry likely felt inferior to the military officer with his air of command and a history of daring deeds that had probably garnered Stratford’s approval. Perhaps Palfry hoped that whipping Alex into shape would focus that approval on him. And perhaps he envied Alex’s freedom to think for himself.

But whatever drove Palfry – and it might well be Stratford – she was glad to be leaving London. Alex did not need more trouble.

Tweed’s description of this feud had been a vast understatement. How could any family treat a son so

abominably? It made no sense.

That was not to say that she expected families to be loving. Most merely muddled along. Her own father had been so focused on his studies that he'd ignored his children. Richard was a pompous bore, who took his position as head of the family so seriously that he often tried to dictate behavior – much like Palfry. But Richard kept family feuds private. He even greeted John politely in public.

So nothing had prepared her for this. How could anyone deride a man who had worked so hard to serve his king? Granted, they knew few details, but even a secretarial post was *something*.

She *did* know details, for John had followed Alex's career closely – she wondered if Alex knew that the praise John had sent to Sidmouth after Alex resolved Christine's murder had been one reason the Home Secretary had increased Alex's responsibilities. Sidmouth had kept John apprised of Alex's progress.

So she knew that Alex had apprehended four spies and a traitor in a bloody battle that had left him bedridden for three months. Alex had accepted the cost without complaint, for recovering that stolen information had saved countless lives. Other assignments had exposed a highly placed traitor and disrupted the French courier system so badly that purloined information reached Napoleon too late to be of use.

So why did he let Palfry and Stratford condemn him as useless? He could have found an explanation that would not expose the truth.

* * * *

Alex unclenched his fists as he climbed the stairs to his old office. He was glad Stratford had disowned him, he reminded himself. It let him avoid the man entirely. Sharing a roof – or even a meal – with any of his family had always been uncomfortable. They were stuffy, pompous, intolerant bores guaranteed to set any reasonable man's teeth on edge. They deemed anyone who disagreed with them to be wrong. King or peasant made no difference. Only their opinions mattered. And they never admitted fault.

Shoving the memories aside, he rapped on the door, then pushed it open when a voice bade him enter.

"Alex!" Terrence Riley rose to shake hands. "I hadn't heard you were in town."

“Just passing through.” Alex took a seat in front of his old desk, stifling momentary regret that it was no longer his. “I’ve a small problem that could use your help, if you are willing. Unofficially, though it may result in official action down the road.”

“What?” His former assistant relaxed into his chair. “A spot of sheep stealing in the wilds of Devonshire?”

“Hardly. You will recall the lady who was looking for me last week.”

Terrence frowned. “I wasn’t here at the time, but they say she was quite insistent. Randolph finally gave her your direction to get rid of her. My apologies for that. I read him the riot act, so you can be sure it won’t happen again. If she put you in danger—”

“Nothing like that,” said Alex smoothly, though he was glad to acquit Terrence of loose lips. “She’s the widow of an old friend. Her husband died under suspicious circumstances, which she wants me to investigate.”

“Why not the magistrate?”

“The magistrate insists it was an accident.” Alex shook his head, then explained.

“I see. He’s a suspect. Do you want us to take over the case?”

“Not yet. There are other suspects with better motives, and it may tie in with a case I handled some years ago. But you can gather information for me, if you would. And if I do find a killer, you will be the first to know.”

“What information?”

“I need everything you can learn about Percy Montagu, particularly his movements for the past three weeks. I also need information on an antiquities agent named Barclay, who uses the Pulteney as a mail drop.” Barclay worked for Lord Oakdale, but he might be pursuing personal interests as well.

Terrence frowned. “Montagu is the family name of the Duke of Travers. He won’t welcome anyone sniffing about.”

“I know, which is why this remains unofficial unless I discover a problem. His is but one of several names that have cropped up.”

“What has he done?”

“Possibly nothing.” Before Terrence could probe further, he named his other suspects, then added, “And my instincts fear this is urgent.”

Terrence froze, then nodded. “Damn your instincts. The last time they acted up, I wound up riding *ventre à terre* to Somerset and nearly killed myself.” He blew out a breath. “Anything else?”

“Yet another antiquities agent named Jasper. Last heard from in Paris, headed for Rome. I think his life is in danger.”

“Small problem, my ass,” grumbled Terrence. “I need details, Alex. I not a magician or a mind reader.”

“Check with his secretary.” He added the direction, again ignoring the request for details. If someone was stalking those interested in Sarsos, he wouldn’t add Terrence to the list.

Terrence frowned. “Oakdale can’t be involved. He was a connection of my mother’s who died last week.”

“My condolences.” Alex sighed. “I heard he was ailing, but didn’t think it was grave.”

“It was no surprise. He’d been getting weaker for months and ceased recognizing faces some time ago, so it’s just as well his misery is over. Mother is the one who is grieving – she always liked him. Personally, I never enjoyed visiting. He collected Egyptian artifacts and had a mummy that scared me witless when I was twelve.”

“You’ve recovered well.”

“Not well enough to manage another of your lightning investigations,” he muttered, then shook his head and finished making notes. “Where can I send reports?”

“Ridley Park. Leicestershire.” Knowing that Terrence’s curiosity would get results faster if it remained unsated, Alex headed for the door. But he opened it to find Sidmouth’s secretary raising one hand to rap.

Alex suppressed a frown. This was why he’d hesitated coming here. He didn’t want to see Sidmouth. The Home Secretary had been urging him to return to work, unwilling to believe that Alex’s investigative career was over.

So why are you here? taunted his conscience as he docilely followed the man to Sidmouth’s office.

It was a question he was unwilling to answer.

Though Sidmouth’s hair had receded another inch, he looked better than the day Alex had tendered his resignation. The deep lines that had clustered around his eyes were fading.

“You look rested,” said Sidmouth as his secretary departed.

“And content.” Alex met his gaze.

“I don’t believe—” He cut off the words with a sigh. “I won’t reopen our debate, though we will always have a place for a man of your talents, Portland.”

Alex relaxed.

“But your timing is perfect, as always. I was just writing to you. The Regent will award you a barony for *service to the crown* – he can’t be more specific, as you well know. The articles of patent go to Parliament next month. The bill should pass easily enough. England needs heroes to counter this growing unrest.”

“This isn’t necessary,” he managed.

“It is.” Sidmouth forestalled another objection with a raised hand. “Arrangements are out of my hands. Plan to be in town the first week in May. But don’t talk about your cases.”

“Of course not, sir. But—”

“That wasn’t a slap on the wrist. You are the best. Always have been. Call here when you return.”

Alex found himself in the hall with little memory of how he’d got there. His head swam.

A barony?

A week ago he would have accepted it as his due, but now the very idea hurt. His reputation had been founded on lies. He had *not* solved his first solo case with panache and acumen. He had botched it quite thoroughly, even reversing the roles of the principal culprits. Never mind that both men had died. Such sloppy investigative work was not acceptable.

And it raised the question of how many other mistakes he’d unwittingly made. Was he a complete fraud, so arrogantly sure of his own infallibility that he’d turned into another Stratford?

His stomach churned. If his accusations had sent men to an undeserved death, then he must refuse any honor from the crown. He would not live a larger lie.

Incompetent ... worthless...

His only choice was to reopen the Marlow case from the beginning. Publicly. The Regent must know the truth.

Stopping at the porter’s desk, he penned a note to Terrence requesting a copy of his official report, then checked the court roster for Sir Michael’s direction.

Chapter Nine

Sir Michael's butler ushered Alex and Eden into a small study, closing the door quietly behind them.

The room was decidedly masculine, with leather chairs flanking the fireplace, deep green paneling, thick carpet, and shelves holding a plethora of well-thumbed volumes. A portrait of Sir Harold hung above the mantel, easily recognizable because of the scar below his left ear. While examining the body, Alex had wondered how it felt to have so visible an imperfection. Four years later he'd acquired the first of his own.

Now he turned away from the painting, too aware of the bloated corpse Sir Harold had become. To avoid the brown eyes that seemed to reproach him for myriad mistakes, he concentrated on Sir Harold's son.

Sir Michael strongly resembled his father. Only a smaller nose and lack of a scar proved the portrait did not depict him. Everything else was the same – dark hair, bushy brows, high cheeks, cleft chin.

"Mr. Portland?" Curiosity lit Sir Michael's face, momentarily lightening his irritation at being interrupted.

"Thank you for receiving us," Alex replied, then introduced Eden, omitting her remote kinship. He had warned her to say nothing and ignore anything he said. She'd showed great presence at Peterson's, so he trusted her to behave. Another oddity. He'd never completely trusted any female. Not even Helen.

Eden confirmed his instincts by uttering nothing beyond the standard greetings. A footman hurried in with a tray. Once Eden was unobtrusively sipping tea by the fire, Alex turned to Sir Michael.

"I am investigating a recent theft, which has a nebulous connection to several rumors. To sort out the truth, I must speak with everyone who has evinced an interest in Sarsos."

"Who the devil is Sarsos?" Sir Michael scowled.

"You mean *what*. It was an island that sank into the sea."

"I thought that was Atlantis."

"Atlantis was another one. There were several."

"I wouldn't know." Belligerence sharpened his tone.

Alex worked harder to look harmless. "I am aware of that. But your father did."

"Sir Harold?" His shock was evident. "He's dead."

"True, but before he died, he evinced interest in artifacts from Sarsos."

"First I've heard of it," grumbled Sir Michael.

Alex bit back a sigh. "I'm sorry to hear that. Perhaps you can direct me to someone more familiar with his interests. I understand he died when his ship capsized?" He must be careful how much he revealed. Sir Michael knew nothing of Sir Harold's crimes. Marlow's demand for secrecy had prevented Alex from speaking with Sir Harold's family or mentioning Sarsos.

Sir Michael was shaking his head. "Rum luck, that. Put out in poor weather and paid the price."

Alex nodded. "Why didn't he wait for fair sailing?"

"It was planting season, so he rushed his business."

"What business?"

Sir Michael's face hardened. "What concern is it of yours?"

"I must speak with anyone he saw on that trip. It is the only way to learn whether his interest in Sarsos is relevant to my current investigation or whether it is a coincidence I can safely ignore."

"I can't believe that something ten years gone can possibly be relevant."

"In which case, why not answer the question? It is ancient history for you, too."

"In truth, I don't know the answer. I was in the Caribbean studying a plantation that was up for sale. Sugar can be quite lucrative, though that place was poorly run and would have needed an influx of cash to get back on its feet. I had to decline the purchase."

Alex ignored the attempt to change the subject. "No one mentioned his business when you asked about his death?"

"No. He made that journey several times a year. As do I. Spring is a chancy time to sail, but one cannot always wait for fair weather."

Alex nodded. "What happened to his antiquities after his death?"

Sir Michael stared. "What antiquities – or do you mean those old blunderbusses? They've been in the family since an ancestor drove off the Irish three hundred years ago."

"That's odd. Several antiquities dealers claim he was a regular customer who was particularly interested in Sarsos." It was a lie of the sort that often prompted

admissions. But not this time.

Sir Michael shrugged. "They probably mistook the name. Some confused Father with Sir Harold Ingleside."

"Perhaps." He dropped the subject, though there was no confusion about which baronet had stayed with Higgins during those crucial two weeks. But unless Sir Michael was a gifted actor, he knew nothing of interest – not even his father's state of mind before that final journey. "One last question. The harvest before his death was poor. Many men feared that the following one would be worse. If Sir Harold had heard of a way to improve yields, would he have rushed out to learn more?"

"No." His voice was positive. "There were many ideas making the rounds then, some of them quite good. We argued the subject often. But Father insisted that the old methods were perfectly suited to our land. Nothing would convince him to try what he called newfangled folderol. It was too late to change anything the year he died – I didn't return until July. But I instituted modern methods the following year, with good results."

"And he had no interest in history or collections."

"None."

Alex nodded. "Thank you for your time. It is obvious that he had nothing to do with my puzzle."

"What is your puzzle, if I might be so bold?"

"Stolen antiquities, but if he had no interest in the subject, he would have paid no attention to rumors about it. I had hoped that he might have jotted them down or mentioned them to acquaintances."

"I doubt it." Sir Michael relaxed. "But I can ask my mother – she would know."

"Do that. I can be reached at Ridley Park, Leicestershire."

Alex excused himself and left, knowing that further pressure would raise suspicions. Sir Michael did not need to know that his father had seduced and killed Christine.

With luck, Lady Iverson might know something of interest. Even ignorance would be useful, for it would support the notion that Higgins had been the force behind the plot. He would then have to decide whether Higgins had lured Sir Michael into the scheme or if Sir Michael had traveled to Leicestershire for other reasons and been corrupted after he arrived. Had there

been a third man involved? Higgins didn't show up in Peterson's book, either.

* * * *

"How can he claim that Sir Harold knew nothing of Sarsos?" demanded Eden the moment the carriage pulled away from Sir Michael's house. She'd bit her tongue throughout the interview, remaining silent despite his strange approach, but now she needed answers. "He convinced Christine to steal the staff, then killed her."

"But Sir Michael doesn't know that."

"Doesn't know?" She twisted to stare at him.

"Exactly. Sir George demanded absolute secrecy. Thus when Sir Harold's ship foundered, we said nothing to the family about his crimes."

"You sound disgruntled."

He sighed. "There were questions I was not able to ask because of Sir George's demands. Sir Harold's death ended the case."

"Does it matter?"

"I don't know. I didn't think so at the time, but now we have another Sarsos relic stolen from another Marlow, leaving another dead body behind. I don't like it."

She didn't like it, either. "So what do we do next?" She kicked herself the moment the words were out, for the question sounded too suggestive.

But he ignored the blush rising to stain her cheeks. "We need to check on everyone Sir Harold met during that period. Especially those with whom he might have discussed Sarsos. Like your father."

"Papa?" She stared at him.

"Higgins was a scholar interested in the classics. Who better to talk to?"

"I don't— I never thought—" Her mind whirled so fast she nearly fainted. Before she knew it, she was clamped against his side. Only when he made no attempt to arouse her did she relax, letting the black spots swirling before her eyes dissipate.

"Who was better qualified to understand his interests?" he repeated.

"Of course. But I never considered the possibility before, for it frankly seems unlike him. After Mother died, Papa often lectured me on his studies, but he never once mentioned Sarsos."

"You're sure?"

“Of course. I would have recalled the name the moment John first raised the subject. Papa never mentioned it.”

Alex frowned, then slowly nodded. “So if Sir Harold had raised the subject, your father would have found it fascinating. Scholars love learning new things.” He paused. “You were gone when Sir Harold arrived?”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. Thinking about those days always left her weak. But he was right to suspect a connection. “I hadn’t even known he was expected.”

“Were there others in the parish who shared his interest in the classics? Men he might have spoken to after Sir Harold left?”

Eden frowned, thinking back ten years. “The squire’s main interest was hunting, but Papa tutored his sons before they left for Eton, and he took Sunday dinner at the manor most weeks. Then there was Major Baggot. He and Papa often argued world affairs, but I can’t recall if they touched on other topics – I generally left the room when the major arrived, for he always shouted, a consequence of being rather deaf. Another friend was old Mr. Hinshawe – retired solicitor. They took tea together twice a week, alternating houses.”

“Did you stay in touch with any of them after you married John?”

“No.” Between perfecting her manners and keeping Olivia out of John’s way, she’d had no time to consider former acquaintances, most of whom had stepped firmly away lest they be tarnished by her father’s suicide. “Mr. Hinshawe is likely gone by now. The major, too. He was past seventy when I left.”

“Did any of them describe your father’s final days?”

She shuddered.

Alex pulled her closer, stroking her arm – purely in comfort. The realization let her dig through the memories of that awful week...

“Olivia and I had spent a month in York with friends. We’d postponed our return until dry weather because the stage dropped us three miles from home. Olivia was fragile as a child, and I didn’t want her walking in the rain.”

“No one met you?”

She shook her head. “No. Papa had little concept of time. And even if he’d known the date we would

return, he didn't like asking someone to send a carriage for us. We kept no horse." She sighed at the reminder of how little money they'd had. "The moment I pushed open the door, I knew. The smell—" She clamped her lips together as her stomach heaved. Thank God John's body had been outdoors...

"Don't think about that part," murmured Alex, dropping a light kiss on her hair.

"I sent Olivia to fetch the squire even before I went inside. Squire was shocked – there's no other way to describe it. Not just at the body, but that Papa, of all people, would do such a thing. If only I'd been there."

"Don't torment yourself. You could have done nothing. Did the squire describe his last meeting with your father?"

"Yes, not that I remember all that much – it was as if someone had packed my head in cotton wool. He swore that Papa seemed his usual self at services the day before, but had declined dinner at the manor, citing urgent studies."

"That sounds odd."

"Not at all. That was his standard excuse for avoiding duty whenever a new book arrived. Some weeks I could barely pry him from his study long enough to read services." She shuddered. "Yet he must have killed himself almost immediately after arriving home. The squire judged him a full day gone when I found him Monday afternoon."

Only after Alex's arm tightened convulsively around her did she recall that he'd interviewed her father a short time before his death, so must have arrived shortly after services. Yet that still couldn't explain why her father had shot himself. She was wondering how to ask for more details on their meeting when he again spoke.

"What about the condolence calls? Did anyone describe new interests? Perhaps Sir Harold mentioned a treatise on Sarsos or put him in touch with someone interested in the subject. Since Peterson didn't know about Sir Harold's interest in Sarsos, his source must have been another collector."

"I'm sorry, Alex. That week is lost in a haze of pain, horror, and terror. People called, but I don't recall who. And I've no recollection of anything we might have discussed."

"Everything is a fog?"

“Not quite. I recall the duns all too clearly – Papa had no head for figures, so he was always in debt. There was the letter from the new vicar announcing his imminent arrival and his expectation that the vicarage would be empty. He made it clear that we were not his concern. And there was John, arriving unannounced to offer for my hand. When he swore he’d raise Olivia as his daughter—” A sob broke free.

“Easy, Eden.” He swung her into lap, letting her hide her face against his shoulder. His arms closed protectively around her, again offering only comfort. She’d not cried after finding her father’s body, but now the terror of those days flooded back, intensified by the relief that John had rescued Olivia from a brutal life in the workhouse.

As the emotion gushed out in a flood of tears, her heart lightened. For the first time in her life, she didn’t have to hide distress. Alex would never hold it against her, though how she knew that was a mystery.

It felt like hours passed before her tears finally dried.

“Feeling better?” he asked quietly.

“Much.” When she pulled back, he smiled and returned her to the seat.

“Good. If you think of anything else, let me know. In the meantime, we’ll concentrate on the man found with John. I think he is either Emerson or Barclay.”

“Barclay? Oakdale’s agent? But I thought we eliminated Oakdale.”

“Yes, but I’ve been thinking about Peterson’s records.” He pulled out the journal and turned to the Sarsos entries, brushing against her as he positioned the book so they could both see. “Look at this. Oakdale asked Peterson about Sarsos twenty years ago, in person. Peterson answered his questions, and Oakdale left. No money changed hands, for Peterson wasn’t yet selling information.”

“Or he wasn’t keeping records of the sales,” she countered.

“Perhaps. But that was the only time Peterson met Oakdale – Peterson didn’t carry Egyptian artifacts in those days, so he wasn’t Oakdale’s usual dealer. Four months later Barclay appeared, claiming that Oakdale had hired him to track down Sarsosian relics.”

“You mean he didn’t work for Oakdale?”

“It’s the only theory that makes sense. Everyone else

insists that Oakdale was a respected Egyptian scholar with little interest in other cultures. And his Parliamentary duties gave him little time to expand his scholarly expertise. So I very much want to know who Barclay's employer really was. His apparent openness kept Peterson from investigating him as he did the very secretive Emerson. I suspect either Barclay or his employer told Sir Harold about Sarsos."

"How can you hope to identify him?"

"Terrence will do that. In the meantime, I will concentrate on John's death and talk to Jeremy. And perhaps you will think of something useful."

"I'll write to the squire. Ten years is a long time, but he might remember something."

When Alex fell silent, she shifted so her leg no longer touched his thigh. The contact was far too seductive. Her body had twice swayed toward him of its own volition.

Picking up Peterson's journal, she held it close to the window, ostensibly for more light. But instead of reading, she battled her senses into submission. If she didn't control herself, Olivia would have no chance to attract him.

Alex and Olivia were a perfect match, she reminded herself when pain stabbed her chest. Unlike her father, Eden refused to put personal desires above duty. She'd accepted responsibility for Olivia eighteen years ago. That would end only when Olivia married.

Olivia met every one of Alex's requirements for a bride, and he would make an excellent husband. He was a spectacular specimen of manhood, with charm and intelligence to spare. He was honorable enough to keep any liaisons private so Olivia would never be embarrassed. And he was wealthy enough to retire at a young age. No rumors of deep gaming had risen since that retirement, so he was not an obsessed gamester. His estate might be isolated, but he had a town house that would give Olivia access to London. And his family woes put him closer to Olivia's station. Alex did not define himself as an earl's son.

But would Stratford's antagonism hurt Olivia?

She frowned. Alex might claim that Stratford had no power over society, but people must be suspicious. There was no doubt that the estrangement hurt Alex. She'd seen the pain in his eyes during Palfry's attack. He might not like his family, but such blatant hatred

had to bother him and would certainly bother his wife. Was there anything Eden could do to ease the situation? She owed him a huge favor for his help. Healing the rift would repay it.

“Why does Palfry hate you?” she asked without warning.

“He is a puppet who mimics Stratford’s every word. Please accept my apology for exposing you to such unpleasantness, then forget it happened.”

“No apology is needed. I’ve witnessed worse between Richard and John, to say nothing of the rest of the Marlows. But I am curious. Is Palfry a simpleton? He doesn’t seem to know you at all.”

Alex sighed. “I don’t wish to discuss him.”

She almost let that be the last word, but instinct forbade it. Instinct had driven her to seek Richard the night of John’s death, which had showed her the manner of that death. It had driven her to seek Alex even when she’d learned of his retirement. Now it pushed her tongue into motion.

“I need to understand,” she answered. “His charges stand at odds with everything I know of you. How can he call you lazy and incompetent when you’ve worked so hard and achieved such impressive results? The Home Office doesn’t promote incompetents to positions like chief investigator.”

“How did you learn of that?”

“John told me.”

Alex muttered a curse half under his breath.

She laid a hand on his arm. “What happened, Alex?”

He stared out the window until she thought she’d failed. But finally he pulled her back against his side and spoke. “Stratford is as arrogant a lord as you will ever meet, more stiff-rumped than the highest duke and narrow-minded to boot. In his eyes, there is only one way to do anything, and that is *his* way. I have never been able to follow his rules.”

“But surely he approves of your service to England!”

“No.”

When she opened her mouth in shock, he spoke over her.

“He knows nothing of my work. Oh, he knows I worked at the Home Office – he all but forced me into the post, and I only accepted because I needed—” He broke off, shaking his head. “He doesn’t believe that I am capable of more than copying letters – poorly.”

“That’s absurd!”

“Not at all. My interests are different from his, which make them incomprehensible. My activities have never pleased him. He has no understanding of how investigations must be carried out – or wouldn’t if he actually thought about it. A gentleman does not pry into another’s business. Gentlemen never take the word of a commoner above that of a lord. And while boxing at Jackson’s Saloon is excellent exercise, actually engaging in a fight anywhere but on a field of honor is a disgrace to one’s breeding. Employing tactics outside a gentleman’s rules is even worse.”

“Are you saying he condemns you for the injuries that produced your scars?”

“In part. He doesn’t know anything about my career. Spies, traitors, and those who expose them are equally lower than dirt in society’s eyes. He would never consider altering that view, for doing so might force him to accept that his ideas about gentlemen are fantasies – I found several traitors with excellent breeding; one held a title.”

“But the war is over.”

“Not to everyone. Some still seek revenge, which is another reason I can’t tell him what I was doing. He would rant to Palfry, who would expose the details when he next cornered me in public. I still have enemies who would avenge Napoleon’s defeat by killing me. It is much better to let Stratford and Palfry complain about how I quit a modest but respectable secretarial position so I could waste my life in lazy idleness.”

She could see his point. Yet she could also hear his pain. And there must be a compromise that would ease that pain without exposing him to danger.

She turned back to the window to hide her face as she considered possibilities. Jason Portland was a military officer high enough up the ranks that he had to have earned his post rather than purchased it. He, at least, must appreciate the importance of Alex’s work.

As she said the name, a memory suddenly clicked into place – Kit Keeling returning home after his first year at Eton with tales about a schoolmate named Jason Portland. Kit had treated his old tutor’s daughter with more kindness than she’d deserved long after he’d grown to manhood. He’d even stood at her

father's unconsecrated graveside and offered his help. Perhaps it was time to accept that help. Kit could learn more about this rift. He might even persuade Jason to arrange a truce, which would make Olivia's life easier if she wed Alex.

She would write to Kit tonight.

In the meantime, she would busy herself with Peterson's journal. It was the best way to keep her mind off Alex's talented lips.

The more she read, the more certain she became that Peterson had made his primary living through blackmail. He'd recorded every questionable deed that had come his way. And more. She wondered if Alex had seen the notes in the back that described in titillating detail Peterson's personal encounters with several widows...

* * * *

Alex was grateful when Eden fell silent. How did she make him speak so freely? It was bad enough that John had told her details of his work that were supposed to be secret. He didn't need to provide more. And he never talked about his family.

He stared at a herd of cows filing toward a milking shed. But he couldn't concentrate on bucolic scenes today.

Eden was again reading Peterson's journal. He wanted to slam it shut, for the contents were highly inappropriate for ladies. Yet she showed no sign of being shocked, so he tucked her more tightly against him and closed his eyes. Maybe she would spot something he'd missed. She was astute enough...

Nights of little or no sleep finally caught up with him, sending him into a doze.

Chapter Ten

Eden was more than ready to leave the carriage by sunset. While Alex had been a near paragon of virtue who offered nothing beyond companionship and comfort, reading the last section of Peterson's journal had incited her body to riot. Every mile made her more aware of his arm warm against her shoulders, the fingers that occasionally stroked her hair, the thigh that rubbed hers whenever a wheel hit a rut.

There were too many ruts.

Despite the cold rain that had fallen intermittently

since they'd left London, the carriage was hot enough to bake bread. Sweat trickled between her breasts, sensitizing the skin and recalling the feel of his hand. Sparks skittered along her nerves until it was all she could do to quietly stare out the window. She wondered whether he was as affected as she by this constant contact, but she dared not look. Confirmation would shatter her precarious control.

Why had she suddenly become so wanton? Ladies never did so, not that she could apply that standard to herself. But none of the village women exhibited such vulgarity, either. Certainly they'd never lost control of themselves in public. It had to arise from more than keeping company with a rake. Even a virile rake with a hard, muscular body, broad shoulders, and a member so impressive that her hand itched to touch...

She stared harder at the black clouds swirling outside, trying desperately to steady her breathing. But it was as out of control as the wind whipping the roadside trees. Lightning stabbed a distant hillside, sizzling across her skin like another caress.

This was a bad time for lust. That John had been gone only two weeks made it unconscionable. Tarnishing her reputation would bring censure even from those acquaintances who ignored Richard's disdain, would convince Richard that he'd been right to despise her, and would ruin Olivia.

You cannot afford to bed this man! she reminded herself as another wave of desire melted her bones. *No matter how much you might enjoy it.*

And that was the rub. Never before had intimacy evoked much interest. But while John's attentions had made her impatient to finish, she knew that bedding Alex would be far different. She could no longer pretend that her character wasn't flawed. Traveling together made it easy to forget duty and responsibility and even society's expectations. Yesterday she'd moaned and whimpered in his arms. If they had not reached the house, she would have begged for more. Screamed for it, in a carriage, on a public street, assuring that his coachman would know her weakness and half of London would suspect it. She ought to feel debilitating shame, yet Alex's kisses had brought her more pleasure than ten years of marriage. She ached to feel his thick shaft stretching her as it thrust inside. She needed so badly to—

The carriage rocked to a halt, surrounded by the voices and laughter of a busy inn yard.

Eden flung open the door and jumped down without waiting for the groom to lower the step, fleeing herself as much as the carriage. She needed distance until she could settle her mind. Lots of distance. She could not afford to abrogate her responsibilities.

But there was no place to go. The baggage coach they'd caught up with an hour earlier was already unloading. Several burly men clustered around the ostler, their gestures reliving a fight – a taproom brawl, by the sound of it. Others lounged near the inn's door, ogling new arrivals. A mail coach jangled past, its guard blowing a warning as it charged toward the tollgate at the south end of the village. A private coach heading north held back until the mail passed, then swerved around a lumbering cart. The Great North Road was always busy.

"I want to conceal your identity in case we were followed," Alex murmured in her ear. He'd hit the ground scant seconds behind her and now slid an arm around her waist. "Let me do the talking."

She was too busy fighting off another surge of lust to object. Before she could ask what he intended, they were facing the innkeeper.

"Andrew Westerfield," Alex said jovially, proffering a card. "My wife and I" —*wife?*— "need two rooms for the night and space for our servants."

Eden nearly passed out from relief. Separate rooms would let her regain her composure.

But relief was short-lived.

"I've only one room left, and it's not my best." The proprietor shrugged. "Above the kitchen, it is."

Alex glanced outside where clouds boiled lower, driven by shrieking wind. Thunder crashed, sending men scurrying into the taproom. Another storm was poised to strike. "We'll take it."

As the innkeeper pulled out the register, Alex began a longwinded monologue on the state of the roads, his business in York, and the prospects for dry weather tomorrow.

Eden goggled in amazement. He'd again shifted personas, becoming a manufacturer of dyes. Not only had he changed his voice and accent, he even moved differently and somehow managed to look middle-aged. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn an

oath that he'd been born to the merchant class, then made a minor fortune in manufacturing. Was he aping a merchant as he'd aped Richard, or was he so skilled that he could create characters out of whole cloth?

But not in an instant, she realized. His card lay on the counter, clearly reading *Andrew Westerfield*. So he'd planned this charade. The comfort he'd offered all day had been an act to disarm her. Had he signaled the innkeeper to claim the inn was full?

Fury rose as his arm wrapped around her waist, leading her to the stairs. She held it in check until the proprietor left them alone, then rounded on him.

"It won't work, Alex. Using a false name won't convince me to bed you. Even if no one finds out we're traveling together – an unlikely hope – *I* would know the truth. I'll not live a lie."

"Stop!" he ordered, catching her hands when she would have slapped him. "I did not plan this. You said *no* and I accept that. I asked for two rooms because I don't want the frustration of sharing one with you, but we're unlikely to find a better place tonight." He gestured toward the window where wind now drove sheets of rain against the panes. "Fate apparently wants us together."

"Hah!"

"Not that way," he growled, "though I can't be near you without wanting you, devil take you!" He dragged her close and plundered her mouth.

God help her, she responded, fencing wildly with his tongue as she rubbed against him.

"Eden," he moaned, lifting her until his thick ridge nestled where it would do the most good. She bucked against it once, twice – then froze as realization crashed over her.

"No— I can't—"

He groaned, but released her. "See why I wanted two rooms?" Turning away, he put the width of this one between them. "My point about Fate was that we may have been followed. A horseman approached Tweed about noon when he stopped to change horses. The man sought word of two carriages and a rider on horseback – fortunately we hadn't caught up with him yet, and my horse is not distinctive. Tweed sent the fellow off on a false trail, but he'll be back. So I gave a false name to the innkeeper, and I'll stand guard tonight while you sleep."

"I see." She drew a deep breath. "Then I should thank you for keeping me safe." She moved to one of the chairs and concentrated on smoothing her skirt, while her heart settled back to normal. Embarrassment nearly choked her. Her charges had arisen from her own fantasies, not Alex's behavior. Now Alex knew just how depraved she'd become.

He wasn't the only one who felt tempted. His kisses had opened the door to a world of sensation she would never experience. How could she close it without sampling even the least of its pleasures?

Yet how could she dismiss this chance to settle Olivia? She had a duty to her sister, and duty always took precedence.

* * * *

Three hours later, after a meal during which both took great care to do or say nothing suggestive – which only intensified memories of last night's dinner – Alex paced the room in growing exasperation. It wasn't working. The more he tried to put seduction out of his mind, the larger the thought loomed. His hands trembled from the effort not to touch her. His erection pressed so hard against his pantaloons that the buttons threatened to rip off. Sitting next to her all day had nearly driven him mad.

"Alex?" Eden asked. "What's wrong?"

"What do you think?" he growled. "You are a very desirable woman, but I promised not to touch you."

"Oh." She fell silent.

He continued pacing, back and forth, back and forth, like the caged lion he'd once seen at the Tower. It was going to be a hellish night. Even if he could raise interest in bedding one of the serving girls – impossible when thoughts of Eden's soft skin filled his head – he couldn't leave her alone. The danger was real enough. Tweed had reported the rider the moment Alex caught up. Alex had seen no sign of the fellow, but since no matching entourage had taken that side road, the man would surely return. Now that both carriages were together...

"Do sit down," snapped Eden. "You are driving me mad."

He dropped heavily into a chair and stared out the window. Maybe spotting something suspicious would divert his mind. But how could he know what was suspicious? The room overlooked a stream and empty

field rather than the stable yard that was the center of activity at this coaching inn, so he would not know if someone approached to question the ostler. Three different men had already wandered back here, seeking a moment of privacy, so merely seeing someone was not suspicious. This was the only place that offered even a hint of seclusion. The inn was packed to the rafters now that the weather had turned savage. Servants lay four to a bed upstairs, with coachmen sharing stalls in the stable with the grooms. The maid who'd brought their dinner reported that four parties would spend the night in the taproom.

He shifted restlessly, trying to get comfortable.

"Why do you carry Westerfield's calling cards?" Eden asked suddenly.

"Habit." He shrugged. Perhaps satisfying her curiosity would distract him from her charms. "I often had to watch suspects without being spotted. If someone sees the same person in several places, he eventually notices. But few remember men who appear once, then vanish. For example, if you emerge from a shop to see a teamster hauling his wagon out of a mud hole, you won't pay much attention. Nor will you think of the teamster when you spot two gentlemen laughing at a street performer an hour later, or a clerk buying his weekly lottery ticket."

"Which ones were you?"

"I could have been any of them, or none, for the secret to remaining invisible is to blend. By the same token, changing roles makes it hard for others to track me, so I always carry several cards when traveling. It is a habit I rarely question now."

"But how can using a different name – or even a different voice – prevent someone from following you? Your clothing doesn't change. Nor do your scars."

"They can, if necessary." Wondering why he was again exposing tricks, he walked to the door, untied his cravat, and replaced it with a colored Belcher he pulled from his pocket. Shaking his head dislodged enough curls to cover the scar on his forehead. He debated reversing his waistcoat, but decided against it. Even without that, her eyes widened when he ambled back, using the gait of a coachman. "Tha' now, whatcha doin' in 'ere, Missy? Doncha know this 'ere's a gentleman's room?"

"Dear Lord. It's like magic."

“Hardly.” He raked his fingers through his hair, restoring a semblance of his usual style. “Any actor can do the same. One need only understand the effect of mannerisms.”

“Like what?”

“Part of it is movement – each class walks differently, using different gestures and what not. Then there is accent, word choices, clothing—”

“I know. But you do more than that.”

“Not always. But it helps if I provide a focus for people’s eyes and ears – a stutter, a limp, an unusual cravat or hideous waistcoat, scars.” He traced his own and shrugged. “A stranger will remember that focal point, but little else. If they meet me again without the focus, they won’t know me.”

“I never thought of that.”

“Few people do. When we leave in the morning, remember that you are Mrs. Westerfield, manufacturer’s wife. No one will connect you to Mrs. Marlow.”

“Like this?” She paused, then cast a disapproving look over his Belcher, her expression very much that of a haughty linen draper he’d once met. “I do believe you’ve made a wrong turn, Mr. Coachman. The stables are outside.”

He laughed, catching her in a quick hug before abruptly backing away. “You’ve quite a talent yourself, Eden.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. A vicar’s daughter is little different from a manufacturer’s wife.” Her hand reached out as if to touch him, but she pulled it back and retreated to the fireplace.

He had to divert his thoughts. If she would go to sleep, he could put her out of his mind. Unfortunately, she did not look the least drowsy. “Tell me about your childhood,” he tried. “You mentioned that your mother died when you were ten.”

“She took a fever after Olivia’s birth, then simply wasted away.”

“Your father must have been horrified to be left with the care of an infant.”

“Not really. Even before Mama died, he spent most of his time with his books. That didn’t change. Olivia was left to me and the housekeeper.”

“At ten?”

“It was a poor parish, so bringing in a nurse or

governess was impossible,” she reminded him. “And most children are working by ten. I was no different. Someone had to see that alms were distributed to the needy and that those with problems received help. I was too young to do much beyond reminding Papa of his duties, but he would not have noticed them if I’d remained silent. As the years passed, I took on most of the work myself. It was easier than prying him loose from his books. We rarely spoke of anything beyond his studies.”

“You said he tutored the squire’s sons. Was that just in classics, or did he cover other subjects, too.”

“Everything – not that he wanted to. But the squire had an extensive library. In exchange for lessons, Papa could borrow anything he wanted. And it meant I could share lessons with the boys, which gave me a better education than I would have received otherwise.”

“Because girls don’t study classics?”

“In part, but without an obligation to the squire, he would have forgotten to teach me anything.”

He ignored the bitterness in her voice. “John’s father must have enjoyed that you knew enough to appreciate his antiquities.”

“I never thought of it that way.” She frowned. “Perhaps that explains the looks he gave me at times.”

“Such as?”

She paused as if searching for words. But instead of speaking, she sent him an odd look that he couldn’t quite interpret. It seemed made up of equal parts interest, friendship, and guilt.

“What?” He frowned.

“I haven’t your skill for interpreting expressions.”

“It’s a simple enough question. You described Sir George as a melancholic man who slipped into delusions after I last saw him. Did he consider your knowledge interesting or dangerous or helpful or what?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. Elements of all three, I suspect. Perhaps he was frustrated to find someone knowledgeable after he’d abandoned his own interest. Or maybe he was torn between liking me as a person and hating that my breeding was so far below his.”

“No matter.” He was suddenly sorry he’d asked. Her breeding was acceptable, but Sir George would have looked at it askance, and Richard was worse. John’s

brother made prigs seem warm. “You mentioned duns. I didn’t think your father’s parish was *that* poor. What happened?”

“His studies. Tithes were lower than in neighboring parishes, but we could have managed had he not spent so much on books. I sold what I could after he died, but I had no time to contact London booksellers, so I doubt I realized a fraction of what they were worth.”

“I wish I’d known. I would have bought them myself.” Not quite true, he realized, recalling the debts that had plagued him ten years earlier.

“You enjoy the classics?”

“I read everything.”

She relaxed, perhaps recalling his library. Candlelight caught the golden highlights in her hair, making them sparkle like a field of jewels. He could imagine all too easily removing the pins to let it down. It would cascade past her shoulders in a silken river, making her seem younger, vulnerable ... and even more desirable.

Tearing his gaze away, he resumed his pacing, pausing briefly on each round to scan the ground outside. With everyone indoors to escape the rain, their stalker could move about unnoticed. Alex had to remain vigilant so no one could harm them.

“Perhaps you should go to sleep, Eden. I’ll summon Carver, then wait outside until you’re settled.”

“That won’t be necessary.” She flushed. “It will be best to sleep in my gown. Safer for both of us, I’m sure.”

“Of course.” He turned his back while she removed her half-boots and hairpins and crawled into bed. Once she was asleep, he could concentrate on duty.

But it didn’t work that way. Half an hour passed in growing frustration. Instead of sleeping, she was tossing restlessly, twisting and turning until he nearly ran mad. Every rustle reminded him of soft skin and eager lips. It was likely that her corset made her uncomfortable. Should he offer to unlace it? But that would mean touching her, watching as her breasts slid free, yearning—

She rolled over, stifling what sounded like a moan.

He paced the room yet again – ten steps to the fireplace, six to the door, five to the window, back to the fireplace, fisting his hands to keep from touching

her as he passed the bed. The torments of the damned raged through his groin.

* * * *

Eden was farther from sleep than she'd ever been in her life. And not just because of the lust boiling through her veins. Guilt was flogging her, too.

She'd deliberately aroused Alex at dinner yesterday, expecting him to seek out a courtesan when she refused him release. But in trying to control her own rampaging emotions, she'd forgotten that someone might be stalking her. Alex was too honorable to leave her in danger or to renege on his vow to recover the stone. So he'd endured. Alone. Last night in his study, all day in the carriage, tonight when circumstances forced them to share a bedchamber...

Only now did she understand what she'd done to him. It was a well-known fact that a man who failed to obtain sexual release when he needed it courted illness. Serious illness. From an early age she'd heard married women allude to the problem. John had confirmed it, and Peterson also mentioned it in that personal section of his journal. Providing John with that service had helped repay him for taking Olivia in. She'd failed him in other ways, but never in that one. And he'd been sufficiently grateful to make the encounters as easy for her as possible.

Now Alex was courting the very illness men feared most, for it could rob them of their ability to perform at all. He'd been in need for days without relief. Again he was putting her safety first, refusing to take advantage of the serving girls downstairs. So it was up to her.

She could not bed him – once she crossed that line, he would never look at Olivia. But Peterson's journal supplied a way, if she dared. It had been shockingly explicit, describing acts she would never have imagined on her own. The imagery remained vivid, taunting and teasing her in a constant stream of temptation. Could she indulge in wantonness without compromising her reputation? Would exploring the extent of her low-bred nature help her control it in the future? Maybe...

“Alex?” she said.

* * * *

Alex nearly jumped out of his skin as her husky tone sizzled along his nerves. “What?” He stopped by the door, hoping—

“I’m not sleepy, and you clearly have a problem. Surely you could have it attended to while I keep watch.”

“No. Lie down, Eden. I’m fine.” He tore his eyes from her tumble of hair and resumed pacing. Yet try as he might, his eyes returned to her on the next round.

She was staring at his groin. “That has to be uncomfortable. Perhaps—” She paused.

He held his breath.

A full minute passed before she continued. “Peterson’s journal is quite explicit.”

“I know.” The words came out in a croak. He’d alternated between embarrassment and arousal all day as he’d watched her read it, her cheeks turning pink as she devoured Peterson’s collection of fantasies. He knew he should have kept it from her eyes – she was a lady, after all – but imagining her indulging in such acts had aroused him too much. And the book had affected her more than any flirtation. So he’d left her in peace to enjoy it.

“I won’t bed you,” she repeated. “But there are other ways. Sit down.”

He collapsed onto a chair, so weak-kneed to find her walking boldly into his fantasies that he couldn’t have remained upright for anything.

“Let’s see what we can manage.” She knelt, her trembling hand reaching out to touch. “I must say this is quite impressive. Even thinking about it makes me shivery inside.” Her fingers traced his length.

He groaned, spreading his knees. “You don’t need to do this,” he managed.

“You mustn’t risk falling into a decline. Besides, Peterson’s book has made me quite curious. I’m looking forward to it.” Licking her lips, she met his eyes.

He had to be dreaming. This couldn’t be happening.

As she bent to undo his buttons, her hair cascaded over his thighs in a river of burnished gold. He shoved it behind her shoulders so he could see her face, glorying that her anticipation grew as she worked. She really *was* curious. And fascinated. And nearly as excited as he was. Her breath came in shallow pants.

She took her time, pausing to explore his length between each button. Tremors made her clumsy, but from the way her tongue kept licking her lips, he knew she shook from arousal rather than fear. The thought

quicken his own breathing until he was lightheaded. And when she finally freed him—

“Oh, my,” she breathed, running a finger from tip to base. “*Very* impressive.” Her hand curled around him and stroked.

“Eden!” he gasped, surging upward.

“I do believe you like that.” She smiled, stroking again as her other hand cupped his testicles and squeezed.

He nearly fainted. Like it? Nothing could compare.

“Do you think this will solve your problem?” she asked lightly – or tried to. Her voice was husky with desire, rasping his nerves and exciting him even more. That she actually enjoyed—

“Oh, yes,” he choked, surging into another stroke. And thank the Lord it would. He never would have lasted the night with the bed so near. Only half an hour had left him so crazed he’d nearly crawled in with her, which could only have ended in the very ravishment he’d vowed to avoid.

“Good.” She shifted, rubbing him lightly between her palms, smiling coyly when he jerked against her. She ran a thumb across his moist tip, then leaned forward and met his gaze. When anticipation shuddered through him, her tongue flicked out and licked.

He bucked.

“Sweet.” She licked again. “And tart. It is wondrously pleasing.” Her lips closed over the end as her palms picked up speed.

He was shaking so hard, he nearly exploded, but he held on for dear life. She was enjoying this as much as he, so he must prolong the exquisite torture as long as possible.

Five minutes. Ten. Only his heels and shoulders supported his tautly arched body. Sweat poured down his back as his fingers dug into the chair so he couldn’t grab her and end it. She’d nuzzled him until his juices smeared her cheek, demanding that he lick her clean. But he couldn’t touch her.

Fifteen. She nibbled his length, now light, now firm, until he ran mad from the pleasure of it. Never had he flown this high. She’d transformed Peterson’s notes into a symphony.

Again she raised her eyes to his, smiling that cat-in-the-creampot smile. Her hands accelerated in long, firm strokes, driving him nearer the edge. He writhed

in agony, no longer able to muffle his groans. He tried to recall anything that had brought him so much pleasure, but his mind was blank, all that had come before Eden wiped clean. She was his salvation, his—

“Harder,” he pleaded, gulping air until he nearly passed out. “Faster.”

She dragged her nails along his length...

He exploded.

* * * *

Eden sat back on her heels, panting. And not from exertion. Her entire body pulsed with energy. Touching Alex was the most exciting thing she'd done in her twenty-eight years. He was easily twice the size of John, rising from a nest of inky curls like Temptation personified. Holding him in her hand had sent liquid heat gushing from her womb. She might not be a lady, as Richard never ceased reminding her, but tonight she reveled in that lack. Wantonness was incredibly fun.

But far too dangerous. She was more aroused than when he'd kissed her in the carriage yesterday. When she found herself again reaching for him, she stood, retreating toward the bed where she would pretend sleep if it killed her.

And it just might...

“Your turn,” murmured Alex sleepily from where he'd collapsed back into his chair.

She swallowed hard. It was so very tempting, but she couldn't. Not if she hoped to settle Olivia.

“Don't worry,” he continued, reaching for a towel. “I promised not to bed you, and I'll stand by that. But you are too aroused to sleep. I can relieve that little problem.” His eyes were hot enough to melt lead.

Another wave of lust engulfed her. Was it truly wrong? “You won't—”

“No. After your masterful attentions, I couldn't. But I so very much want to touch you, Eden. You are the most sensual woman I've ever met. Let me please us both by pleasuring you.” He held out his hand.

Throwing caution to the winds, she took it. He was right. She needed help. Excitement skittered along her skin until she was mad with it. And who better to dampen it than an honorable rake? Never would this chance occur again.

Instead of the fiery kiss she'd expected, he trailed his lips lightly across her face, pausing to nibble her

ears, her nose, her chin. Only when she was quivering with impatience did he take her mouth, hotly, deeply, his plunging tongue exploding new heat into her womb.

Her dress and corset slid to the floor.

“Yes,” he breathed, bending her over his arm so he could suckle a breast through her shift.

“Alex!” In moments, she convulsed, spilling liquid down her thighs, then nearly wept that it was over so quickly.

He saw her distress and laughed. “Oh, no, my sweet Eden. That was just the beginning. You’ve an advantage I’ll never have, for that is not the end for you. And it is but a pale ghost of what I’ve in mind.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Laying her on the bed, he removed her shift to leave her clad only in stockings. Then he kicked off his boots and joined her. “We’ll start here since you like it so much.” His mouth closed around a nipple.

Before she knew what was happening, his wicked tongue and teeth restored desire. Clutching fistfuls of his shirt, she arched into his mouth until her entire breast was engulfed. Aches appeared in places she’d never noticed. She writhed, blindly seeking his shaft, knowing that it could ease the exquisite agony.

“Not tonight,” he murmured, pinning her on her back. “I promised not to enter you. But I want you to sleep very soundly. Ensuring that takes time.” His hand teased the inside of one thigh, then untied her garter. “Such gloriously long legs,” he purred, pausing to examine them. “How I wish I could feel them around my hips.”

The words invoked images of flexing to pull him deeper as he plunged inside. She whimpered.

“But for today, we’ll finish undressing...”

He pulled the garter away and slowly rolled her stocking down, lavishing kisses on the exposed skin, all the while extolling her legs. Propped on her elbows, she watched as he removed the second garter and skimmed his mouth along her flesh. The sight was more erotic than she’d dreamed possible.

When he had her quivering with need, he sat up, examining her from head to foot. “Flushed and beautiful,” he panted. “Now the real fun begins.” As one hand teased her nipples, he settled between her legs, parted her curls with his fingers, then blew softly.

She writhed, unable to think.

“So responsive.” He brushed a thumb across her. “So gloriously eager.” His breath beat hot against her skin.

“Don’t tease,” she gasped. “Touch me. More.”

A finger slipped inside. The question of whether this violated their agreement vanished on a new wave of pleasure. As he added a second one, she surged against him, seeking a rhythm her body seemed to know, though she’d never experienced it. Her eyes closed. Excitement built higher and higher. But no matter how she strained, she couldn’t quite manage the last step.

“Look at me.” His lips brushed her thigh. “See how much I enjoy watching you. Feel my fingers slide in and out. Slick. So very slick. I get hard just thinking about it. Imagine how it would feel if I could enter you. I shake at the thought, and you do, too.”

She raised her head. He wasn’t exaggerating. Fire burned in his eyes as he stared at his hand. Tremors rippled along his skin. His tongue mimicked his fingers, in and out, glistening with moisture.

She contracted, squeezing tighter, fighting for more.

He groaned. “You could wake the dead, Eden.”

“Harder,” she gasped. “Can’t quite make—”

“You will.” He raised his eyes to hers, deliberately licked his lips, then set his mouth to her throbbing core.

Incredibly, he drove her higher yet. She sobbed, begged, shouted her need until she shook so hard she thought she’d fall apart. She wanted him to touch her forever, to hold her on this quivering peak until eternity, yet she needed an end, needed to fly apart so she could be made anew...

“That’s right, Eden,” he gasped. “Come to me, sweetheart.”

But still she wavered, teetering between madness and annihilation. Not until his teeth scraped across her most sensitive spot did she explode into a million shards and fall, screaming, into blackness.

Chapter Eleven

Alex groggily opened his eyes to find Eden shaking his shoulders. Her shattering climax had sent him into a second one of his own, leaving him so drained that

when he'd finally staggered back to his chair he must have fallen asleep.

"Wake up," she demanded, shaking him harder. "The inn is on fire."

"Wha—" A cough cut off the question. Smoke boiled under the door, shocking him into immobility. He was a light sleeper who had never been caught unaware, especially when he was on guard. How had he failed to—

"Get up, Alex." She slapped his face. "Fasten my gown so I can fetch Carver. She falls apart in a crisis."

The slap broke his paralysis. He quickly did up her ties, grateful that she'd left off her stays. Time was pressing. Already their escape might be cut off. "You go outside. I'll see after Carver."

"There isn't time. You have to find Tweed. The male servants sleep in the other wing. Hurry!" With that she was gone.

Cursing, Alex jumped into his boots, tossed their valises out the window, then peered around the door. Flames roared up the kitchen stairs across the hall. No one would escape that way. But the rest of the inn seemed clear. He raced to the right, banging on doors and shouting, "Fire! Everyone out! Hurry!" Eden's voice echoed from upstairs, doing the same thing.

Voices swelled behind him. Doors slammed. He ran after Eden, terrified that she might become trapped. The attic was the most dangerous place to be, for the smoke would be thicker.

Tweed was already in the hallway herding groggy servants ahead of him. "The men's rooms are clear," he reported, choking.

"Good. Get them out," urged Alex. "I'll check the maids." Glass shattered downstairs, sending up new clouds of smoke. Horses screamed from the stable.

"Umph!" He'd run into someone in the gloom.

"Alex?" Eden.

"You have to get out. This place is going up fast."

"I can't leave her. She's unconscious."

Only then did he realize she was dragging a woman. Not Carver.

"I've got her," said Alex, tossing the woman over his shoulder. "Is there anyone else?"

"Not here. I sent Carver out with the others." She bent over, coughing deeply.

"Good." He grabbed her hand. "Move!"

The heat intensified as they stumbled downward and skidded to a stop on the first floor. The brief delay to pick up the maid prevented their escape. Flames had reached this staircase, too.

“In here,” he ordered, dragging Eden into a hastily vacated bedroom. He slammed the door behind him, then laid the woman on the floor.

“What now?” gasped Eden.

“We jump.” He threw open the sash, sighing in relief. The window below this room was intact, though flames already spurted from others.

Eden gulped clean air, then nodded. “I’ll go first. Hand her down to me.”

“Right.” Shouts joined the screaming horses in the stable yard, but no one was on this side of the building. Grabbing Eden’s wrists, he lifted her out, lowering her as far as possible.

“Now,” she ordered.

He let go, watching her drop the last six feet.

“I’m fine,” she called up. “Pass me the maid.”

Eden could barely reach the woman’s feet, but Alex had no choice but to drop her. Already flames crackled behind him. His lungs burned worse with each breath.

“Brace yourself,” he called.

“Ready.”

He let go. Eden collapsed under the woman’s weight.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

“Pull her aside. I don’t want to land on you.”

An interminable minute passed before he could jump. Pain shot through his ankle on landing, but it didn’t break.

“Come on.” He picked up the maid. “Get away from the wall.”

“What—” She coughed. “What started the fire?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like the timing.” He cursed himself for falling asleep.

“Then it’s my fault.”

“Never!” He shifted the maid so he could see around her to Eden’s face. “This is not the time to assign blame. They’ll need my help with the fire. I want you to stay close so I can keep you safe. Can you do that?”

Eden nodded.

They rounded the corner into a scene of chaos. People milled about the stable yard, sobbing and in shock. Others huddled in the corner, nursing burns.

But beneath the apparent confusion was order.

Fire had taken a firm hold on the inn, but its slate roof kept most of the sparks contained. The stable's thatching was soaked enough from the rain to extinguish those that landed. Men and women were already passing water from the stream to the blaze. Grooms led horses to a smoke-free pasture. Villagers rushed to help, carrying buckets and rugs.

Alex joined the water line, passing full buckets one way and empties the other. Eden also pitched in.

She'd surprised him several times tonight, first by saving his life – if she hadn't awakened him, he would have died – then by rousing others before taking herself to safety. Few of the ladies he knew would have done so. Nor would they have continued fighting the fire. A country inn mattered only to its village – or so most of society would agree; too many would pack up their carriages and leave, complaining bitterly about the inconvenience. Yet Eden fought as if the place were her own. She'd handled crises without turning a hair since the day he'd met her.

And he appreciated it. If she'd collapsed in hysterics like the women currently wailing in the stable, he would have been furious. When he had time to seek a bride, he must make sure she could keep a level head in times of trouble. He had no patience with whiners.

It would be a difficult trait to assess, though, he admitted through growing fatigue. Without an actual crisis to act as a test, how would he know?

* * * *

Eden was exhausted by the time the last ember died. For hours she'd stood shoulder to shoulder with Alex, passing buckets up and down. Now that it was over, her arms shook, and she could barely stand.

"Easy," urged Alex, catching her when she stumbled.

"What now?"

"Sit here while I find out if the horses are all right and send Tweed to see if our luggage survived – I pitched it out the window. Sit." He pressed her down on a barrel and disappeared.

She needed to pull herself together, but her mind remained stuck in the horror of choking awake to find herself in the midst of a fire. Alex had been slumped over, unresponsive to her loudest shouts. Not until she'd shaken him several times had he opened his

eyes. Terror still pumped through her veins. She couldn't live with herself if she led him to his death.

"Everything is fine," Alex reported, startling her out of the memory. "The carriages are intact, as are yesterday's horses. Tweed has our luggage and has even calmed Carver. Let's go. There is nothing more we can do here. We'll stop for breakfast in a couple of hours." He glanced eastward, where dawn prodded the horizon.

"Excellent plan," she managed, rising. A glance at the inn made her grimace. Wisps of smoke still curled lazily upward. A few men poked through the ruins, though most had collapsed in exhaustion. Even the injured and hysterical had finally fallen silent. "Do they know how it started?"

"It was deliberate."

She gulped.

"But not your fault," he repeated. "Someone soaked sheets in lamp oil, then spread them around the perimeter of the kitchen, dropping the last one on the banked fire. A servant spotted the flames immediately, but it was already too late. The place went up like kindling." He steered her across the yard to his waiting carriage.

"He must be mad."

"I can't argue with that."

She frowned. "But even if it was started by the man following us, why burn down an inn? He could have attacked tomorrow on an isolated bit of road."

"We don't know that it's the same man, and if it is"—he added as she tried to interrupt—"he's not particularly competent. Everyone survived." He drew a deep breath. "But we must be alert today. I want to catch him before he does more mischief."

"*Mischief?*" she quoted bitterly. "Peterson dead, a dozen people injured, an inn in ruins..."

"He'll pay." He held out a hand to guide her up the steps.

She couldn't raise her foot.

Shocked, she tried again. Without success.

"You're exhausted," said Alex, lifting her inside. "I'm not surprised."

"I know, but—" Her body convulsed. What was wrong with her?

"Reaction." Alex pulled her into his lap. "Relax, Eden. Accept it. It's perfectly normal after a crisis." He

pulled out a flask. “Drink. It will settle the nausea that should hit you next.”

It already had. Horrified at losing control of her body in yet another way, she meekly swallowed the brandy. It burned all the way down, but he was right. It eased the cramps that were suddenly twisting her stomach into knots. And it lightened the heaviness that had been pressing on her head.

She handed back the flask, gratified when Alex also took a long swallow.

“Why aren’t you shaking?” She had to clench her teeth to keep them from chattering.

“I’m used to sudden action.” He made her drink again, longer this time. As the carriage lurched into motion, he pulled her closer. “Try to sleep. You’ll feel better when you wake.”

His warmth felt good, reviving memories of last night that drove thoughts of the fire into hiding. Grateful, she closed her eyes. Though thinking about something that could ruin her was a bad idea, if it could ease these tremors...

Yet relaxation wouldn’t come. Terror returned to banish the good memories, sending images rampaging through her head – Alex sprawled in a chair as if dead, Alex appearing out of a billow of smoke, Alex framed by flames as he waited to jump, delayed because she was so slow in tugging the woman aside. If anything happened to him...

Her shaking increased. Tears stung her eyes. He’d come so close to injury, or even death...

“Steady,” Alex murmured, stroking her arm. “It’s over, Eden. You’ve had a rough fortnight, but you’re safe.”

“I-I know. It’s j-just—” A sob escaped.

He tucked her head against his neck. “Go ahead and cry. It will help.”

She no longer had a choice. Flinging her arms around his neck, she let the tears flow. His scent wrapped around her, promising safety. His hand stroked soothingly up and down her spine. Murmurs whispered through her ears. If they were words, she couldn’t understand them, but they eased her fears. Gradually her sobs lessened.

Yet instead of exhausting her as tears usually did, these revived her. Tremors wracked her body, brought on by a burst of lust even fiercer than last night. Her

wantonness grew stronger with each passing hour, taking over mind and body, relegating twenty-eight years of manners and training to the dustbin. It was alarming how needy he could make her with but a touch. She was becoming addicted to the passion he aroused.

And he was just as needy. His shaft pressed hard against her thigh, jerking with each bump of the carriage. His lips brushed her ear. Sparks skittered along her skin, hotter than the fire. She ought to move back to her corner, pretend sleep, remember that she was a lady.

But it was too late.

Alex might control himself well enough to cling to their agreement, but she cared only about relieving the need building inside her. Her breasts strained for his touch, reminding her with every breath that she wore no corset, that nothing covered her but a thin piece of fabric, for she'd not even replaced her shift. Squirming rasped her nipples against it, but it wasn't enough. When he moved to set her aside, she grabbed his arm and pressed his hand to her breast.

"Please, Alex," she panted, no longer caring if he adhered to last night's vow or took her where she sat. All that mattered was relief.

He hesitated, then bent into the kiss she craved.

Passion exploded with the first thrust of his tongue, driving away the last fragments of terror. It consumed her, demanding more, and more again. Tremors shook him as she fenced with him, pressing closer, twining her fingers in his hair. It was thick, soft, luxurious...

He groaned, deepening the kiss. Ravaging. Devouring. His hunger increasing her own.

The moment he released her bodice, she arched, pressing a breast into his palm, reveling in his talented fingers, her moans drawing answering groans from deep in his throat. She tore off the disheveled Belcher he still wore, letting his shirt fall open. His chest was covered with dark hair, springy to the touch. Beneath it his heart hammered like a wild beast, driving her own even faster.

"Eden," he gasped, trailing fiery kisses down her neck while he shifted her to lie across his lap.

She could no longer reach his chest, so she rubbed his leg, sliding her hand between his thighs. His shaft jerked against her hip as his mouth sucked an aching

breast deep inside. Excitement built.

“Rest your foot on the window,” he gasped, changing to her other breast.

She complied, then parted her knees when he pushed her skirts up. Fingers tangled in her curls, teasing until she shook.

“More,” she begged. “Faster.”

“Fast and hard,” he agreed. “Come to me. Now!” His fingers slid inside, his thumb digging into her folds. She lifted to grind against it, then shouted her glory into his mouth as the carriage bucked across a rut. Reveling at the sparks exploding about her head, she tumbled into darkness.

When she came to herself, Alex had refastened her gown and was settling her onto the seat beside him. “Shall I—” She reached for his buttons.

“No. I’ll be fine. You need sleep.”

His refusal shocked her more than her sudden wantonness. He had more control than she, it seemed. And more honor. She’d pushed him beyond all reason, teasing him until no one would blame him for taking her completely. Least of all her. If he’d done so, she would have welcomed him – which proved just how abandoned she’d become. In the throes of passion, she would have jettisoned scruples, responsibility, and pride for a chance to experience the full range of his lovemaking.

But he hadn’t let her. He took better care of her reputation than she did.

Shame washed over her. And guilt. She must not test his honor again. This exploration of pleasure had to end. In a few hours, they would be at Ridley. If all went well, he would recognize Olivia as his perfect bride. But only if she ceased distracting him.

* * * *

Alex fought his libido under control – a difficult job, for passion was the easiest way to burn off the extra energy danger always produced, as Eden had realized. But his control was too precarious to risk further touch. He wanted her to the point of pain, needed to plunge into her, again and again, releasing his seed where it might—

He cursed under his breath.

Even escaping danger couldn’t explain the intensity of his response. He’d never felt anything like it. Last night she had brought him more pleasure than he’d

known was possible. And he hadn't even entered her. He'd never imagined a woman who could arouse him with a glance, who was as eager to explore pleasure as he, who went up in flames without pretense or shame. She was more adventurous than anyone he'd met.

But the more he learned of her character, the less likely it seemed that she would accept a liaison. Her entire life had been devoted to others – her father, her sister, her husband. Duty was more than a word to her. She approached it the same way an honorable man would, putting it always first.

That wouldn't change. She still felt a duty toward her sister and toward the estate she had inherited from John. Both demanded attention. Both required that she maintain an impeccable reputation. Both needed money.

But despite her financial woes, Eden would never accept payment for the use of her body, even if they could meet in total secrecy. So once this investigation ended, he would likely never see her again.

Pain stabbed him at the thought.

To forget the fires ravaging his groin, he forced his mind to their pursuer. The man was clearly dangerous. Eden would not be safe until the fellow was caught.

As the miles passed, Eden relaxed more fully against him, falling into real slumber. With his libido finally under control, he was content to hold her, with no expectation of more when she woke. It surprised him that she could provide comfort as well as passion.

He frowned, for it didn't make sense. Nurses comforted their charges, but it wasn't something people expected later in life. Women made exciting bed partners or obedient wives. Touching them did not offer comfort. Unless...

She'd saved his life. He'd already been stupefied when she'd awakened him. Again his instincts had failed. He should have awakened at the first whiff of smoke. He should never have fallen asleep to begin with. Granted, he'd been wrung dry, but—

He couldn't blame Eden. No matter how enervating an encounter proved, he never slept when danger lurked – or hadn't on any previous assignment. But two years of retirement had dulled his wits. Without frequent exercise, his instincts had lost the sharp edge that had so often saved him from harm.

Another failure he must accept. One that boded ill for this investigation. If he couldn't trust his instincts, how was he to succeed?

Chapter Twelve

Alex studied Ridley as the carriage drew to a halt before the steps. Eden's estate was a modest manor, ten bedrooms in size, set in a large park. Its drive circled a broad lawn cropped by two dozen sheep. The kitchen garden lurked beyond a band of trees to the right. To the left were stables. Tall privet hedges separated those areas from the formal gardens beyond the house. Dense woods climbed a low hill in the distance.

The house was in reasonable condition, though the door needed paint. But there was nothing unique about it. Dozens of similar structures dotted the countryside.

"Has Ridley always been in the Marlow family?" he asked as the groom let down the steps.

"No. It was Christine's dowry, though they never lived here. John and I only moved here to escape the arguments with his father." As her foot hit the ground, she cursed.

"What's wrong?"

She gestured toward a curricle drawn up nearby. "Why is Jeremy here?"

"Calling on your sister?"

"That's what I'm afraid of. He is personable when he exerts himself, but I can't trust him. Even if he is innocent of stealing the stone, he is obsessed with John's collection and is using Olivia to spend time with it. I don't want her hurt."

"Would you sell it to him?"

"He couldn't afford it. And even if he could somehow scrape up the cost of it, he wouldn't dare offer. His longstanding financial problems have put him under Richard's thumb. Richard would throw a fit. Ignoring Richard's wishes would terminate his job and likely send him to the Marshalsea."

Debtor's prison. He'd had nightmares about the place during his years of poverty. "Are you sure his pockets are to let?"

"He often mentioned being purse-pinched when discussing antiquities with John. He may have

exaggerated in hopes that John would offer him pieces at bargain prices, of course, but not by much. He hates Richard and dislikes Marwood Hill. Only desperation would make him accept a job there that must last months. The collection is a mess. John catalogued barely a quarter of it.”

“So Jeremy must do what Sir Richard wants or lose his income.”

She sighed. “Exactly. Which is why this terrifies me.” She gestured toward the curricula. “Risking Richard’s ire to sneak another look at John’s collection indicates that his obsession is growing dangerous. Perhaps he thinks I won’t notice if a few pieces go missing.”

Alex shook his head. “If Olivia is as levelheaded as you claim, I doubt he can bamboozle her. Nor would a levelheaded miss give her heart to a scoundrel. Don’t fret yourself into megrims when there is no evidence of a problem.”

* * * *

Eden frowned. The collection was not her greatest concern, for her doubts about the authenticity of its contents decreased its value. She would probably end up throwing most of it away. The real problem was Olivia, for the girl wasn’t quite as levelheaded as Alex thought. Raising her to be a lady might have protected her from the seamier aspects of life, but it left her naïve, easy prey for a rogue. Eden now knew just how enticing men could be. And if Olivia shared her penchant for wantonness...

She feared that Jeremy was a budding rake who would claim Olivia’s heart, for there was a spark in his eye she didn’t like. Olivia would eventually outgrow such an attachment, but by then, Alex would be gone. Finding a local suitor was impossible. Dowry aside, no man of decent breeding would risk Richard’s ire to court the girl.

Her fears grew when they reached the drawing room. Jeremy leaned negligently against the mantel, every inch the dandy. Olivia sat demurely on a couch, a teacup in one hand. But both were blushing, and Olivia was breathing too fast. After five days with Alex, Eden recognized arousal all too easily. Even if it meant being deliberately rude, she had to get rid of Jeremy before Alex decided that Olivia was taken.

Pasting a false smile on her face, she moved to

Jeremy's side. "I regret that I was absent when you arrived, Mr. Highbottom, and I'm devastated that duty calls you away before we can exchange condolences, but we will do so next time."

At least Jeremy had the grace to know when he was not wanted. One could never fault his manners. "Perhaps next week when you have recovered from your journey," he said smoothly. "For now, I bid you adieu. And you, Miss Higgins," he added, bowing in Olivia's direction. Without sparing a glance for Alex, to whom he had not been presented, he left.

"That was unpardonably rude," snapped Olivia.

"Not at all. You should know better than to entertain gentlemen without a chaperon. I don't care if he *is* John's cousin, he knows it is improper to call when I am away. I won't have him poking through John's collection." Giving Olivia no chance to argue, she gestured Alex forward and made the introductions.

Olivia's eyes widened, for she, too, had expected a much older man. Alex's broad shoulders made Jeremy's slenderness seem boyish in contrast, which boded well. Dandies looked downright silly next to Alex, for his masculinity permeated every corner of the room, sucking out the air until it was difficult to breathe. There was something not quite tame...

While Olivia openly ogled him, Eden covered a burst of irritation with a smile and guided the conversation to general remarks about her trip. Olivia sparkled in social situations. Alex must see the girl in the best light from the beginning.

It seemed to work. He relaxed, even laughing at Olivia's quips.

Eden's chest constricted – from nerves, she assured herself. Only marriage would assure Olivia's future and discharge Eden's obligations, and Alex was the only viable candidate.

But remaining silent so he could focus solely on Olivia was difficult, especially when he deprecated his investigative abilities, describing himself as an assistant who had occasionally looked into complaints on behalf of the Home Secretary before his grandmother's bequest had allowed him to retire to the country.

A quarter hour passed before Olivia excused herself. Alex immediately frowned. "I wish you hadn't thrown Highbottom out."

"I hate sneaks, and I don't want him here. I would like to forget the entire family, if truth be told." Irritation drove her to her feet. To cover her reaction, she added a lump of coal to the fire.

"But I wanted to watch him when he wasn't wary."

"He is always wary, which adds to my suspicions. I don't recall ever seeing him relax, even when drinking with John." She straightened the vase of spills that Jeremy had bumped.

"I don't believe he would have returned here if he'd taken the stone."

"Any change in his interests would be remarked." She shrugged.

"Not after John's death. And he is not the man who followed us from London."

"But we don't know if the man who followed us is the same man who stole the stone. Besides," she added when Alex tried to object, "Jeremy could easily be here as Richard's spy, apart from the Sarsos question or his own interests. Richard was furious that Ridley came to me. He refused me any help, blaming me for John's poverty and predicting I would run the estate into the ground inside a year." She still seethed over that encounter.

"Why would that lead to spying? Even if you *had* run through John's fortune, it is gone and cannot be recovered. And he can hardly claim rights to an estate that was never in the family. I cannot imagine Jeremy poking through your desk and jewelry case. He seems a mannerly man."

"Hardly. Tricking an innocent into revealing private information is unconscionable." Not until Alex frowned did she realize that he'd likely done the same thing on occasion, so she added, "Unlike your investigations, he lacks an excuse that can justify it."

"Perhaps." He changed the subject. "You said Sir Richard refused to help you. Do you mean in some way beyond insisting that John's death was an accident?"

She cursed herself for mentioning it. She must remember that Alex's mind was a spider's web that trapped everything flying by. "Nothing in particular. He was furious over the will and warned me to expect no help from him, now or in the future." It wasn't the whole truth, but seemed to satisfy him.

The day they'd read John's will was not one she

would soon forget. She'd approached Richard because he was presenting his daughter to society this Season. Since Olivia would soon be out of black gloves – mourning for a brother was much shorter than for a husband – Eden had hoped that he would take Olivia with him. His sponsorship would have improved her chances, and staying with Richard would have lowered Eden's costs.

He'd refused, citing Olivia's low breeding and blaming Eden for giving the girl airs above her station. He'd dismissed her reminder that John had considered Olivia the child he'd never had. Nor had he accepted that John had squandered his fortune over Eden's protests. Richard believed that all women were profligates, that Eden's inferior breeding must enhance that tendency, and that her years of poverty had made restraint impossible once she married money.

Rather than argue with a close-minded fool, she had given up. If he was determined to see her as a gamester and spendthrift, nothing would sway him.

Alex interrupted her thoughts. "Antagonistic or not, I must speak with him and discover if he's traced the pistol you described. If it's by Manton, there will be records. And if there's any chance that he sent Jeremy here, then I should see him now."

It had already gone two o'clock, but she nodded, warning him, "We dine at six." Then she headed upstairs.

* * * *

"How dare you entertain that flirt without a chaperon?" Eden demanded when she reached Olivia's room. "He will ruin you if given half a chance. He is far too young for marriage and has no means of supporting a wife even if he wanted one. Christine's family bears us no love, and the Marlows are worse. At best he means to enjoy a light flirtation. At worst..." She shuddered. "Men like him think nothing of seducing a girl of imperfect breeding, then abandoning her."

"He is not like that."

"But he is. Remember Damon? He was very like Jeremy, with charm and manners to spare. He could make you believe black was white if he tried. I recall all too well how Lizzy Fuller found herself with child." She had nearly succumbed to the rascal herself, Eden recalled in disgust. That flirtation was the reason her

father had packed her off to friends for a month. Guilt had assailed her ever since. Despite Alex's platitudes, she knew her father would never have shot himself had she been at home.

Olivia frowned at the reminder. Discovering Lizzy in the family way had made an impression on the eight-year-old, too.

Eden softened her tone. "Forget Jeremy, my dear. He can never wed you. And even if by some miracle he did, you would regret it for all of your days. The Marlows despise low breeding, and the Highbottoms are nearly as bad. You would not enjoy being one of them."

Olivia looked as if she wished to argue, but she held her tongue, which reminded Eden of how stubborn the girl could be – and how contrary. Suggesting that she consider Alex as a suitor might make her reject him out of hand.

"I need your help with Mr. Portland," she said instead. "Nothing onerous, I hope."

"What?"

"He has agreed to investigate John's death, but I was gone longer than I'd planned. My desk must be groaning under accumulated problems. Can you entertain him while I catch up?"

"Of course, though I'd planned to call on Mrs. Sommers tomorrow. She's taken a chill."

"Certainly you must call. I expect Mr. Portland will be busy all day. But if you could see after him this evening..."

Olivia nodded, then demanded an accounting of Eden's trip.

Eden made sure she painted Alex in a heroic light, exaggerating his exploits and hiding all hints of her slide from grace. "When our inn caught fire last night, he pitched in, working beside grooms, shopkeepers, and even the boot boy until the fire was out," she finished.

"Fire?" Olivia's eyes widened.

"It wasn't serious," she lied. "But it was frightening enough at the time. He made sure everyone escaped and even carried an elderly maid down from the attic."

"How awful."

"Exactly. So see that he relaxes after dinner. He needs it."

Olivia nodded. "And you must speak with Harris,"

she said, naming the steward. "A corner of Walden's roof collapsed yesterday – all this rain. Harris is dithering between replacement and another patch."

Damn! It would be their first confrontation since John's death. And she had no money to support her orders.

* * * *

Alex rode toward Marwood Hill, pondering how much to tell Sir Richard. He doubted the man cared a whit about Sarsos. He was a stuffy prig who expected everyone to copy his own taste – very like Stratford, now that he thought on it.

But Sir Richard deserved to know about Alex's investigation. And if he assumed that Alex remained with the Home Office, so much the better.

Then there was the question of Eden. John's profligacy had left her in dire straits. As head of the family, it was Sir Richard's duty to see after his brother's widow. Alex couldn't force him to be kind about it, but Sir Richard would hate the scorn that would attach to him if his peers discovered he was ignoring that duty. A baronet wasn't high enough to escape censure. Alex didn't yet know the best solution to her problem, but he needed to at least open discussions on the point.

The butler escorted him to Sir Richard's study.

"You are actually giving credence to that harpy's madness?" Sir Richard demanded the moment Alex crossed the threshold, not wasting time on a more conventional greeting. He shook his head in disgust. "I would think the Home Office would have better things to do. Or perhaps not. What happened to your face?"

"An unfortunate encounter with a knife. Careless of me." He took a seat across the desk and tried to look relaxed.

"It hasn't taught you caution, though. Why the devil are you listening to such nonsense? It's bad enough she bent my ear with it. But to go to London! Surely you realize that she is only seeking money."

"How?" he asked, more interested in how Sir Richard had learned of Eden's errand than in the response. Perhaps he *had* sent Jeremy to spy on Eden's household.

"She hopes I will buy her silence, of course." He snorted. "Having run through John's fortune, she now hopes to tap mine. You might as well return to town."

I've no intention of succumbing to blackmail."

"If I find evidence of such, I will deal with it as it deserves, but I cannot return just yet. No matter how ridiculous the charges, John was a baronet's son, so we must investigate," he said mildly.

"Who would want to kill John? It was clearly an accident."

"Quite likely," Alex agreed, crossing his legs. "But I need facts if I am to write a proper report. You have no objection to answering questions, I presume."

Sir Richard's face darkened, but he nodded. "I won't have you spreading this poppycock around, though. There can be no public disclosure of this discussion."

"You might recall that discretion is one of my strengths." He kept his face congenial with difficulty. He and Richard had been at odds from their first meeting. Richard had been furious at Sir George's demand for secrecy. In his view, making the original affair public would have forced his father to sell his collection. A sale had been his goal then and seemingly remained his goal today.

Sir Richard broke eye contact first. "Yes, you cocky bastard. I must acquit you of gossip."

"Describe the scene of your brother's death."

"John was set upon by a highwayman while out for his morning ride – not the first such incident I've dealt with; too many soldiers won't do honest labor."

"It is a problem," agreed Alex neutrally, though in truth it was a lack of jobs rather than laziness that left so many unemployed.

Richard seemed about to pontificate, but caught himself and continued. "That he died was his own fault. He rode horses so spirited that few could control them. I begged him to be sensible, warning him such recklessness would bring him to grief one day. And so it did. When the highwayman jumped out, he startled the horse, which shied and knocked him down. His pistol discharged as he fell, killing him and spooking the horse even more. John fell, smashing his head on a stone."

"I presume the horse then fled back to its stable," said Alex.

Richard frowned. "No. We found it grazing nearby."

"A horse so high-spirited that no one could control it?"

"Horses are as prone to shock as people."

“Did you recognize the beast?”

“I hadn’t seen John in some time and never rode with him.” His fingers drummed on the desktop. “What does it matter? John is dead. If I’d had my way, the beast would also be dead.”

“What matters is that your tale and Mrs. Marlow’s agree on few points.”

“The woman is vulgar beyond belief, a light-skirt who parlayed a few tears into a life of leisure, a hen-wit who throws emotional fits over the least thing. I still can’t believe John was stupid enough to marry her – and him but a week widowed! Poor Christine would have wept to see her bed defiled – and so unworthily.”

Poor Christine? Interesting.

Sir Richard continued to vent his spleen, finally winding down with, “She will twist facts until they fit what she wants to believe, never considering that her feeble brain is incapable of comprehending subtlety. Half the time, she ignores even obvious evidence!”

Which was exactly how she’d described Richard. “I don’t know her well enough to judge,” lied Alex. “But I must defer to her on one point, for she *did* recognize the horse. It is a docile beast used with the housekeeper’s gig. It is not a horse John would ride.”

“A prime example of how she twists facts.” His chin came up. “She couldn’t tell one horse from another if her life depended on it. The girl is a greedy nobody who insinuated herself into our station. And don’t tell me she is cousin to a baronet,” he snapped when Alex opened his mouth. “Connection to the bastard who killed Christine is no testimonial. She’s as mad as he was.”

Alex gazed speculatively at Sir Richard. Eden hadn’t exaggerated his character. His hatred would prevent him from offering help, no matter how venal it made him appear in the public eye. And he was stupid. John’s grooms would have identified the horse had he asked – something a competent magistrate should have done when faced with conflicting claims. And why was a man who eschewed emotion exhibiting so much of it over a ten-year-old death? Did he know more about the earlier case than he’d admitted? The possibility didn’t fit the image Alex had formed ten years ago, which demonstrated how superficial that investigation had been. But it gave him a place to start.

In the meantime, he must soothe ruffled feathers or risk having Sir Richard throw him out. “I am fully aware of her breeding, my lord. But justice is not restricted to the upper classes, so I must investigate her charges. Did you identify the highwayman?”

“No, and don’t expect to. He wasn’t local, and he carried no identification.”

“Not even discharge papers from the military?” Even the worst scoundrels kept those close at hand, for desertion could send them to the gibbet for treason.

“No, but not all scoundrels are former soldiers,” he admitted. “He wasn’t wearing a uniform, which most of them still do.”

“What was in his pockets?”

“The usual.” He paused. “His effects are still here. We keep them for a year in case someone comes forward to identify him.” He led Alex to the strongroom where he kept official papers, pulled a box from a shelf, and extracted a filthy bundle.

Alex spread the contents on the table. The clothes were tattered, but of good quality – not that quality mattered since they’d likely come from a used clothing dealer. Blood soaked the front of both shirt and coat. It also soaked their right sleeves. Smaller drops flecked the left coat sleeve.”

“He must have held the pistol in his right hand,” Alex said, pointing to the stain.

“True. He retained his grip even as he reached out to break his fall. Stupid with it cocked like that, but intelligent men don’t turn to highway robbery.”

“He caught himself only with his right hand? Or were both hands under him.”

“Just the right.”

“So only the pistol hand was scraped from hitting the road.”

Richard frowned, as if he’d seen what Alex had. A falling man would catch himself with his empty hand, not the one holding a cocked pistol. At the very least he would use both. “Both were undamaged.” His brow suddenly cleared. “He must have landed on his right forearm, trying to keep his pistol trained on John even as he fell. The left was likely unusable. Had a fellow like that hanging about last month. Wanted work, though his right arm wouldn’t move. What did he think he could do, maimed like that? I soon sent him on his way with a flea in his ear. Cripples shouldn’t

bother decent folk.”

Alex gritted his teeth, but kept his face placid. “It seems odd that his left sleeve has blood on it if that arm did not land beneath the body.”

Sir Richard muttered an imprecation. “Don’t they teach you anything at the Home Office, you young jackanapes? The pistol fired before the body came to rest. Blood, bits of flesh, and God knows what else escaped before he hit the ground. That’s why spatters were on the road and John’s clothing.”

A telling admission. Alex hid a smile as he examined the rest of the man’s effects. Sir Richard’s observations belied the man’s own conclusions. Why would blood be on John’s clothes if John had been on a rearing horse when the gunman went down? The gunman’s body would have blocked any spatter except near the ground. And Sir Richard’s reconstruction did not explain why the gunman had landed on his stomach atop John.

But he couldn’t antagonize the man until he no longer needed his cooperation. So he merely nodded, turning the coat this way and that for closer examination. No mud or hair marked where a restive animal might have struck. In Alex’s experience, it was impossible to come into contact with a horse and not wind up covered with hairs.

Laying the coat aside, he examined the pistol. Eden was right. It was one of Manton’s.

The remaining effects were as interesting for what they didn’t contain as for what they did. Aside from the pistol, which anyone familiar with weapons should know could be traced, the man had carried nothing that might identify him. Nor had he carried anything a man living rough would need. No blanket. No pot or cup or tinderbox. No balls or powder so he could reload his pistol after using it. No other weapon. No receipt or key from an inn. No money.

What he *did* have was a bent piece of wire that Alex recognized as a lockpick. So this was indeed Eden’s thief and probably John’s killer.

Then there was the penknife. Few highwaymen could write. Fewer had any need to do so. A penknife was useless for any task but sharpening pens. His instincts were right. This was either Emerson or Barclay, an educated man acting under instructions from his employer. Obedience had cost him his life.

“Did you find his camp?” he asked.

“No, but it will turn up eventually.” Sir Richard shrugged.

“I see.” What he saw was Sir Richard’s bullheadedness. Having decided the death was an accident – which excused him from wasting time on an investigation – he ignored everything that screamed otherwise. A highwayman might have attacked a lone horseman, though dawn was an odd time to look for victims on the High Toby. But he should have had a camp set up nearby or kept his pack handy so he could make a swift retreat.

“There is nothing here that a highwayman should have,” he said, hoping Sir Richard might join him in considering the anomalies.

“Of course not. The peasant who found the body robbed it before fetching me. I’m keeping my eye on him, though. The moment he retrieves his bounty, he’ll pay for interfering in the king’s business.”

Alex sighed. Sir Richard was hopeless. Maybe he needed the satisfaction of correctly predicting John’s fate. Or maybe he was terrified that another family murder would tarnish his image and somehow call his competence into question.

“I will send the pistol to Manton for identification,” he announced, pocketing the weapon. “Mrs. Marlow will rest easier knowing who was responsible for John’s death.”

“I can’t think why. She cared nothing for him, wasting his money on fripperies, then expecting me to support her when he died in debt. He should never have wed the chit. Everyone knows that installing peasants in a genteel household is begging for trouble. She belongs in the workhouse. I can’t believe he left his estate to her instead of to me. She must have cast some spell over him to distract him from his duty.”

“That is not my affair,” said Alex stiffly, fighting the urge to plant a fist in that arrogant face. “My job is to investigate his death.”

“Waste of time,” he barked.

“So you have said. I will let you know when I discover the highwayman’s identity.”

He left before he forgot himself and called Sir Richard out. The man had not improved with age. If anything, he was worse.

And he must find an acceptable way to help Eden.

Sir Richard never would. Alex could dower Olivia as a way to repay John's aid, but Eden would never accept help with her mortgage. Nor would she sell him John's collection at an inflated price. Her honor would rebel at the very notion.

The problem ate at his mind.

Chapter Thirteen

Alex dispatched the pistol to Terrence by post, then returned to Ridley, deep in thought. Sir Richard's tirade bothered him more every time he thought about it. The man was treating Eden worse than a dishonest servant. Granted, she was several steps lower than a baronet, but she had been a lady even before her marriage. Vicars were gentry, no matter how far removed from a title.

The sins of the fathers...

Was that Sir Richard's problem? Her father had been involved in the theft that had killed Christine and broken Sir George's spirit. Was Richard punishing her because her father was out of reach? Or was he angry because Sir George had welcomed her to Marwood? Sir George had long favored John because of their shared interests, widening the rift between the brothers.

But that theory didn't feel right. Richard's hatred was too strong to have grown from a quarrel with John. And it was too overt to be aimed at Higgins or based on Eden's breeding.

Whatever the cause, the feud must end. With John gone, Eden would be at the mercy of the Marlow family. Unless Sir Richard accepted her presence, she would be ostracized by her neighbors, leaving her isolated and alone. Repairing the breach was another way Alex could repay his debt to John. Not that he hoped to do more than convince Richard to leave Eden alone. Richard was too bullheaded to ever welcome her.

Richard's animosity might stem from John's collection, of course. But even that could not explain his hatred of Eden.

Which brought him to Christine.

Christine had taken several lovers. Alex hadn't compiled a list, for Sir Harold had clearly killed her. But if Richard had been one of them, he would have seen her elopement as a betrayal. Guilt over an

incestuous relationship could explain his current behavior. That Christine had been a promiscuous thief made the sin worse. And if he'd loved her – a likely scenario, for nothing less than love would have pushed him to take her – then John's remarriage would have seemed an even worse betrayal.

It made sense. Now all he had to do was prove it. Eden should not be a scapegoat for Richard's guilt.

* * * *

Dinner was nearly ready when Alex returned to Ridley. He barely had time to change before joining Eden and Olivia in the dining room. Olivia took advantage of his presence to practice her coquetry.

The girl was pretty enough, with Eden's light brown hair and delicate face. Her eyes were more blue than green, and she retained an innocence that Eden had long since lost. It spoke well of Eden's care that Olivia had weathered the tragedies she, too, had endured.

He didn't like flirts as a rule – prattle hid character, making it difficult to know the real person – but for tonight, he set aside irritation. Sir Richard's antagonism meant Olivia would have had little opportunity to practice the skills most girls learned in the schoolroom. It couldn't hurt to teach her how to flirt more naturally. And if he learned something of her interests, it would be easier to find her a good husband. It was small price to remove some of his guilt. The botched Marlow case had left her an orphan, and the most spectacular success of Alex's career would not have happened without John's tip. It made his debt all the larger.

"Eden tells me you no longer live in London," Olivia said over the fish course. "Do you miss it?"

"At times," he admitted. "It is unlike any other place on earth. But there is much to be said for country life, too. It is more peaceful."

"Yes, I imagine that London can be quite exhausting."

"Even passing through London can be exhausting," confirmed Eden before retreating into her thoughts. He wondered what new calamity kept her in thrall this evening, but couldn't ask. An annoying facet of manners was the prohibition on discussing anything serious at dinner. But manners didn't keep him from noticing how she blushed when the butler laid a spear of asparagus on her plate, or how she nearly choked

when the second course included scalloped oysters. He could guarantee that she would never look at a dinner table the same way again...

He averted his eyes lest they prove that Eden felt as needy as he did. He could not betray her to Olivia.

Olivia questioned him closely about society's denizens and the entertainments they enjoyed, "for I will likely never experience a Season for myself."

Alex answered with light banter and humorous anecdotes, all the while downplaying the glamour so she wouldn't pine for a life she might never know – and shouldn't miss. A constant round of entertainments grew boring.

When the ladies finally rose to leave him to his port, he sighed in relief. "Please stay, Eden. I have a few questions."

"Of course." Her face paled as she waved Olivia away. The butler followed.

As soon as they were alone, Alex steepled his fingers under his chin. "What did John tell you about the theft of the staff – not the details you learned from Christine's maid. Just what he said."

"There wasn't much," she admitted. "You must know how painful he found the subject."

"True." While John had known about Christine's affair with Sir Harold, he'd not known about the others, demonstrating how focused he'd been on the Marlow collection. Only Christine's own carelessness after she'd decided to elope had revealed the last one.

Eden nodded. "So you know that he was reluctant to discuss it. He mentioned it only once – a year after her death. That was the first time I heard about Sir Harold's involvement and that he'd stayed with Papa. The family was understandably reluctant to mention any of them. Guilt over Papa's suicide drove John to offer for me. He felt he should have noticed Sir Harold's deceit in time to save Christine, which would have prevented him from sweeping Papa into his plot." She stared at her twisting hands, then met his eyes. "No one had told me why he killed himself. All I had was that damnable note. *Forgive me...*"

"If anyone was responsible for his death, it was I." Despite his earlier efforts to soothe her pain, she still blamed herself for being absent. He couldn't reveal that Higgins might have killed Sir Harold, but his original conclusions might help her. "Your father was

not directly involved in either the theft or in Christine's death, and he may have known nothing of Sir Harold's plans. As far as I know, all he did was offer shelter to a cousin and discuss the neighborhood with him. Sir Harold claimed that ill health made it necessary to take the waters at Oakham."

"Then why—"

"—did he kill himself? I was less than diplomatic," he admitted. "When he told me about Sir Harold's ill health, I called him a liar, then reminded him that Sir Harold had seduced Christine, convinced her to steal for him, then killed her. No man as ill as Sir Harold claimed to be could have managed that. Higgins was shocked down to his toes." A truth, though the shock had likely arisen from having his crimes exposed. "Before we could speak further, a messenger brought news that Sir Harold's body had washed ashore. Rather than continue the interview, which might have convinced him he'd done nothing wrong, I left, vowing to return later. But he must have blamed himself for not controlling his houseguest. He shot himself that afternoon."

"That seems an inadequate reason for suicide."

"For you, certainly, but you are stronger than he was. He lived in a scholarly bubble quite out of touch with evil. When I jerked him into the real world, he lacked the skills to handle it."

"That much is true," she agreed sadly. "He was a dreamer, I'm afraid, too caught up in his studies to pay much heed to those around him. It was a defect I chastised him for on many occasions, so if he thought it had caused someone's death, he might atone by taking his life. And it certainly fits his note. *Forgive me...* He uttered those words a dozen times a day and must have started half his correspondence with them. He was always forgetting appointments, or inadvertently insulting people, or ignoring his daughters for days at a time—" Her voice broke.

"And now it's my turn to utter them. Forgive me for not concluding the interview before leaving. Another hour would have made no difference to my journey." The admission intensified his guilt.

She didn't hear, her dreamy voice still firmly anchored in the past. "I stared at that note for years, wondering what he'd done that demanded such a penalty. If I'd been there, I could have stopped him. If

I'd chastised him less, he would not have accepted guilt for his guest's crimes. But I'm glad you thought him blameless. I never really believed John's assertion that Papa was an innocent bystander. John could hardly wed me, then hold my father in contempt."

"I would rather have had him live. Though he kept his nose in a book, Sir Harold might have told him something that we could use now."

"But if there was nothing in his journal, Papa could not have helped. Everything he saw or heard wound up in there. He could recall entire conversations by checking its pages – and did on occasion, especially to resolve quarrels."

"Journal?" Alex gripped the edge of the table.

"Surely you saw it."

"I had no reason to return. I'd only interviewed him to learn more about Sir Harold. Once Sir Harold died, Sir George canceled the investigation, so I returned to London."

"If you really think it might help, we can look. I kept all his papers. They are in the attic."

Alex's heart leaped. He hadn't expected actual evidence of that old crime. "Let's go." He finished his port, then helped her to her feet, for once barely aware of the sparks the touch ignited.

Eden led the way, talking as she went. "I doubt you will find anything useful. If he was as shocked as you say, then he knew nothing of Sir Harold's plans."

He wasn't about to argue *that* point, so he changed the subject. "I know you sold his books, but how many trunks will we have to search to find his journal? His study was overflowing."

"Only one. All I have are his journals, some correspondence, and the notes he was making for his next sermon."

"He wrote his own?"

"Of course." She glared at him. "They might not have been the most scintillating sermons in history, but he could put together a good argument when necessary."

"I did not mean to insult him."

"I know." Her shoulders sagged. "And in truth, aside from the classics, he felt most strongly about his connection to Sir Harold, which tied him to several great houses. He bragged about that often, particularly when he'd been found wanting. He ignored the

remoteness of that connection, I'm afraid, using it to justify his conviction that he was above menial labor."

The remark revealed a wealth of pent-up frustration. She was the one who had shouldered her father's neglected duties, assuming responsibilities far beyond her years. It made his own childhood complaints seem trite. And it strengthened his need to protect her from further insult. She deserved so much more than a life of hard work and constant fear for her future.

"Here we are," announced Eden, opening the door to a dusty attic. "I think the trunk we want is somewhere back there." Her candle wavered as she pointed it toward the darkest corner.

Alex set his own candle on a table and began shifting the pieces that stood in the way. Chairs. Chests. Crates. A shaving stand.

Dust rose in clouds, irritating lungs still burning from last night's fire.

He was coughing by the time he found the right trunk. It was larger than he had expected. Hefting one end tested the weight. Crammed full. He was about to suggest summoning the footman when Eden grabbed the other end.

"I'll help carry it. I've lifted it before," she added when he hesitated. "Simms has trouble with stairs these days, and the footman is polishing silver."

Stifling an instinctive protest, he collected his candle and headed downstairs.

* * * *

By the time they reached the study, Eden had abandoned her candle so she could use both hands on the strap. But she made no complaint. It was better to carry the trunk herself than remind the staff that her father had killed himself. The shame would never go away. The servants had been wary of her when she'd first arrived, disliking the rapid change in mistress and fearing that the sin of her father's death might rub off on them. John had put a stop to that nonsense, but country memories were long. There was no point in jogging them.

She made a production of wiping dust from the trunk while she caught her breath. Only then did she open the latch. "Papa wrote in his journal nearly every day," she said, sorting the three dozen volumes by date. "You start on these while I go through his papers." She handed him the last one.

Alex moved closer to the lamp.

Pulling her eyes from his broad back, Eden braced herself for the pain she always felt when thinking of her father. How could he have killed himself, knowing it would condemn his daughters to the workhouse? His betrayal still hurt.

She concentrated on the papers. Letters. Accounts. Sermons. A note to the housekeeper to turn out Eden's room before she returned.

Tears blurred her vision. She'd thought he'd forgotten her existence. *Out of sight, out of mind* described his mental processes perfectly.

"Are you sure this is a journal?"

Alex's question jerked her back to the study. "Of course. He kept them religiously, consulting them whenever questions arose. The only way he could remember something was to write it down. I've not read them, though. They were private."

"This one is not a journal."

She jumped up to peer over his shoulder. "What is it, then?"

"Poetry, for the most part. Bad poetry."

"Impossible!" Her hand shook as she took the book and held it closer to the light.

*The Nordic gods must scream in fright
To see their heir do nothing right.
This blue-eyed giant daily wails,
Drink the waters, else he fails.*

*Great Zeus above ignores his woe.
His guardian angels will not sow
A grain of bread to ease his pains,
Which worsen every time it rains.*

*A man so handsome should not be
In pain that no one else can see
Where—*

"Good God." She shook her head. "This is execrable. What possessed him to try his hand at verse?"

"Since the journal contains nothing but verse, I'd say he considered himself a poet."

"You must be joking," she muttered, flipping pages. But he was right. In her father's cramped hand were page after page of verse. Skimming convinced her that

the page she'd read was typical. "I had no idea. Perhaps he kept his daily accounts in another volume."

Alex picked up the oldest one, then shook his head. "More poetry. He'd improved in twenty years, though. This is far worse."

Once she looked at it, Eden had to agree. A quick glance through the other volumes revealed more poems. "Dear Lord."

Alex set the books aside. "What did you find in his papers?"

"Not much." She ticked off the piles surrounding the trunk. "Sermons. Ancient accounts. These are reminders – instructions for the housekeeper, a note that I should call on a neighbor when I returned, and so forth. That pile is correspondence."

"I'll start there." He picked up the letters, quickly skimming each one.

Eden finished sorting, then frowned over the small pile of reminders. They did not reflect the mind of a man contemplating suicide. On the other hand, they undoubtedly predated his discovery that Sir Harold was a thief and a killer who had involved his host in his crimes.

"Odd," Alex said when he finished.

"What is odd?"

"These letters cover a full year before his death, yet there is nothing from Sir Harold."

"It was a distant connection that—"

"You missed my point. I am aware that it was a distant connection. Higgins had never met anyone from that branch of the family."

"Nor did he presume to write. While he was proud of the connection, he retained enough sense to know that a man of Sir Harold's stature would not welcome importunities from a mere vicar."

"But Sir Harold would hardly have shown up on the doorstep without telling his distant cousin that he was coming."

She frowned. It was a valid point. "I gathered every note I found, and not just from the study. I did not want to leave personal effects for Papa's successor." The man had made his condemnation of suicide known, refusing even to speak with her lest he be tarnished by contact with a sinner's family.

"Then he must have destroyed the letter," said Alex,

pulling her out of her thoughts with a growl that sounded like a curse.

"Papa would never destroy a letter from his exalted cousin."

"Not deliberately. But it is clear that many other letters are also gone. This one refers to the reply Higgins made to an earlier missive, but that one isn't here."

"True, he kept only the letters that contained information he did not wish to forget."

"So it is possible that Sir Harold's letter got mixed with others destined for the rag-and-bone man."

"No. It's more likely that he tucked it into his journal. That was where his most precious papers always were. Since it is missing, I can only conclude that Sir Harold retrieved it." Fury burst through her head. The cad must have snooped through her father's private papers. Might even have read some of the poetry her father had kept so secret.

Alex frowned. "A safe assumption. The question is why he would remove it." He paced to the fireplace and back. "Unless he wrote it long before contracting the chill that was his excuse for taking the waters. That would prove his theft was planned well in advance. I wish I knew when he first proposed this visit."

"It couldn't have been long before he arrived," she countered. "Papa would have been in alt that Sir Harold was coming, but I knew nothing of it until I returned, and I'd only been gone a month." Or had her father wished to hide the visit? Maybe that's why he'd sent Olivia with her. It had not been necessary to protect an eight-year-old from Damon.

But she slammed the door on that thought, for secrecy made him a willing partner in Sir Harold's theft.

"You seem upset." Alex cradled her against him, again offering comfort.

"So do you."

"I am," he admitted slowly. "This missing letter means something."

Eden remained silent, hoping his thoughts had not followed the trail hers had taken.

His arm tightened. "I don't think the date is as important as the letter itself. Yet it makes no sense that Sir Harold would take it to hide his presence. Higgins would notice the loss, and everyone around

Marwood had entertained him for a fortnight.”

“My God,” gasped Eden, unable to help herself. She stared up into his eyes.

“What?”

“You said Papa would have noticed the letter was gone. So if Sir Harold took it, he must have killed Papa.”

“No.”

She flinched from his uncompromising denial.

He traced her cheek. “I know murder is a more palatable demise than suicide, Eden, but you forget that I was with him when I received word that Sir Harold’s body had washed ashore.”

She sagged. “Of course. Forgive me.”

He nodded. “Sir Harold would only take the letter if it could harm him. He must have written something that could redound upon him, though I can’t imagine what that might be. His actions at Marwood were hardly subtle, so everyone knew he was guilty of Christine’s death.”

“True. If he hoped Christine would bear the blame for stealing the staff, he should have covered his tracks better.” She shook her head, disgusted at the man’s ineptitude.

“Why? She *did* steal the staff. He wasn’t even in the house at the time. And killing her was part of his plan.”

“But she wasn’t your original suspect.”

“Not until her maid—”

“Exactly.” She glared at him. “No one would have suspected him if he’d understood ladies enough to have taken Christine’s maid with them.”

“He’d been married for years and sired two daughters. That—”

“—doesn’t make him an expert on ladies,” she insisted, whirling away so she could think. Alex’s touch scrambled her head. It was even worse tonight, despite that they’d spent hours apart after arriving. “If he’d taken the maid, then claimed ignorance of Christine’s flit, he would never have been suspected when two bodies turned up in a river. Especially if the other items were with those bodies, hinting that the staff had washed downstream. He would have sworn that the silly girl had made more of their friendship than was there, then suggested she’d tried to follow him. No one would have questioned his innocence.”

“So he wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“But the rest of the plan was well-conceived. So why did he forget the maid? No lady can conduct clandestine liaisons without her maid’s knowledge. Maids always know their mistress’s lovers.” Carver certainly suspected her own recent activities, but Eden shoved the thought aside and met his raised brows. “Yes, I can name Christine’s other men. Richard wasn’t one of them, though he tried often enough. Christine refused, pretending that loyalty to John prevented her from following her heart. Her tragic protestations made Richard love her all the more, of course – which blinded him to her ongoing affair with his father.” She returned to the subject before Alex could ask further questions. “But at the very least, *Christine* should have insisted on bringing her maid. Ladies can’t dress without help.”

* * * *

Alex’s head reeled, for he had never considered the maid. At the tender age of twenty-three, he’d also known little about ladies. His mother had died when he’d been eight, and he had no sisters. Thus he’d never questioned why the maid had remained behind or why she had been so furious. Now he knew. She’d been insulted and abandoned. Another vital clue he’d overlooked.

He opened the journal and studied the poems. The reference to unseen illnesses might refer to Sir Harold. Higgins had so valued the connection that he must have made the most of it. But if this described Sir Harold, then Alex had fallen into a carefully crafted trap.

His stomach clenched. The book fell from nerveless fingers.

“What’s wrong?” demanded Eden, staring.

“I’ve been a fool.” He barely forced the words past the bile rising in his throat. He’d been worse than a fool. Instead of making brilliant deductions, he’d allowed a schemer to thread a ring through his nose and lead him down a garden path. No wonder it had been so easy. Despite the instinct that claimed it was *too* easy, he’d accepted praise for his acumen, letting his conceit grow into a smugness that must have annoyed everyone he met. His face heated at memory of his boasting. Why had Sidmouth tolerated him?

“How a fool?”

He shook his head, circling the room several times as he fought his stomach under control. Thoughts crashed through his head. He should have recognized Higgins as an inept dreamer whose weakness could be exploited by an unscrupulous man – that much had been obvious during their brief interview. He should at least have suspected trouble when Eden described the suicide note Higgins had scrawled on a scrap of paper.

Scrap? Its only message a phrase Higgins penned to everyone? It had likely been ripped from some other apology.

Another circuit finally fit the facts into their proper pattern. He returned to Eden's side. "You were right. Your father was murdered. So was Sir Harold."

"What?" She blanched.

He caught her before she could faint, set her gently on a chair, then handed her a glass of wine. "Thanks to a furious maid and your father's abominable poetry, I finally know what really happened ten years ago."

He drained his own glass, inhaled deeply, then began. "Our culprit – we'll call him X, for I don't yet know if he is Montagu, Barclay's employer, or someone else. Whoever he was, he wanted the Sarsos staff badly enough to scheme for it. He might already have acquired the chalice and spoon, but those thefts had been easy to hide, for they'd occurred in foreign lands. The staff was in England, where he would find it harder to escape."

Eden's mouth hung open.

"To hide his true identity, he studied residents of nearby towns, searching for anyone he could use. My apologies, but your father was a perfect dupe. He bragged about his cousin, making much of the connection though everyone knew they had never met."

"Are you saying that it wasn't Sir Harold who stayed with Papa?"

"Sir Harold's portrait hung over the fireplace in Sir Michael's study. Did you notice it?" He waited for her nod. "Now read this." He handed her the last poem. "I believe it describes your father's houseguest."

It only took her a minute. "My God!"

"Exactly. Higgins writes about a blond giant with blue eyes. A Viking, whose strong constitution belies his supposed ill health. It does not describe Sir Harold, whose dark hair was turning silver at the temples,

whose eyes were dull brown, and whose physique might be described as elegantly slender.” A less charitable man might have called him skeletal, which had added another layer of horror to his dream image.

She met his gaze.

“Exactly. Your father may be a bad poet, but I don’t think him fanciful. You were right that this is a journal. It records his daily life and the people he met. Thus the man who called on him claiming to be Sir Harold Iverson, was really X. The missing letter clinches it. Why would he retrieve the letter unless he feared it would expose him as a fraud? I would wager his hand is nothing like Sir Harold’s.”

“And it also explains the maid,” she said, nodding. “He wanted her to reveal Christine’s plans so you would immediately identify Christine and Sir Harold as the thieves.”

“Which I did.” Alex’s fist smashed onto the mantel. He’d been a bigger dupe than he’d just accused Higgins of being. A child would have been more prescient. In his arrogance, he’d never considered that other men might also be capable of playing roles. They might even do it better.

Drawing in a deep breath, he continued. “X chose Higgins because everyone considered him an absentminded scholar who paid little heed to those around him. Higgins ignored his parish, spending most of his time in his study. X made only one mistake. He didn’t know that Higgins was a poet with a sharp eye for character. Perhaps his depiction of your childhood can offer solace for his seeming neglect.”

“He didn’t kill himself,” she murmured wonderingly.

“No. He didn’t.”

She rose, her sudden joy revealing just how painful she’d found the manner of his death. “He didn’t abandon us to the workhouse.” Tears filled her eyes.

“He would never have done that, Eden. He loved you.”

She tried to say more, but her voice broke.

Alex pulled her against him, letting her weep onto his shoulder. For ten years she’d carried the burden of what must have seemed the ultimate betrayal – a parent who callously condemned his children to a living hell. Now, at last, she was free.

But Alex wasn’t. He’d failed. Miserably. Not only had

he meekly followed a trail laid out by a killer, accepting false clues without thought or protest, but he'd left Higgins to face that killer alone, consigning Higgins's family to years of pain. Their suffering was his fault.

He was a fraud. His entire career was a fraud. And continued to be a fraud, he admitted as he pulled Eden closer, needing her warmth to counter the ice building in his chest. He ought to pack his bags and leave.

Yet here he was, clinging to her under the pretense of offering comfort when it was *he* who needed it. Even now, he wanted to tear away that unattractive gown and drown his sorrows in her woman's warmth. He was a cad, a scoundrel, a lecherous rogue unworthy of her touch. Yet he couldn't stop. As her sobs slowed, he brushed away her tears and kissed her, savoring her sweetness, invoking her passion to drive away his pain.

As usual, touching her ignited fires that swept him from head to toe. She was like no other woman he'd known or imagined. Her taste made the richest sweets seem sour. Her fragrance put the most elaborate summer garden to shame. And her response—

"Don't Alex," she begged hoarsely, panting. "Not here. I have to think of Olivia."

He shook his head clear of fantasies and reluctantly pulled back. But he couldn't stop himself from placing one more kiss on the end of her nose before releasing her.

"Thank you." She picked up the journal, dropped it on the floor, then stumbled against the table, shock turning her as shaky as she'd been that morning at the inn. "It is best if I retire. And perhaps you should do the same."

Before he could respond, she was gone.

He stared at the door, then paced to the window, frowning. She was right. Much as he wanted to, touching her in this house was wrong. Sir Richard had likely planted suspicions among the staff about her morals. And until Alex could atone for leaving her father unprotected, he should not touch her at all.

But how could he atone for ten years of pain? Not a single idea formed...

So he would concentrate on identifying X. The bastard must have watched as Alex interviewed Higgins, then killed Higgins the moment Alex left.

Again he cursed. Realizing that he'd played puppet to a master planner churned his stomach. He'd never once considered other possibilities, discarding several clues because they hadn't fit the trail he was following – just like Sir Richard.

Fool!

Twice a fool. And might still be. How many other cases had he twisted by overlooking evidence? Had traitors continued plying their filthy trade because he was too incompetent to find them? Had innocent men died on the gibbet because he'd ignored facts?

His legs gave way. Bile rose. Minutes passed – or maybe hours – before he managed to thrust the horror aside long enough to rise.

Tomorrow he would start the search for X, but first he must write to Sidmouth.

Chapter Fourteen

Eden slammed her bedroom door and leaned against it, furious that she'd done it again. One touch and she'd wanted to rip his clothes off. One kiss and she was ready to pull him to the floor, abandoning the responsibility she'd accepted in Olivia's infancy. And why? So she could feel his weight pressing down on her as he pounded deep into her core. So she could experience the soaring sensations he could arouse so easily. So she could find the ecstasy—

She couldn't. It was one thing to destroy her own reputation. Harming others was quite different. Society was right to fear emotion. Succumbing to temptation was the first step toward turning her back on duty, a step that could only end in dishonor.

She stared in the mirror at the stranger whose hair was falling down, then poured water in the basin. This wasn't her, she assured herself, splashing her face. Wantonness was an aberration triggered by shock, grief, and God knew how many other pressures. Finding her home invaded and her husband murdered had jarred her senses, which had run completely wild after enduring a carriage accident, Peterson's death, and an inn fire. Just the last hour had produced so many shocks that she could hardly breathe. Euphoria over her father had shattered her control.

Ten years ago, she had numbly accepted John's offer because the workhouse would have killed Olivia.

She'd spent hours, days, weeks of that first year searching every memory, convinced that she could have saved her father's life if only she'd been less concerned with her own affairs. Had his bouts of irritation bespoken a melancholia strong enough to incite suicide? Had her ridiculous infatuation driven him to despair? Had the expense of outfitting her for her visit forced him to confront his precarious financial state? If only she'd been there... Countless other hours had gone into preventing Olivia from bothering John lest he, too, escape them by killing himself.

Now, thanks to Alex, the anger was gone. It was Fate who had abandoned her to a pile of debts and an eight-year-old girl. Her father had not ignored his responsibilities yet again. Thus her tears. She'd known Alex would comfort her. Tears didn't discommode him in the least. And she'd known he would remain in control no matter how far she pushed. His control was what had made it possible to explore her sensuality.

But when he'd kissed her this time, something had been different – not his control, but something else...

Pain.

That was it. He was suffering pain. Knowing it was wrong to drive him to distraction, she'd pulled back. But now that she could think straight, she had to address his pain. If she had caused it, she must make amends.

She dried her face, inhaled deeply to calm her nerves, then returned to the study.

He sat at the desk, writing. But this wasn't the Alex she knew. His intensity was gone, leaving him broken, almost shriveled.

"Is that a report for the Home Office?" she asked softly, closing the door behind her.

"In a way." His face seemed haggard. "They must re-examine all my cases. I am too gullible to be trusted. Who else did I falsely accuse? How many traitors remain free because I did not ask the right questions? Sidmouth must tell the Regent that rewarding me would insult the crown."

"Rewarding you?"

He shrugged. "He wants to give me a barony."

A barony? It made sense. She knew he'd saved the crown much embarrassment by quietly removing French sympathizers from sensitive positions.

But as he raised his eyes to meet hers, she gasped.

Instead of the pain she'd expected, they swirled with despair, ghosts, and so much more. Curses at her stupidity filled her head.

Tonight's revelations might have removed her own burdens, but they had stabbed Alex to the core. Beneath the façade of a larger-than-life god who could solve any problem and right any wrong lay a wounded mortal. His power stemmed from believing in himself, but that belief was fragile – hardly a surprise, considering his family. Admitting one mistake had shattered it.

Her heart ached to see him so battered. His many successes had given him confidence, letting him shrug off Stratford's rejection and Palfry's hate. Now he had nothing.

She covered his hand as he bent to sign his missive. "Don't be hasty, Alex. Confronting a mistake is a shock, but this does not negate years of exemplary service. You are not to blame for what happened ten years ago. X is a cunning schemer. It is no surprise that his false trail worked for a time. But now that you know the truth, you will bring him to justice."

"I would like to think so, but he is more likely to fool me again."

He sounded so weary that tears sprang to her eyes. She blinked them away, suddenly furious at Stratford. The man had denigrated his son for years, never satisfied with anything Alex did. Now the doubts he'd planted were strangling the pride Alex ought to feel for a career that even the government felt needed recognition. It had to stop.

"Of course you will bring him to justice," she said sharply. "This is merely a temporary setback. No one is perfect, Alex. Mistakes are part of every life, as I know all too well. Remembering the first tea I hosted for the ladies of Papa's parish still makes me shudder. I'd been overseeing the parish for five years by then and had planned every last detail to make sure it was perfect."

"What happened?" Interest flickered across his face.

"What didn't? No one had told me that Mrs. Stokes and Miss Gimling were sworn enemies who could not occupy the same room without causing a scene. Since no one ever invited them together, I had not observed the problem for myself. Each assumed the other would be absent, of course – hostesses alternated their

invitations so as not to choose sides. As if that wasn't bad enough, Miss Gimling arrived late, so the others had already eaten before the fight sent them fleeing."

"Bad enough?"

"I'd been careless collecting the chestnuts for the biscuits."

"Not horse chestnuts!"

"I'm afraid so. No one died, but the apothecary did a brisk business that evening. Believe me, I never made *that* mistake again."

"You can't have been more than fifteen. Too young to be blamed."

"I could say the same. Ten years ago, you were also young. Don't judge yesterday by the knowledge of today. We learn every day of our lives. Mistakes are inevitable, but that is not always bad. They provide life's most potent lessons, one of which is that even following the rules does not guarantee success."

He raised his brows. "On the contrary. Rules prevent mistakes."

"Usually, but even the most rigid rules have exceptions – as Olivia learned two years ago. A friend shared a confidence after swearing her to secrecy. Being honorable, Olivia kept her word despite her disapproval, so she remained silent until it was too late."

"Too late?"

"Amanda was slipping out to meet a beau."

"Unsuitable, of course." He shook his head.

"Who else would demand secret assignations? Since he treated her like a princess and never pressed improper attentions, Amanda considered him honorable. Yet he did not seek marriage to a spoiled heiress. His true goal was wealth. He accepted a princely sum to depart – and to give him his due, he said nothing of Amanda's indiscretions. But she had been careless. Olivia wasn't her only confidante. So her reputation died. Olivia was appalled, for if she'd spoken up sooner, she might have saved her."

"Or maybe not. Amanda sounds a peagoose."

"To some extent. My point is that Olivia faced a situation in which two rules collided. She had given her word to remain silent. Yet a friend was flirting with danger."

"I don't see a problem. She chose wrong, to be sure, but only because she forgot that safety takes

precedence, even over honor. My mistakes are unforgivable. While investigating a crime in my official capacity, I ignored evidence and failed to ask pertinent questions. It is time to remove the blinders and accept my incompetence. Now if you'll excuse me—" He again picked up the pen.

"Put the letter away," she ordered. "Sleep."

"Sleep?" His voice cracked. "This problem will not disappear overnight. You should throw me out and thank Providence that you discovered my faults before my incompetence kills more of your family. Your father and John are dead because of me."

"Stop it!" She slammed her palms on the desk. "What stupidity is this?"

"My carelessness left your father at X's mercy. If I'd found X ten years ago, John would not be dead."

"Fustian. You are not responsible for the ills of the world, Alex."

He spoke over her. "My reputation is nothing but arrogance and lies. That alone makes me ineligible to help you. My conclusions are faulty, my observations suspect, my—"

"Are you God?"

"What do—"

"You are a man, Alex," she continued now that she had his attention. "Men make mistakes. Do you expect Jeremy to be perfect?"

"Of course not. He's a green cub."

"So were you ten years ago. At twenty-three, most men care for nothing but the cut of their coats and the latest gossip. Just because you'd moved beyond that doesn't—"

"I was a trained professional," he ground out, his scars white against a purple face. At least his intensity was back.

"How many of your cases involved the subterfuge X employed?"

"That was the first," he admitted.

"Had anyone warned you about such schemes?"

"No, but—"

She spoke over him. "Put the letter aside, Alex. We will seek X in the morning. After he is apprehended, you may post this if you wish. But it is dangerous to make a serious decision when you are reeling from shock and weary from days of hard travel."

It was a measure of that shock that he slumped in

defeat and left. She scooped up the abandoned letter and burned it. It would not do for the servants to see it.

Then she finished the letter to Kit that should have been posted that morning – the fire had driven it from her mind. It was more important than ever that Alex heal the breach with his family. As long as they eroded his confidence at every turn, any setback would tumble him into a melancholia from which he might never recover.

* * * *

Alex stared out his bedroom window, exhausted but unable to sleep. Moonlight sparkled across the dew-drenched lawn. A nightingale trilled from the trees. But nothing lightened his heart.

He ought to be packing his bags, but he was too weak to even make a stand. Abandoning his letter. Following orders.

He wanted to believe her, but it was impossible. Eden was an idealist who continued to see the world as benign despite her own tragedies. So she ignored that he was incapable of learning from mistakes. Even admitting them paralyzed his mind, releasing memories of every beating he'd received in childhood and every verbal flogging he'd endured in the years since. The only way to survive was to cling to the certainty that Stratford was wrong, that Alex Portland was canny, intelligent, and talented, with instincts that would lead him to the solution no matter how confused the evidence. No one was better than Alex Portland. No one!

He sagged, his conviction gone. He was an arrogant fool, blustering his way through life, convinced that only *his* way was right.

Just like Stratford.

He blinked away the moisture collecting in his eyes.

Stop this, demanded his conscience, sounding far too like Eden. *Concentrate on business. You promised to resolve John's murder.*

He closed the shutters and sank wearily onto the bed.

Maybe he could carry out that vow. He wasn't the lone investigator this time. Whatever information Terrence sent would be reliable. All he had to do was make sure his own evidence was sound by moving methodically, avoiding intuitive leaps, and double-

checking everything.

Was that possible? He'd never worked that way before...

* * * *

Eden bolted upright in bed, panting, one hand clutched to her breast to keep her heart from escaping. It was pitch black outside. What—

Thud.

Someone was in the collection room below her bedchamber.

A squeak followed, softer, but clearly audible now that she was awake.

An intruder.

It might be Alex, of course, but he had no reason to blunder about in the middle of the night. So it must be the man who had followed them. The man who'd burned an inn down around her.

Fury nearly choked her. She wanted to draw him, quarter him, hold his feet to hot coals, choke him until his eyes popped—

Leashing her rage, she slid silently to the floor and tiptoed toward the stairs, grabbing the poker as she passed the fireplace. If she could hear the intruder, he might hear her.

She'd been so emotional last night that she'd neglected to order more than the usual locking up. Criminal negligence, now that she thought of it. She knew someone was after her and would stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

Slipping cautiously down the stairs, she tiptoed toward the collection room, heart pounding in her throat when she heard rustling.

Thud.

Gripping the poker in both hands, she charged...

Her knees crashed into a chair. The poker clanged as she hit the floor.

Hinges screeched.

"Stop! Thief!" She lurched to her feet.

Bursting into the collection room, she scrambled to the open window as the moon broke free of a cloud.

A shadow raced across the formal gardens toward the distant woods.

The chair again crashed as someone else fell over it. "Damn!"

"Who is it?" she called, raising the poker.

"What the devil are you doing down here?"

demanded Alex, rubbing his shin. His nightshirt bunched above hastily donned pantaloons. Simms puffed up behind him, carrying a night candle and a poker.

“Someone was in the collection room.”

* * * *

Alex glared at Eden’s poker while he waited for his heart to settle. If she’d heard a noise, why hadn’t she wakened him? She was too independent for her own good. It didn’t matter how well she ran Ridley, she was no match for a killer. Or didn’t she trust him to deal with it? Despite her soothing words, it was deeds that revealed truth.

“You have no business confronting an intruder yourself,” he snapped.

She leaned the poker against the wall. “There wasn’t time to fetch you.”

“Of course there was.” He pulled her around to face him. “It would have taken less than a minute.”

“And risked losing him. Your room is at the far end of the hall. He would have heard my footsteps. The only chance of catching him was to reach him before he realized people were awake.”

Alex opened his mouth to deliver a blistering lecture on her lack of sanity. But the footman arrived, hastily dressed and carrying a poker. Two maids crowded behind him, similarly armed. Undoubtedly the rest of the staff was on its way. The hall resembled a gathering of pikemen.

Drawing in a calming breath, he studied the wreckage of the collection room. “Did he take anything?” He should have searched the house upon arrival.

“I’ve no idea. You can’t have been more than a minute behind me.” While Simms lit candles, she pulled the window closed on a new screech of hinges, then locked it. Firmly.

Alex turned to the footman. “Return the chair to its usual place, but don’t touch anything else.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Simms, check every door and window. I want to know how this fellow got in. Mrs. Marlow and I will straighten up in here.”

Simms left as the footman shoved the chair against the wall. The intruder had moved it only a few feet, positioning it so that anyone coming downstairs in the

dark would run into it. It made an effective alarm. Another chair sat between the collection room and the servants' stairs.

"Is anything missing out here?" he asked, pointing to the display case that stood in the hall between the collection room and the study.

She frowned. "No."

"Let's check the collection, then." Not an easy job. Cabinets were pulled out and cases shifted. A bookcase leaned drunkenly against a chair, its contents scattered across the floor. Drawers from a chest lay in a heap in the corner.

Alex castigated himself for not setting grooms to watch the grounds. More evidence that he was a failure. He knew someone was after them. Where had his wits been? Grooms could have caught the intruder outside, ending the case once and for all. Instead, he'd fallen into maudlin self-pity, abrogating his responsibilities.

His list of errors was growing. Discovering that X had killed both Higgins and Sir Harold had shaken him so much that he'd put off addressing Ridley's security until morning. Only the thief's own wariness had saved Eden's life tonight. If she'd actually confronted him...

"You had no business coming down here alone," he repeated, closing the door to the hall. "You could have been killed."

"I was armed."

He laughed without mirth. "Unless you dispatched him with one blow – a highly unlikely occurrence – he would have overpowered you in an instant. And once you saw his face, he would have killed you. Do you think he would let anyone live who could identify him? He probably killed Peterson and set the inn on fire. If he is also X – which now seems likely – he killed Christine, Sir Harold, and your father. And he might have killed John, untold accomplices—" He ran out of breath. Fury burned his chest, stronger than he'd ever experienced

She glared. "I'm not as helpless as you think. I could have knocked him out."

"It's dangerous to overestimate your abilities," he warned.

"I'm not."

"Prove it. Hit me." He tossed her a cane from the

jumble spilling from an elephant's foot.

"I couldn't!"

"Of course you can't. But I dare you to make contact with anything that might incapacitate me."

"It's not the same. You are expecting an attack."

"And he wasn't? Poppycock! He was poised to repel an attack from the moment he entered this house. Every sense was alert to the slightest sound. He would have reacted the instant you touched the door handle." He turned his back, opening the window to check for marks on the casing. Another screech jangled his nerves. X could not have entered this way. Everyone at Ridley would have heard him.

He locked the window, then turned to a display case that had not yet been disturbed. It—

Whirling, he caught the cane in one hand, twisting it from Eden's grasp. Before she could react, he pinned her to the floor, his arm banded across her throat.

"Satisfied?" he asked, ignoring the heat that had instantly suffused his body. He helped her up.

"H-how did you do that?"

"Danger hones a man's instincts, Eden. Don't ever think you can win a physical confrontation with one. If you hear a noise in the night, wake me."

"I will not stand idly by when danger threatens. I am not one of those helpless society ladies who fall into hysterics at the least thing. This is my home. No one is going to destroy it."

He grabbed her shoulders. "You don't have to do everything when there are people available who can share the load. Either let me quit or let me do my job. I can't concentrate if I must constantly worry that you will rush into danger. Do you want me to regret for the rest of my life that you died while in my care? What would happen to your sister?"

She sagged.

He pulled her against him, gently this time. "Relax, Eden," he murmured into her ear. "There are many ways you can help apprehend X. But battling him face to face is not one of them."

"Very well. Let's see what he's done." She tilted her head back to meet his gaze. "Why are you sure this was X himself and not another collector or a servant?"

"Whoever was here knows the house. X, in his guise as Sir Harold, trysted here with Christine."

"But that was before John moved here." She pulled

away to pace the room. “Tonight’s intruder went straight to the collection room, which makes me suspect Jeremy. I wish I’d had a clearer view of him.”

“Jeremy knows the room well enough to avoid noise. He also knows where every item is stored, so he could retrieve what he wanted in silence. This man was clearly searching for something. All he knew on arrival was which room housed the collection, which he could have discovered by visiting the house.”

“You mean I know him?” She sounded appalled.

“Or he posed as a traveler wanting a tour. Or he befriended one of the servants. I must question your staff.”

“Of course.” She paled.

He made no attempt to soothe this new shock. It was time she faced that she could trust no one, not even her faithful servants.

Once he returned the cabinets to their places, he passed her the contents. It took an hour to put everything away.

“Is anything missing?” he asked again.

She frowned. “Arthur’s sandals. Perhaps the thief thinks they will help him tap Merlin’s power – not that I believe they are real.”

“They had no particular value, then?”

She shook her head. “I can’t in good conscience sell them as Arthur’s sandals.”

“Why do you think them false?”

“Condition. I don’t believe leather would survive uncracked for centuries. They don’t even look worn.” She examined the shelves, frowning. “There should be a box— Ah. Here it is.” It had rolled beneath a chair. “His Borgia ring, complete with poison chamber. I don’t know its value, though the stone should be worth something. John loved it.” Her voice broke.

Simms returned. “Everything is properly locked except the kitchen door, ma’am. There is no sign that it was forced from outside,” he added to Alex.

“You mean someone let him in?” choked Eden.

“Not necessarily,” said Alex. He turned to Simms. “With your permission, I will interview the staff.”

“Immediately,” added Eden.

“As you wish. We are in the servants’ hall.” He left.

Alex turned to Eden. “Go back to bed. This is one interview you will not conduct.”

“Why? They are my staff.”

“Exactly. Admitting carelessness to you would put their positions in jeopardy.”

“Carelessness?”

“Either Cook forgot to check the door before retiring or someone slipped out after Cook went to sleep. It is too soon to assume that X seduced a maid, though it is possible.” The staff must include maids who had not met Sir Harold ten years ago.

“Very well. I will wait for your report.”

“Go to sleep. If I learn anything urgent, Carver will fetch you. Otherwise, we can discuss the results at breakfast.”

She frowned, but left.

Alex took a moment to settle his thoughts before heading to the kitchen. Holding Eden always scrambled his wits. Lingering fury at her recklessness didn't help. Nor did it help that he was torn between applauding and cursing her intrepid spirit.

* * * *

The gentleman was still shaking when he handed his horse to the posting inn's groom, rounded a waiting mail coach, and went in search of the proprietor. How had he been caught? The gods were supposed to be on *his* side.

It's a test, he reminded himself again. To see if you're worthy.

If it was a test, he was failing. Nothing had gone right in weeks. Storms kept separating him from his quarry. The fire that should have finished the matter had done nothing. Every time he took even a brief nap, Mrs. Marlow slipped away, disappearing in the predawn blackness or becoming invisible to everyone on a street. It was as if she could sense the moment he closed his eyes.

He'd been so sure this time. He'd arrived at Ridley after dark, intending to camp in the woods until he learned the estate's routine. But the gods had smiled on him for once – or so it had seemed. He'd not even chosen a campsite before a maid tiptoed from the servants' entrance, her stealth proving that no one was near the door.

So he'd walked in.

No one had seen him. No one had heard. The sorcerer's power had reached out, protecting him – or it should have. It was his right, his inheritance, his—

He twisted his face into a congenial smile and rang

the bell to summon the proprietor. But his thoughts remained at Ridley. What had he done wrong?

The innkeeper bustled from the taproom, face welcoming despite bleary eyes that bespoke a late night. Laughter followed him in surprising volume. The crowd rivaled a London club – odd for three of a country morning, even with the mail waiting outside.

“May I help you, sir?” The man’s eyes dimmed as he took in the shabby jacket and scuffed boots which proved he wouldn’t be letting his best room.

“I hope so.” He pulled a shilling from his pocket. “My brother disappeared while returning from London. I’ve traced him as far as Melton Mowbray, where he was seen heading this direction late on March the eighth. Did he perchance spend the night here? He’s about your height but thinner. Brown hair. Brown eyes.”

The innkeeper frowned, even when a second shilling dropped on his desk. “I see men what fit that description every day, sir, begging your pardon. ’Tain’t uncommon and even fits that body what turned up a couple miles up the road. Highwayman, he was.”

So his scene-setting had worked. He hid his satisfaction behind a frown, gripping the desk with both hands. “A body?” he squeaked. “Dear Lord! It can’t be... But you said a highwayman. I won’t believe...”

“But you do.” The innkeeper flexed muscular arms. “If your brother goes about robbing decent folks—”

“No, no. You misunderstood. If it is he, then the tale must be different than rumor claims, for George is a peaceable man, and not without assets. But if he were attacked—” He produced an artistic shudder. “What was the victim wearing?”

“Clothes about like yours.” His frown deepened.

“What did he carry?”

The innkeeper shook his head. “My cousin helped bring him in. He says he carried but a handkerchief, some string, and a bit of wire.”

He let relief spread over his face. “Praise the Lord! It can’t have been George. His wife’s letters always lie above his heart. Are you sure George didn’t stop here? George Mason, he is, an honest man and hard worker.”

“I don’t recall, but see for yourself.” He opened the register.

The man calling himself Mason carefully thumbed

through the pages, then sighed. “No sign of him. I would have thought since he changed horses at Melton – but perhaps he pressed on for another stage before halting. Thank you for your help.” He paused, as if with an afterthought. “How did your highwayman die? Did the coachman carry a musket?”

“No. He attacked a rider. Ineptly. The horse knocked him down, discharging his own pistol into his chest.”

“There’s a lesson there,” Mason intoned. “One can hardly rue the death of such a man.”

“But one can rue his attack,” growled the innkeeper. “A good man died with him – thrown when the horse bolted. We’ll not see his like again.”

“My condolences.” Another shake of his head brushed the conversation aside. “I’ll relieve my thirst before I press on, if you would bring me an ale. And a bite of food if the cook remains awake.”

“Always. Would you prefer the parlor, Mr. Mason?”

“The taproom will do. Perhaps someone in there saw George pass.”

The innkeeper gestured him to a table, then moved off to speak with others.

Mason studied the room. A dozen men clustered around a table in the far corner, so intent on a card game that it must involve considerable stakes. They groaned in unison as one of the players threw down his hand. Three men gulped stew at a second table, obviously passengers from the mail. They rose as one when the call went out to reboard, stuffing crusts into pockets to finish on the road.

A maid delivered his plate and ale, adding a smile before she whisked away to take orders from the card players.

Mason downed the ale, relaxing. The gods remained with him after all. No one suspected that their supposed highwayman had been murdered, and his near capture tonight was his own fault. He’d acted impatiently and paid. Next time he would leave nothing to chance.

He smiled as he dug into the meat pie steaming on his plate. The plan was simple, so as long as he didn’t rush his fences...

Chapter Fifteen

At breakfast, Eden held her tongue until Alex

finished eating, but her patience gave out when he lingered over his coffee.

“Well?” she demanded. “Why was the kitchen door open?”

“A maid slips out twice a week to meet a groom from Beckfield,” he said, naming the next estate. “She swears she always locks up when she returns.”

“That doesn’t help the rest of us while she’s gone.” Eden frowned.

“No, it doesn’t. She was gone two hours last night, returning to find the house in an uproar. That’s why she forgot the door. I hoped she might have seen our intruder leave, but she circled around the front of the house to avoid the housekeeper’s window.”

“And Cook’s.” Eden clenched her fists. “If she’d returned earlier, she would not have confessed. We would have been puzzled over how he entered.”

“She would have told me the truth.”

She shivered at his grim look and had to agree. Alex would have forced a confession through sheer determination. His intensity was back with a vengeance, clearly laced with anger.

“Which maid?”

“Polly.”

She shook her head. “I never suspected she had a beau – or that she might sneak about if she did. Sarah is the flighty one.”

“Nor did Simms or the housekeeper or the cook. They are furious.”

She would have to let Polly go. Rules aside, the staff would make the girl’s life miserable otherwise. They wouldn’t appreciate being put in danger. If Eden failed to act decisively, she would lose their respect. “So X happened to find the door open last night.”

“Which he will interpret as proof that Fate approves his plans – obviously he’s decided the stone he stole was a decoy, so he’s seeking the real one. That could make him even bolder.”

She suppressed a shiver. “Then why burn down the inn?”

“I can’t yet explain that. Even madmen display a certain logic, so he must have had some reason beyond his own insanity.” He shoved his plate aside. “I want to check the collection more closely.”

She’d hoped he would escort Olivia to call on the ailing Mrs. Sommers this morning while she spoke

with the steward, but the break-in made it more urgent than ever to find X. So she led the way to the collection room.

“Where were the servants the night John died?” he asked, examining the window in daylight. “You did interview them, I presume.”

“Of course. Two of them heard John shout, *Stop, thief!* as he raced out, but they were upstairs and saw nothing.”

“Which two?”

“Carver was turning down the bed in my room. From there, you can see the formal gardens, but you have to thrust head and shoulders beyond the casing to see the terrace. She didn’t. The boot boy was returning John’s riding boots to his dressing room. He ignored the shout.”

“Typical. As the lowest-ranking male on the staff, he probably feared being blamed if someone broke in. Where did John go when he left?”

“I’ll draw you a sketch.” She reached for a sheet of paper, then warned, “This won’t be to scale.”

He nodded, then leaned over her shoulder to watch, clasping his hands behind his back so he wouldn’t touch her. He couldn’t afford wandering wits. Yet her scent rose up to strangle him, proving that she could distract him no matter what he did. Was he doomed to yet another failure because he couldn’t keep his mind on the job?

“Here’s the house and terrace,” she said, breaking into his thoughts as she drew a pair of rectangles, then added lines that marked off the various gardens. “John ran to the terrace from the study. There are the only three ways off of it” —she pointed— “steps in the middle down to the formal gardens and steps at either end to the grassy rides. The west ride leads to the lake, the east ride to the woods. John was turning right as I reached the study, so the thief must have run toward the woods.”

Alex glanced at the window last night’s intruder had used. John would have run past it. “Where were the servants?”

“Eating dinner in the servants’ hall, here at the west end.” She tapped her sketch. “They saw and heard nothing. Simms had not yet joined them because I’d detained him in the dining room. But that is also at the west end. He was on the servant stairs when John

yelled, so heard nothing.”

“The perfect time of day to break in,” Alex commented grimly. “The thief probably entered here.” He touched the kitchen entrance at the east end of the building. The nearest servants’ stair emerged near the collection room.

“It’s how last night’s intruder gained entrance,” she agreed, sighing. “Two others were also absent from the servants’ hall. Morris – our groundskeeper – was late returning from Melton Mowbray. He heard shouting, but was too far away to understand the words.”

“Where was he?”

“On the drive a hundred yards from the house, but shrubbery, the kitchen garden, and the privet hedge stood between him and the east ride, muffling sound and blocking his view.”

Alex growled.

“One of the grooms had remained in the stable to treat a horse’s leg. He was heading toward the door to the servants’ hall when he heard shouts from the terrace. He ran up the west steps, but by the time he arrived, John was gone. I sent him down the east ride to help.”

“But he would have seen anyone who fled along the west ride.”

“Right. The west ride is straight for a quarter mile. The east curves, with privets on both sides, so anyone disappears quickly. I suppose the thief might have veered into the formal gardens – the inner hedge has several gaps – but I saw no movement there despite reaching the terrace only moments after John raced away.”

“How far behind John was the groom?”

“Perhaps a minute, though I can’t be sure. Time seems different in a crisis. I wish Carver had seen more, but my window overlooks the garden, not the ride.” She shook her head.

“One always wants to know more, but this information is valuable. The thief had to have gone into the woods. If he had cut across the kitchen garden, the groundskeeper would have heard him – I’ve never met one yet who tolerated trampled plantings. If he’d veered toward the formal gardens, you or the groom would have seen him.”

She twisted to meet his gaze, sending new fires raging through his body. “What difference does this

make?”

He forced calm over his voice. “Now I can cease wondering whether he slipped around to the stables to steal a horse. If John followed, a stable offers many weapons and many more opportunities for accidental death. And it would explain how he escaped notice. No grooms were there during dinner.”

“I never even considered that.”

“Because you knew he’d gone to the woods. That is now proved, so I must find a new explanation for moving John’s body.”

“Why does it matter?”

He sighed. “I want no loose threads this time, Eden. Unless I can explain everything, then I cannot be sure that my solution is correct. I will not risk charging the wrong man again. I want no more deaths on my conscience.”

“So what do we do next?”

“Study your father’s journal for more clues to X’s identity. The man was there for two weeks.”

“It’s in the study.”

He followed her out of the room.

* * * *

Half an hour later, Alex nodded. “What do you think of this?” he asked Eden, who was reading her father’s sermon notes while Alex slogged through the poetry.

“What?”

“You tell me. You knew him better than I did.” He leaned closer, sliding one hand down her back while the other offered her the book. His fingers tingled from the contact.

“Not well enough.” She frowned, but plucked the volume of verses from his hand, ignoring his touch while she read. “*Soft-spoken ... secretive ... Beelzebub’s slave... What on earth?*”

“That’s what I want to know. By my calculations, he’d been hosting X for more than a week when he wrote that.”

“April twenty-third,” she noted. “Christine died on the thirtieth...” She frowned. “Ah. This was written on a Sunday. That accounts for the reference to Beelzebub. X didn’t attend services.”

“Your father was that devout?” Many people ignored services, especially when away from home.

“Not devout.” She seemed to struggle for words. “But he had placed Sir Harold on a pedestal, revering their

connection. Now this is speculation,” she warned, “but he seemingly became disillusioned by Sir Harold, who claimed to be in ill health, yet appeared robust.”

“I noted that two pages earlier. X insisted on carrying his own trunk upstairs. He saddled his own horse, rode instead of taking a carriage—”

“Exactly. His words did not match his deeds. This entry addresses the man’s manners. No matter what your usual habit, when you accept hospitality at a vicarage, you attend services. Not only did X decline, but he left to take the waters even on the Sabbath.”

“But—”

“The Oakham spa is not open on Sunday.”

Alex frowned. “Surely X would know that. Very little is open on Sunday.”

“One would think so, but perhaps he was so intent on ingratiating himself at Marwood that he forgot. Thus even Papa saw through his lies. I doubt X noticed.”

“Why?” Alex knew from long experience that playing roles required keeping a close eye on everyone. Unless one nipped the tiniest doubts in the bud, the masquerade failed. He’d always kept a ready supply of explanations for every conceivable oddity.

Eden glared. “If Papa became suspicious, X would have soothed him with a lie. Whether Papa believed it or not, he would have included it here.” She waved the journal. “That X didn’t notice Papa’s disenchantment demonstrates both arrogance and a disdain for those he considers inferior – which hints that he is at least upper gentry himself. Or perhaps he lives so secluded from the world that he is unfamiliar with custom.” Rising, she strode to the window and back.

Alex’s mouth turned dry when her skirts outlined her legs. He tore his eyes away, reminding himself that he was unworthy of her. His goals were to solve this case, find Olivia a husband, and convince Richard to leave Eden alone. Perhaps once she finished mourning—

He inhaled deeply. Eden was one of those rare women who would never consent to a liaison, he reminded his libido. Especially with someone like him. All he could do was pray he could finish his tasks before passion overwhelmed his honor. “So you agree that your father was growing suspicious of Sir Harold. Would he have searched the man’s belongings?”

“Maybe, though our housekeeper had likely already done so. But if he *did* search, he found nothing he recognized. His writing lays out puzzles, but doesn’t speculate on solutions. And the housekeeper died five years ago, so we have no one to ask.” She drew a deep breath. “You look tired, Alex. Why don’t you relax while I study the journal? Olivia needs to call on a tenant this morning. If you accompany her, she can show you the gardens on the way back. Even if you find no evidence of X’s flight, you will think more clearly after a break.”

Alex scowled, kicking himself for not seeing the truth sooner. This was the third time she’d suggested that he entertain Olivia while she did something else. She was matchmaking.

Fury exploded before he could stop it. The nerve of the woman! Did his touch mean nothing to her? Of all the arrogant, misguided—

He caught himself before he could spew the vitriol aloud. And in doing so forced himself to think.

Eden had sacrificed herself for Olivia since childhood. At the tender age of ten, she’d stepped into the role of mother and household manager. Instead of enjoying the courtship and marriage most girls dreamed of, she’d wed a stranger old enough to be her grandfather so Olivia would have a home. Now she was ignoring her own desires solely to protect Olivia. But her plot would never work.

“It’s no use,” he said, drawing a startled gaze. “I’ve no interest in Olivia.”

“What’s wrong with her? She’s everything you want in a bride – quiet, sweet-tempered, prefers the country—”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Tweed.”

“Damnation!” He turned away to look out the window. “He shouldn’t have taken my mutterings seriously.”

“You aren’t going to London to find a bride?”

“I toyed with the notion in a fit of blue-devils.” He shrugged. “Mostly because I was frustrated beyond belief and thought acquiring a wife might be easier than trekking into Exeter every few months. But I didn’t want to disrupt my routine, so—”

“Olivia is an expert at staying out of the way.”

“Forget it,” he snapped. When pain slashed her face,

he pulled her into his arms. "She's a lovely girl, and I will do what I can to find her a husband, but I won't wed her. The nonsense I was muttering that night would have driven me mad if I'd ever pursued the matter." He now knew that a quiet, conformable wife would bore him to tears before a week passed. And seeking a bride in town would never work. Olivia's sweet innocence illuminated the unbreachable wall his job had raised between him and the girls who made up London's marriage mart. He was less fit for society than even Stratford knew.

He pulled Eden closer, needing her warmth to ease his pain, needing her touch to deaden his memories, needing—

She pulled away. "This has to stop, Alex. I'll be no man's mistress."

"Of course you won't. Marry me." The words slipped out without thought, shocking both of them.

Her eyes turned suspiciously bright even as her head shook. "No. Thank you, but no. I'll be no man's wife, either." She pulled out of his grip. "If Olivia doesn't interest you, then go discuss security with Simms. I need a few minutes alone."

He could use time alone, too, he decided, grabbing Higgins's journal and heading for the door, her refusal cramping his stomach. Why had he offered? He was unworthy of her, as she plainly saw.

Yet he wanted her. Permanently. Was there anything that might overcome his faults?

* * * *

Eden collapsed the moment Alex left. Why was Fate toying with her? Hadn't she given enough?

Alex's offer had stunned her, tempting her with the fulfillment of nearly every dream she'd ever had. To have the luxury of fully sharing his bed without the threat of lost reputations or harm to others. To live with a man who could comfort, challenge, excite, respect...

But she couldn't. Marriage was out of the question for so many reasons. Even the thought of again placing herself under the control of a man made her quake. Twice, she been in that position. Twice, she'd suffered. First with her father, who while not acting out the final betrayal as she'd so long believed, had done nothing for her in life, not even amassed the tiniest portion that might have let her wed honorably.

Then with John, whose obsession had driven away all memory of his promises. Both had left her destitute, though each had considered himself honorable and caring. She could not risk that again.

And Alex needed more from his wife than she could ever give. A title would draw him openly into government, for he would have to sit in Parliament. With a well-born wife beside him, he could become very influential. But she wasn't well-born. Even satisfying his most torrid lust could not balance the drag she would be on his career.

He knew that. She'd seen the shock in his eyes the moment the offer was out. He'd not planned it, thoughtlessly uttering the words in the heat of passion. When he came to his senses, he would thank her.

In the meantime, she must ignore him and concentrate on business.

* * * *

Alex retired to the drawing room. To keep raging turmoil from swamping his senses, he forced himself to read more of Higgins's poetry, wondering for the thousandth time why the man had put all his thoughts into verse. Twisting them into meter and rhyme made them too cryptic to decipher. What the devil was a tympanic orb? Or pedestrian agony?

He couldn't ask Eden. He wasn't even sure he could face her over lunch, let alone anywhere more intimate.

Someone rapped on the door.

"Enter," he called.

Simms bowed, a tray extended on one hand. "A post for you, sir."

"Thank you."

One look at the letter drove Eden from his mind. It was from Terrence. And it was thick. If only it helped. Last night's break-in proved that X was willing to take absurd and dangerous risks.

The thickness was the copy of his report he'd requested. It was as bad as he'd feared, his conclusions brash and embarrassingly arrogant. Not one word mentioned puzzles that had not fit his hypothesis. He'd offered no proof beyond the claims of a furious maid. It certainly contained nothing he could use now.

But attached to the end was preliminary information on Percy Montagu and the agent Barclay, which gave

Alex a place to start. He had to discover X's identity so he could concentrate on apprehending him.

Moving to the writing desk that stood the corner, he set to work.

* * * *

The door opened without warning. Alex jumped, scattering his notes.

Eden shook her head. "Simms said you received a dispatch."

"Terrence sent the results of his preliminary inquiries."

"What did he find? I presume he is checking all three collectors and both agents."

"Lord Oakdale and the industrialist are definitely innocent."

"Which means Percy Montagu. He employs Emerson, if I recall."

"He does. But Barclay's employer is also in the running. As I suspected, he does not work for Oakdale."

"Could he be working for himself?"

"No. He receives instructions at his post drop at the Pulteney Hotel and sends responses back to Oakdale, though to another post drop rather than Oakdale's London house or Northumberland estate. Since neither party has written in the last month, Terrence doesn't yet know who collects them."

"So even Barclay might not know who employed him," she said, frowning.

"It's too early to say. I did discover another clue to X's identity, however. He's left-handed."

"How do you know?"

"*Sinister*." He opened Higgins's journal to a marked page, pointing to *this sinister stranger, set apart*. "He wrote this the day Sir Harold arrived. Your father clearly idolized Sir Harold in the beginning, so he wouldn't consider him malicious, harmful, or evil. Sir Harold's accession to the baronetcy rules out illegitimacy. But *sinister* is also a Biblical reference to left-handedness."

She stared at the lines for nearly a minute. "You're right. I don't see what else he can mean. Not in the beginning."

"Which is helpful. Not many men are sinister."

"Is Percy?"

"I don't know. I've not met him, but I intend to find

out. Terrence did discover that neither Emerson nor Barclay is in London just now. Percy sent Emerson to Italy, via France.”

“Like Mr. Jasper.”

“And several others. Now that the war is over...” He hoped it was coincidence, but it would take time to discover the truth, for Jasper remained *incommunicado*. It could be weeks before Terrence’s man found him. “Barclay is visiting a cousin. No one knows where the cousin lives, of course.”

“You sound unhappy.” The moment she said the words, her face turned crimson.

He ignored it, unwilling to discuss his precipitous proposal until he was calm enough to consider it. “If X is eliminating everyone who knows about the stone, then the idea of Emerson following Jasper is unsettling. On the other hand, Emerson left after John’s death, so if the corpse found with John was X’s agent, then it must be Barclay, which would acquit Percy and render Emerson harmless. Either theory leaves you in danger, however, since it is X himself who tried to break in.”

“I see what you mean. Confusing. But how do we find out which theory is right?”

“I have two places to start. Terrence sent a sketch of Percy drawn by one of his secretaries, who knows the family. The Montagues are all blond, but I would not call them giants.”

“Papa was about my height. Even you might appear gigantic to such a man.”

“I hadn’t realized – he was sitting behind his desk when I arrived, and I left so precipitously, he didn’t see me to the door. So he might well describe Percy as a giant. I will show the sketch to those who met Sir Harold ten years ago.”

“And your other plan?”

“To call on Lady Debenham after lunch.” Lord Debenham’s estate was barely five miles away.

Eden shuddered. “She’s a terror.”

“True, but she also knows more gossip than anyone else around here.” Such knowledge gave her great power in society, for a word from Lady Debenham could shower a new arrival with invitations or see that he was stricken from the lists. In some ways, she wielded more power than the Almack’s patronesses. If anyone knew about Percy Montagu, it would be her.

Chapter Sixteen

The ride to the Debenham estate gave Alex too much time to contemplate his new mistakes.

Eden had arrived at Cliffside when he'd been too needy to think straight. His mind had instantly equated the word *widow* with *potential mistress*. Despite his reluctance to seduce her so early in her mourning, he had retained that image. Not until the offer had emerged from his lips had he considered courting her.

The idea had potent appeal, for she had much to commend her, and not just the passion that promised unlimited pleasure. She would never be the cipher he'd envisioned, but she was competent, honorable, and loyal. Her education made her an interesting companion. Even their arguments were stimulating, for she forced him to view problems from a different perspective. Debating with her would prevent him from becoming another autocrat like Stratford.

But winning her hand presented a challenge. It would take more than the passion she clearly feared if he was to succeed. He must first convince her that his intentions were honorable. And because he wanted her willing, he could not use his intention to dower Olivia as a bargaining point. It was time Eden considered her own needs instead of always choosing what was best for her sister. Nor could he reveal his growing protectiveness. Eden was too independent to accept it, even when she clearly needed help.

Excitement stirred at the thought of Eden permanently in his bed. What a partner she would make! But convincing her would be difficult. If he pressed too hard, she might toss him out. His first order of business must be to eliminate her most pressing problem so she had time to consider his offer.

To keep his libido under control, he turned his thoughts to his surroundings. Sunshine had banished the winter rains, letting spring burst forth. Lambs gambled in fields. Crocuses blazed along hedgerows. He forded a stream, then cantered across a meadow so green it hurt his eyes. Did deciding to wed Eden affect how he saw the world?

Yet his tension increased with each passing mile. Resolving this investigation was more urgent than

ever, but Lady Debenham might have already left for town. The Season would officially begin in another week.

Lady Debenham's knowledge of aristocratic families was second only to Lady Beatrice's. Together the pair probably knew more than the College of Arms, official arbiter of title disputes. So she was his best source on the Duke of Travers and other Montagues, including Percy.

On the other hand, Alex did not want to direct her curiosity toward Percy until he knew the man was guilty. Nor could he raise suspicion about Eden and Olivia by revealing his residence under their roof, so he must hide his true purpose.

Lady Debenham pinned him with a disapproving glare as he entered her drawing room. "What are you doing in Leicestershire, Portland? It's past time you were in London. You've not shown your face in society for two years."

"Not London society," he agreed with a smile. "But I've wandered the countryside from time to time. I was passing this way and decided to pay my respects."

Her eyes sharpened. "Passing? To where?"

"Marwood Hill, then Graystone Manor."

"Why?"

"Sir Richard's brother recently died. Since John was a friend, I ought to pay a condolence call while I'm in the area. Graystone has a horse I wish to see. Hartford refuses to part with the one I want." Graystone and Hartford were renowned breeders, particularly of hunters.

Her interest in his business died at this prosaic response. The country around Melton Mowbray offered the best hunting in England. Many men tested their skills there. Even more sought horses that had been trained there.

A footman appeared with refreshments. Alex accepted wine and the biscuits for which her cook was justly famous in London.

"Now tell me why you really called on me," Lady Debenham demanded when they were again alone. "And no fustian about paying respects. I've seen you pass me in the street with nary a nod, so I can't commend your manners."

"I've apologized for that gross oversight a dozen times, my lady. Shall we make it an unlucky thirteen?"

“No, we shan’t,” she snapped tartly. “You wouldn’t mean it any more than the first twelve.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “I do sincerely regret the incident, if for no other reason than to avoid constant reminders of it.”

“Let that be a lesson to you – and you’ve still not answered my question.”

“What reason could there be beyond an hour of scintillating conversation?”

“With any other man, I might believe it. But you never do anything without a reason. Even talk.”

Witch. But he didn’t say it. She was too astute for his peace of mind. Matching wits with her was always a challenge. “Curiosity, more than anything. I overheard mention of the Duke of Travers while changing horses yesterday – nothing interesting; merely speculation about his health.” The man was ninety-five, so the tale was plausible.

“No surprise there. He suffered a bout of ague last month,” she said, handing him a glass of wine. “Considering his age, he recovered more quickly than anyone expected.”

“Just so. But the name rang a bell. My grandmother once mentioned him – something about his birth, though I can’t remember the details. I was barely out of leading strings so paid little heed. But travel is boring enough without curiosity making the hours drag. I am hoping you recall the tale.”

“Which one?”

“There is more than one?” He popped a cake into his mouth, letting avid interest show on his face.

Lady Debenham scowled. “I don’t know anything beyond rumor, myself, you understand. You would do better to ask Lady Beatrice”—her arch-rival for the title Most Knowing Gossip—“for her advanced years give her an edge when it comes to ancient tales.” Since her tone held a bite he couldn’t miss, he didn’t remind her that Travers had reached his majority before Lady Beatrice’s birth, so she would know nothing firsthand, either.

Instead, he shrugged. “She is in London, and we are not. I’m sure your great-grandmother must have mentioned the tale.” Or her grandmother, though naming that woman would imply that he knew Lady Debenham had passed the age of fifty some years ago. “I seem to recall something about twins.”

“Yes, the twins,” she said immediately. “I had that story from Lady Marlow – she was Travers’s sister, you know.”

“I thought she was a viscount’s daughter.”

“That’s Sir Richard’s wife. Sir George’s wife was a Montagu.”

“John never mentioned a connection,” he said inanely, head spinning as facts rearranged themselves into new patterns.

“That surprises me. Very close to his mother, he was. To both parents, really. He only wed because she demanded it on her deathbed – in ’94 that was. It was a mistake, by all accounts. The girl might as well have been a light-skirt. Came to a bad end.”

“So he said”—he interrupted before she could recall his own involvement in the events of ten years ago—“but what is the tale about the twins?”

“Travers is the eldest twin – maybe.”

“What? Surely the midwife marked them.”

“Of course. And Travers was first. But was that what nature intended?” Her eyes gleamed. “Now you must recall that Lady Marlow was younger by several years, her mother being the old duke’s third wife, so she knew only what she’d overheard the servants whispering. ’Twas the duke’s second wife who birthed the twins, his first having died following her fourth stillbirth. And the second seemed destined for the same end. Labor was well advanced before the midwife arrived to find the child positioned badly.”

“Yet both boys lived.”

“Because the midwife acted against nature – on the duke’s direct orders, but against nature nonetheless.” She paused to sip tea, leaving Alex raptly staring. “When it was obvious that the duchess would expire, the duke ordered the midwife to rescue the babe. He wasn’t about to accept another stillbirth. So the midwife reached into the womb, shoved the obstruction aside, then grabbed the feet and tugged. But she could not say which feet they were, those of the child nature intended to be first or his brother.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Not to most, but it was debated in the family for years. Who was the rightful heir? Was it the younger by only two minutes? Did it matter?”

“It is always difficult when the heir is a twin,” he conceded. “The younger often questions fate.”

“In this case, it was the duke who questioned fate, despite that his own orders produced the conundrum. He was superstitious and feared that tampering with nature would send his house into decline. When he remarried, speculation abounded that a new son might lead to untimely accidents for the twins. But the babe was female. When that wife also died – all the babes were unusually large – he took it as an omen and accepted his fate. Or seemed to. His own death proved otherwise, for his will split the dukedom as much as law allowed. The eldest received the title and entailment, of course, but everything else went to the younger, who ended with more than his brother.”

Alex whistled softly. “That must have grated.”

“It produced the very schism the old duke had feared. The new duke was left with land he couldn’t sell and little else. He’s rebuilt a modest fortune in the sixty years since, but he and his twin last spoke at their father’s funeral.”

“Does the younger twin care? He inherited a fortune.”

“But Lord James lacks the power of a title – dukes are a bare two steps below God, but younger sons remain commoners. And his life has been haunted by ill luck. His wife died tragically, leaving a single son. That son died a month before his own son was born. The grandson must be forty-five by now, but has never wed, so that branch of the family will likely die out. Lord James is determined to survive Travers, no matter what it takes, and he gloats at every hint of Travers penury. As for Travers, he must pray daily that at least part of the family fortune will somehow return to him when his brother dies. His own line is prolific – too prolific, some would say. Five sons, sixteen grandsons, and eleven great-grandsons to date. Plus a score of girls requiring dowries. So while the succession is in good hands, the family coffers remain strained.”

“A lesson to beware of large families,” he quipped. But as he turned the conversation to the latest gossip and the prospects for the coming Season, his mind fretted over her revelations. He saw a quite different explanation for the Montagu imbalance.

After the shock of his father’s will, Travers had made sure his twin could never have the title, too, producing son after son after son. And if the younger

twin believed he should have been first, the schism gave Percy a motive for pursuing the Sarsos relics. They were reputed to mend injustice.

Now that he thought back, he'd once heard a garbled tale about a night Percy Montagu drank himself into near oblivion, raging about stolen birthrights and cousins who didn't know their place. The situation could easily have left him susceptible to fantasy. So if his great-aunt had mentioned her husband's collection, which included the Sarsos staff...

It was enough. Alex would confirm his theory by showing the sketch to Sir Richard, but the pieces fit too well to doubt his conclusions.

He endured an interminable half hour of trivia before he could return to Ridley to collect the drawing.

A letter from Sir Michael awaited him in the study. He frowned.

"Is something wrong?" asked Eden from the doorway.

"I don't know." He broke the seal, skimmed, then handed it to her. "Further confirmation that X killed Sir Harold."

"I see what you mean." She frowned in turn. "Sir Harold had no interest in antiquities. Lady Iverson claims he was summoned to London to collect an unexpected inheritance." She shook her head. "He must have been very gullible."

"Or desperate. We know his finances were strained. Why else would he seek to buy a sugar plantation?"

"But why would he go to London in person instead of asking his solicitor to deal with it? He ought to at least have questioned why a man he didn't know had left him a fortune."

"He *was* the head of the family, and the deceased was supposedly a cousin."

She snorted.

"Very well. He was gullible. But if you received such a notice, would you question its authority – assuming you knew nothing of Sarsos?" he added as she opened her mouth to protest.

"Perhaps not. Ignorance leaves people woefully unsuspecting, so we should pity him." She handed the letter back.

Alex skimmed it a second time. "Lady Iverson is looking for the original letter so Sir Michael can

pursue the inheritance. I'm amazed she said nothing earlier."

"I'm not. Sudden death drives mundane details into hiding. And since Sir Harold seemed to be returning home when he drowned, she would not realize the business was unfinished. Few ladies consider the fine details of finance."

He rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You managed far better than most ladies. Better even than many gentlemen."

"I doubt it." She shivered.

"Believe it, Eden. You are intelligent, capable, and level-headed in a crisis."

"Only because I have no choice. Megrims and hysterics never solve problems."

"Perhaps not, but many find them easier than girding their loins and heading into battle for themselves. I admire your ability to do so, even when I cringe at the danger you court." He squeezed her shoulder, letting one finger caress her neck, then released her to again skim the letter. "Sir Michael is hoping to recover the funds since none of his accounts contain such a sum. He hopes the cousin's solicitor set up a separate account."

"You must tell him it was a ruse." She walked to the window. "Write to him today."

"Not until we apprehend X. We can't risk him discovering how much we know."

"I suppose not." She stared outside. "But it seems cruel..." Another pause. "There's one aspect of this I don't understand. X was here, seducing Christine. So how did he intercept Sir Harold? The route from the Isle of Mann to London does not pass Marwood."

"I suspect Sir Harold was abducted when he landed in Wales, then incarcerated while X came here to seek the staff. Once he had it, he killed Sir Harold, dumped the body at sea, then returned to watch Higgins. After Higgins corroborated the maid's story, X disposed of him, then blithely headed home." What a fool he'd been to miss the significance of those rope marks.

"So evil. We have to stop him."

"We will. I'm reasonably certain that Percy Montagu is X." He told her about Lady Debenham.

"John was Percy's cousin?" she exclaimed. "No wonder Richard and his sisters are so high in the instep. Their grandfather was a duke."

He nodded. "I need to show the picture to Sir Richard to be absolutely sure Percy impersonated Sir Harold."

"I have no doubt at all," she said. "Everything fits."

"Quite likely. But I cannot tolerate another mistake. Since it seems odd that no one of Barclay's acquaintance has the slightest idea where he is – aside from visiting an unnamed cousin at an unknown location – it occurs to me that Percy might also be the false Oakdale."

"You mean he paid Peterson twice for the same information?"

"That is one way to make sure his agent doesn't cheat him or seek the relics for himself. Such distrust might also explain why he's after you. I can't believe I let him pull the wool over my eyes," he growled, voice rising.

"Are you still wallowing in guilt?" she demanded. "I don't see that your mistakes are particularly onerous."

"Mistakes cost lives. Mine have already cost four, starting with your father, and the tally may yet rise. If he employed both agents, then Jasper is certainly in danger, as is Emerson once he carries out his commission." He turned away.

"You've already done everything humanly possible to protect Jasper," she reminded him, then parroted his own words. "You cannot accept the blame for a madman's acts, Alex. Hold yourself to high standards, certainly, but don't cling to self-pity because you can't predict the future. And don't whimper because your father is foolish enough to hate you," she added. "That isn't your fault, either."

"But it is," he swore. "Oh, not his latest complaint, which is only perversity. But I gave him every reason to hate me. It was no surprise when he threw me out to starve."

Chapter Seventeen

Eden stared. "Starve?" Tweed hadn't mentioned starving.

"Just about." He grimaced, obviously wishing back his words.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"This isn't pertinent to the case."

"But it is, for the memories distract you. Tell me the

whole story this time. From the beginning.” She couldn’t stand to see him in pain.

“I can’t remember the beginning. Stratford has always hated me.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t need a third son, especially one who ignores orders and asks impertinent questions. I don’t believe anything without proof.”

“Which is why you are a good investigator—”

“—who follows wrong trails and convicts innocent men.”

“Never!” She punched his arm, furious at his obstinate self-flagellation. “One mistake made in the flush of youth does not condemn you. Stratford should be proud of you. The quest for truth is exemplary.”

“Not when I asked him why my seventh great-grandfather was given an earldom for saving the king’s life in a battle he did not attend.”

She raised her brows.

“I found his memoirs in the muniments room. It’s not a pretty tale.”

“So why did he receive the earldom?”

“For wedding the king’s pregnant mistress and accepting the child as his own. He’d been the king’s bard until then, a man of minimal birth, who sang entertaining songs but never carried arms in his life.”

“Which means nothing, since the child was royal.”

“The child was a girl, so the earldom descends from the bard. Stratford was furious – I don’t think he’d known before I brought it to his attention. He destroyed the memoirs, then turned off my tutor for letting me run wild.”

She stared. “He blamed your tutor because you’d learned a truth he wished to hide?”

“Of course.”

“That isn’t fair!”

“Life isn’t fair. Surely you know that by now. Punishing others for my transgressions was how he forced obedience. Every time I rebelled, someone else suffered. Tutors never stayed long. Servants likewise moved on quickly. He made sure I knew it was my fault that they couldn’t find new posts.”

She couldn’t believe anyone could be that cruel, but it had to be true. Alex kept his voice light, as if commenting on the latest gossip, but she could hear the pain beneath it, twisting a knife in her heart.

"I left for school with threats ringing in my ears of who would suffer if I was sent down," he continued.

"Were you?"

"No, but I came close. Stratford's influence is all that kept me there. He wasn't pleased that he had to exert it."

"What happened?"

"Besides sneaking out now and then?"

"Disguised as a servant, I suppose."

He nodded, then sighed. "Participating in theatricals was another rebellion – he'd forbidden it, of course, especially after he learned about the bard, but he is a proud man who cannot admit his failure to control me. Since telling the school about his prohibition meant explaining my rebellious tendencies..."

"He didn't."

"Right. They welcomed my talent, unsuspecting that access to the costume closet let me slip away at least once a week."

She laughed. "You *were* a scamp, weren't you?"

"Too true. And a stupid one as well. My last year at Eton, I fell in with a cardsharp, losing nearly five hundred guineas before coming to my senses. I didn't have it, of course, and my youth worked against me when I accused him of cheating. I had to apply to Stratford to cover the vowels. He was furious." Pain flashed across his face.

Eden winced. At a guess, he'd been whipped. Or worse. And for a debt that was uncollectible under law or even under honor. Except to a man who expected perfection and absolute obedience. She was beginning to hate Stratford, and she hadn't even met him.

"I kept out of his way after that and managed to avoid his notice until my third year at Oxford. My allowance was never high, and events that year conspired to overspend it."

"More vowels?" she asked.

"A few small ones, but most of the duns came from other things." He didn't elaborate, making her wonder if brothels operated on credit. With his proclivities... "Stratford turned purple when he found out and nearly pulled me out of school."

"I suppose he never overspent his own allowance," she snapped.

"I wouldn't know, but heirs live by different rules than spares, and the rest of us have different rules yet."

When I finally matriculated, he took his revenge.”

“How?”

“Used his influence to get me a government post, handed over the younger son’s portion with a reminder that it was the last groat I would ever receive, then sent me on my way with an admonition to trouble him no more.”

“That’s hardly tossing you out to starve.”

“No. That came later. The job he’d found was a secretary’s post, something I’d never wanted. I was at my club trying to find an alternative when a young jackanapes freshly down from Eton challenged me to piquet. Before the night was over, I’d lost everything I owned and three thousand more.”

“My God!” She could hardly breathe. “Did he cheat?”

“I believed so for years, but in truth, no. We were both desperate that night, both seeking escape from domineering fathers, but he was sober and I wasn’t.” He shook his head. “As the losses piled up, I panicked, betting wildly in a mad attempt to recoup. It didn’t work. I’m not proud of my behavior, but I hadn’t believed—” He paused to clear his throat, then resumed speaking. “Stratford disowned me. Most of the family followed suit. I had to accept his damned post to pay off the moneylenders – which took years. Stratford hasn’t trusted me since.”

“Surely he can see that you’ve become a responsible gentleman,” she objected. His current fortune attested to his recovery, and he was respected by his peers.

“Why? In his eyes, I’m still the obstinate, contrary hellion he’s hated for thirty-three years. How can I counter that? He doesn’t care how I stayed out of the Marshalsea and thinks me barely suited to copying correspondence. Think about it. Within a year of inheriting my grandmother’s estate, I quit my post, proving that I’m the lazy, incompetent wastrel he’s always called me. Not that the events were related,” he added.

“Of course not. You must have been dying by inches after playing roles for so many years.”

He seemed surprised that she understood. “Until he strips me of any hint of independence, he lives in daily fear that I’ll embarrass him. He won’t stop until he turns me into another Palfry, dutifully following his lead and never asking questions.”

“He sounds an officious snob.”

That surprised a chuckle out of him.

“How did you get from a secretarial post to investigations?”

“Money. It is more dangerous than office work, so it pays better. And there never was a secretarial post *per se*. Sidmouth is a cousin of sorts, so he promised to put me to work. He, at least, was delighted to discover my talent for disguise – not that he will ever discuss me with Stratford. Either Stratford would call him a liar, or he would transport both of us for conduct unbecoming a gentleman.”

“Then he is not worth knowing.”

His eyes widened.

“Have you gamed to excess since then?”

“No. The risks aren’t worth the rewards. And I’ve hardly had extra hours to fill.”

Alex was a far more complex man than she’d first believed. Was any of his public image true? She was pondering how far she could probe when he changed the subject.

“We have moved far afield. My original point was that I cannot assume anything if I want to discern the full truth. Ten years ago, I was too young and too arrogant to ask the right questions. I accepted too many statements without seeking confirmation – Sir Harold’s guilt, his accidental death, even your father’s complicity and suicide. Each supposed fact was a lie crafted to lead me astray. I knew it was too easy, but I ignored my instincts.”

“You can’t go back.”

“I know. But I will not make that mistake again. I have to know why Percy killed Peterson and why he is stalking you. And I have no explanation for why John was found on a road three miles away, so let’s return to the night he died. We proved that he followed the thief to the woods, but I never followed to see where he went.”

“Others did. My entire staff checked every trail. They found nothing.”

“Yet we know that John was there, as was the thief. At some point, John died. At some point the thief stole a horse. I doubt he did so until well past midnight, so he must have remained nearby.” He suddenly nodded. “Get your cloak. We’re going to take a look.”

“Now? The rain will have erased every trace.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy. But I must see the

woods if I am to understand what happened and why. Your staff was looking for a fleeing thief. They were not looking for a body, nor did they expect the thief to remain in the woods. They might have missed something. If I am to protect you while I search for Percy, I must know why John died and why he was moved.”

“Very well.” But her stomach turned over.

* * * *

Alex fought down another wave of inadequacy as he opened the French window and stepped onto the terrace. Eden was right. What could he prove after all this time? The man who had actually killed John was dead, probably by Percy’s hand. Percy was hiding somewhere in the neighborhood, so it would be more profitable to scour the area for him, a job somewhat easier now that he had a likeness to show people.

Yet this was the last investigation he would ever undertake, so advancing one painstaking step at a time was necessary. He couldn’t live with another mistake. And the reason he’d given Eden was absolute truth. It was impossible to continue living if he failed to protect her from harm.

Eden returned wearing her cloak and bonnet.

He smiled. “Show me what you did.”

She followed him to the terrace, looked right, then whirled toward the stables. “Billy raced onto the terrace in response to John’s shouts. I sent him after John, then rushed inside and told Simms to send all the male servants to help – Billy is nearly sixty and can’t run for long.”

“Recruiting assistance was the right choice,” he said as regret twisted her face. “I already proved you are no match for a male when it comes to fighting. If you had caught up with him, you would have died, too. What would have happened to Olivia?”

She paled, but pulled herself together. Her voice firmed as she continued. “When John had not returned in an hour, I went to the woods myself. No one knew which path he’d taken, though they’d tried all of them without luck.”

“Show me.” At least he now knew when the horse had disappeared. The thief had visited the stables while everyone searched the woods.

That did not tell him where John’s body had been, though. Nor did it tell him why the thief had returned

to collect it.

As he followed her into the ride, he couldn't avoid staring at the trim ankles that winked at him from beneath her cloak. She was as delectable a female as he'd ever seen. Despite his unworthiness, he must convince her to wed him. While society expected ladies to remain docile in bed, forcing gentlemen to patronize the demimonde for more energetic couplings, there was no reason a man couldn't find the excitement he craved at home. He'd never been one to follow society's dictates. A wife like Eden would be perfect. Once he arrested Percy and settled Olivia, she might be willing to overlook his faults.

Tearing his eyes from her form, he looked around.

The ride was thick with grass and nearly twenty feet wide. Three weeks ago, the ground had been firm, but relentless rain now left it soft. Indentations clearly showed where Percy had jumped down last night, then veered away.

"I could have followed him," said Eden, shaking her head. "If I'd known he would cut through the rose garden..."

"No. Following a trail in the dark requires a lantern. By the time we found one, he would have reached his horse." He passed the footprints and concentrated on the protected ground beneath the privet hedges. If the thief had slipped...

But if he had, no tracks remained. In minutes, they reached the end of the ride. A narrow lawn stretched between the formal gardens and the forested hillside. Three paths entered the trees, and the thief might have ducked straight into the woods to throw off pursuit. "Which way now?"

"I've no better idea than I did that night," she admitted. "The left path circles toward the lake. It's a comfortable walk, though fruitless for escape. But would a thief know that?"

"This was not a random burglary," Alex reminded her. "The thief likely explored every foot of the grounds in case he needed to flee."

"In that case, he would most likely take the right path. It twists often, with enough undergrowth that one can rarely see more than ten feet ahead, even in winter. It also remains under cover for more than a mile, whereas the center path leads straight to the village."

“Then we’ll start on the right. He could circle toward the stables unobserved if the undergrowth is as thick as you claim, then cut across the corner of the front lawn. I doubt he would have traversed the formal gardens. It would have forced him too close to the house.” From the terrace, he’d spotted several water features as well as hedges, walls, and a sprawling rose garden that could only be crossed via a winding path.

“If he’d gone around the front, someone would have seen him crossing the lawn,” she protested. “All the female servants were looking out the windows.”

“How long before they gathered in the servants’ hall to scare themselves silly with *what ifs?*”

“No more than an hour,” she conceded. “But if he escaped notice, why would he return to the woods where so many were searching for him?”

“I wish I knew.”

* * * *

Alex paused under the first trees to let his eyes adjust to the dim light. Instead of looking for nonexistent tracks, he concentrated on the underbrush, seeking any sign that someone had pushed through.

Signs were everywhere.

“Deer,” insisted Eden as he turned along the third potential trail. “That branch is nipped, not broken.”

“Maybe, but the thief might still have passed this way.”

“He wouldn’t.”

Alex clenched his fists. “If the thief stayed on the path, the servants would have found him. Since he circled back to the stables, it makes sense that he ducked out of sight so his pursuers would rush past.”

“He wouldn’t leave the path this soon,” she repeated.

“Why?”

“The thief had a head start and did not expect to be caught, so he would have raced to where he’d hidden his horse. We do presume he had a horse, don’t we?”

“Yes,” he conceded, sighing. He’d forgotten that the visit to the stables must have happened after John died. “Percy would not risk trapping his accomplice on foot.” And if he’d started on foot, he would have stolen two horses.

“So he began by running away, choosing the path that kept him under cover. Staying on the path let him

move silently, so he had no reason to push through rustling shrubbery onto ground thick with leaves and dry twigs that must crackle underfoot. He was in little danger from pursuers – he was about ten years your senior, but I cannot imagine Percy sending a man who was physically impaired. Since John suffered from gout and could not have moved fast for long, the thief should have escaped.”

“Then why is John dead?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, shoulders sagging. “I’ve asked that question a thousand times. The only answer is that something happened to change the thief’s plan. Maybe he stunned himself in a fall.”

“That could cost him a minute or more,” agreed Alex, recalling his helplessness after being thrown from his horse last year. “It is easy to trip with all these roots crossing the path, and he had no light.”

“But if it happened this soon, John would have reached him almost immediately and yelled. From here, a shout should reach the house. It would certainly have reached Billy.”

He sighed. Again she’d clarified his thoughts, which had been heading the wrong direction. It was a humbling admission, but he would rather accept her help than risk revealing his inadequacies to others. He had forgotten John’s age. The image of a slow, gout-riddled man touching the delectable Eden hurt. Imagining her making love to such a creature made his blood boil.

“Very well. We will stay on the path until it leaves the forest. But if we find nothing, we must pursue these side trails.”

Half an hour later, Alex stopped in his tracks. He had marked a dozen spots to examine on the way back, but this one was different. A broken branch hung from a shrub that had been shoved drunkenly to one side. No deer had caused this damage unless it had rolled or been pushed against it. But it wasn’t rutting season, and this was not a place a doe would choose to give birth. Nothing smaller than a deer could produce this damage, so...

A root protruded from the path. No worse than others they’d passed, and not as massive as the one he’d stumbled over a quarter hour earlier. But the thief had been running for his life. He would have been tiring by now...

He estimated distances, then studied the ground where the trees drew back, forming a tiny dell.

“What is it?” asked Eden.

“The leaves seem disturbed – as if they’d been scuffed, then smoothed.” Rain had not yet flattened them completely.

“You think—”

“I don’t know. Your staff combed the woods, so one of them might have walked through here. Stay on the path and touch nothing.” He advanced slowly.

Thick pines sheltered the dell from the worst of the wind and rain. That alone might account for the state of the leaves, but he doubted it. Another bush showed signs of impact. A thick branch lay beneath it. Oak, not pine, so it hadn’t fallen here naturally.

He pulled it out, nodding. A cudgel. Someone had shoved it out of sight, then heaped leaves over it. The leaves had protected most of it even as they’d settled to expose one end. Dark smears remained on the other.

“Is that a weapon?” Eden’s voice trembled.

Alex moved it under a sunbeam. The smears were the unmistakable color of dried blood. “Yes. And it’s been used.”

Eden gasped.

“Stay there,” he repeated. “If you feel faint, sit on that log across the way and put your head down.” He wished he could protect her from the reality of this murder scene. But she wouldn’t leave, and touching her would destroy his control. His blood was boiling that a man he’d known had been bludgeoned to death.

“I’m fine,” said Eden, though she sat. “I can make notes if you like.” She pulled a small sketch pad and pencil from her pocket. Her face was stark white, and she nearly dropped the pencil, but giving her a job would steady her.

“Excellent idea. Sketch the clearing and mark where the leaves seem scuffed. The thief probably tripped and landed in that first bush. Perhaps he turned an ankle or did something else that would slow him down, for he changed his tactics from flight to ambush. John wasn’t here yet, though. The thief had time to collect a weapon – probably from that oak behind you.”

She nodded, though her face blanched further. Her ability to hold herself together increased his admiration. Now that he was looking at her through the eyes of a suitor, he found more and more to

applaud.

Leaning the cudgel against the bush, he broke off a slender branch and poked it into several mounds of detritus. The first two had stiff plants at their cores that had trapped blowing leaves, but the third pile held nothing. He carefully peeled the leaves away, one layer at a time.

“What did you find?” Her voice was surprisingly calm.

“I don’t know yet, but there is no reason why leaves should collect here. There is nothing to trap them, and the nearest beech is fifty feet away.”

The leaves were partially decayed, and as he moved downward, they grew increasingly disturbed. They had obviously been scooped from elsewhere.

Beneath them was a flat layer of—

“This is where John landed,” he said quietly. The angles and distances were right. The thief had crouched behind a thick shrub. When John passed, he’d slammed the cudgel into John’s head. John had fallen onto a bush and rolled – the ground sloped – coming to rest here. Blood soaked the bed of pine needles, still visible because the covering had shed rain. He could smell it.

“I— Dear Lord.”

“Don’t swoon, Eden,” he commanded sharply. “We knew he died here. You’ve seen his body. You know he suffered a blow to the head.”

“But this makes it more real.”

“Sketch it. Don’t think.” She would never let herself succumb to hysteria, so he could finish his study before addressing her shock.

He examined the dell more closely. There had to be more. Billy had been behind John. He might have fallen several minutes behind – fury would have kept John running despite the gout – or he might have first tried the path to the village. But others would have passed this way. Yet they’d seen nothing.

It was dark, he reminded himself. And the servants had been looking for men on foot. Still...

He resumed probing the ground with his stick.

“What are you doing?” asked Eden when he’d covered half the clearing.

“Trying to find out why your servants didn’t see John.”

“It was dark.”

“Perhaps Billy rushed by in the dark. Perhaps others did the same. But by the time you came out here, servants were combing the woods. They must have had lanterns. I don’t believe the thief carried John to the stables—”

“He was heavy,” she agreed. “Sixteen stone at least. Larger than the thief.”

“—so he must have been here. Aha!” he added when the stick sank.

“What?”

“There’s a depression behind this tree, just deep enough to hide a body. It’s filled to the brim with leaves, but they’ve been disturbed.”

This time, peeling back the leaves revealed nothing. The thief had probably dragged John this far, then waited for Billy. When the groom went by without stopping, he’d covered the body, smoothed any marks in the dell, then slipped away to fetch a horse. Death had changed his plans. While a thief might escape pursuit fairly easily, killing a gentleman would bring the entire aristocracy after him. Lords didn’t tolerate injury to one of their own. So he had to hide the manner of John’s death by arranging an apparent accident somewhere else.

He shared his thoughts with Eden, ending with, “A riding accident fit John’s habits. The thief was in the area long enough to learn your household routine, so he likely heard of Richard’s oft-repeated prediction that one of John’s wild horses would kill him.”

She nodded, handing him her sketch. “So now we know why he moved John.”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t explain Percy’s—” His eyes suddenly focused on a pebble beside the path. It was no bigger than his thumbnail, but... “Hmmm.”

“What?”

“The rock.” He pointed.

“What about it?”

“There is nothing beneath it.” He walked closer and stared, hands on his hips. A space the size of his palm contained naught but bare earth and one pebble. Three feet away was another. And a third.

Eden inched closer, staring at the three pebbles. “What is wrong with them? There are rocks all over the woods.”

“True, but I’ve not seen two this close together, let alone three in a row. These bare spots are too alike to

be an accident of nature. If they had been here long, the stones would have settled into the soil.”

“A marker.”

“One that no one would notice unless they were looking closely.” He sighted along the line. A hundred feet away, nearly hidden behind a screen of young pines, stood the remains of an ancient tree. Half the bark had peeled off. Gaping holes marked where limbs had fallen.

“Stay here,” he said again, staring at the ground as he followed the line. Most of it seemed undisturbed, but one spot showed where a boot had slipped. A cavity on the tree’s far side gaped a foot above eye level. Reaching inside, he felt about...

“Aha.”

He pulled out a handkerchief wrapped around a fist-sized stone. Gray with a bluish cast. Not quite crystal. Warm to the touch.

Shaking his head, he returned to the path and dropped it into Eden’s hand.

“The Sarsos Stone,” she breathed. “I’d recognize it anywhere, but how—”

Alex grinned. “He didn’t dare be caught with the stone while moving the body, or maybe he was double-crossing Percy. Whichever, he hid the stone, intending to retrieve it later.”

She wasn’t listening. A smile lit her face, making her breathtakingly beautiful. “You found it. I can’t believe you really found it. You’re incredible!” The stone fell unnoticed to the ground as she threw her arms around him.

Lust exploded. Lifting her, he twirled in a complete circle, then crushed the brim of her bonnet with his forehead so he could plunder her mouth.

Chapter Eighteen

Alex’s brain shut down as Eden pulled him against her, practically crawling inside his coat. Waiting until they caught Percy no longer seemed necessary.

“You’re mine,” he growled, backing her against a tree. “Forever. Admit it.” His hand slid under her skirt, stroking her leg higher and higher.

“Alex,” she whimpered. “So good...” Her hands fumbled for his buttons. “Need—”

He was already harder than the stone. And hotter.

When her hand brushed against him, he nearly passed out from the pleasure. Every encounter was better than the last, whisking him to a realm he'd not known existed, where the prosaic world couldn't reach them, where mistakes and complaints and incompetence had no meaning.

He bared her mound and cupped her, shaken to find her already wet to his touch.

"Alex! More!" She shuddered, rubbing against his hand, faster and harder until he shook with need. Freeing him, she took him to the brink in seconds. He'd never known anyone who wanted him so much, never—

"Mrs. Marlow!" a voice shouted in the distance. "Mrs. Marlow!"

"Wha—" Eden shook her head.

Alex bit back a curse. He'd been wrong about the prosaic world. She was not yet ready to consider marriage – she remained in deep mourning, after all. Allowing anyone to catch her in a compromising position would make his task harder.

"Sounds like trouble," he managed, straightening her bonnet as he stepped back. While she smoothed her skirts, he fastened his fall and willed his erection away. "Over here!" he called to the servant.

Eden adjusted her cloak, then picked up the stone and shoved it in her pocket. Alex grabbed her hand and ran toward the house.

"What can have happened?" she panted, her voice still husky from passion.

"Don't talk. We'll know soon enough." But he feared the worst. There was only one thing that would send the staff after Eden. Cold seeped into his bones. Again Percy had outflanked him. If this turned Eden against him...

The footman met them halfway to the ride.

"What's wrong?" demanded Eden.

"It's Miss Olivia, ma'am."

Alex caught Eden as she swayed. "Don't faint," he ordered, then fixed the footman with a steady eye. "Is she injured?"

"We don't know, but Miss Seagal—"

Eden inhaled sharply. "Miss Seagal is here?"

"Inside, ma'am."

"Let's go." She hurried away.

Alex followed her down the ride and through the

French window, marveling at how quickly she'd pulled herself together. She dumped her cloak and bonnet on the desk as she crossed the room.

They burst from the study to find Simms in the hall, wringing his hands. Half the staff hovered behind him.

"What's this about Olivia?" Eden demanded softly to keep her voice from carrying to the drawing room.

Simms straightened, clasping his hands behind his back. "It is Thursday, ma'am."

"I am aware of that."

"Miss Higgins rode out, as usual."

Alex raised his brows.

"She calls on Prudence Seagal every Thursday," Eden explained. "It is a short ride through our woods, so she usually goes alone. Seagal Manor lies on the edge of the village."

"I see." He was already kicking himself for not warning her to stay indoors. He'd known Percy was nearby.

"Miss Seagal arrived a short time ago seeking Miss Higgins," continued Simms. "Miss Higgins did not call as expected. I've sent Billy to see if she fell in the woods."

Alex nodded.

Eden inhaled deeply. "Thank you, Simms. You have done well. Send Billy to the drawing room when he returns. For now, I must allay Miss Seagal's fears. Let us hope that Olivia did not break something vital."

Alex held her back until the servants left, knowing her last statement had been uttered for their benefit. "She might well have fallen. We would not have heard her if the center track is a straight as you claim."

"Perhaps not. But if she fell, her horse would have returned by now. Finding the stone explains much. Now we know what Percy seeks. He must have thought I'd gone to London to sell it."

"Probably. But since Percy didn't return until several days after John's death, he must have originally thought he had it – which means the thief gave him a false stone. Perhaps he meant to play Percy false all along, or perhaps John's death gave him the idea. At that point, he could avoid hanging only by fleeing the country. Ransoming the real stone would provide funds, but Percy is not someone to cross face to face. Handing over a substitute would put him out of reach when Percy received his demands."

“But Percy killed him, as he’d done with his other accomplices.”

“Once he discovered the substitution, he would have blamed John, which is why he went after you in London and broke in here – he expected you to have the real stone.”

“Now he hopes to barter for it. He’ll offer my most precious possession in exchange. I would do anything for Olivia.” Her voice cracked.

He hugged her close. “We won’t let him win this round, Eden. But first we must deal with Miss Seagal. What sort of girl is she?”

Eden swallowed. “Silly, for the most part. Major Seagal retired from service in India following an injury that left a permanent limp. They moved here shortly after I married John, so it was natural for the two new arrivals to form a friendship. But though she often seems younger than her seventeen years, she can be as disapproving as the stiffest dowager. Almost puritanical. And she is not very bright.”

“Then tell her nothing you don’t want to become common knowledge,” he advised. “Puritanical young ladies judge first and think afterward.” Sighing, he released her. She was outwardly calm, so he held out his arm. “Let’s see what she has to say.”

* * * *

Miss Seagal huddled before the fire, her face streaked with tears. “Have you found her?” she asked shakily.

“Our groom will return shortly,” Eden said soothingly as Simms arrived with a tray. “I expect she is nursing a sprained ankle. Have some tea, then tell me why you came in person instead of sending a note.” She passed a cup as Alex slipped unobtrusively into the corner to make sure the writing desk containing his notes remained locked.

“I thought I’d got it wrong,” Miss Seagal admitted. “About our visit, I mean. I’d come here last week, but now that Olivia is out of deepest mourning, I assumed—” Her hand fluttered, spilling tea in her lap.

Eden handed her a napkin.

“Forgive me, ma’am,” she murmured. “I’m that upset. At first I thought she was late – she is often delayed. But when it went four with no sign of her, I decided she forgot the day – she would have sent a

message if she couldn't see me." She shook her head. "So I told Mama what a goose I was and made our coachman spring the horses so I could roast her roundly for being so totty-headed. But then she wasn't here, either."

Eden bit her lip.

"Might she have stopped in the village?" asked Alex. "Some emergency that needed tending?"

Miss Seagal jumped.

"Forgive me," begged Eden. "My wits are wandering." She introduced Alex as John's friend and fellow collector, here to evaluate John's antiquities. "Was there trouble in the village?"

"Nothing," she swore. "And I can't believe she would fall on a path she rides so often. I know something's happened to her. Did she run off?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Eden managed to sound amused. "You have been reading too many gothic novels. Even the best horsemen fall on occasion. I just hope she hasn't broken anything."

Alex marveled at Eden's control. They both knew Olivia had been abducted and that the only way to have spirited her away was if she'd been unconscious.

And he could do nothing but pray that Billy found some clue to her whereabouts. Percy would not return her alive, so Alex would have only one chance to save her. Success demanded perfection. Again. From a man who had made more than his share of mistakes.

Miss Seagal was becoming more incoherent by the minute, despite Eden's soothing reassurance.

Half an hour passed before Billy returned.

"Ma'am. Sir." He doffed his cap.

"Is she hurt badly?" asked Eden.

"No, ma'am. She wasn't there. I searched every foot of the path, and she didn't pass through the village."

"I knew she ran away." Prudence's hysteria changed to rapacious curiosity. "Not that I'm surprised after my maid reported that you were holding orgies." She spat the words at Eden.

"What nonsense is this?" demanded Eden, signaling Billy to leave.

"You needn't deny it," snapped Prudence. "Wilson got the tale from Polly Morrison."

"Retaliation," said Alex calmly. "You are well rid of the girl, Mrs. Marlow."

"Indeed." Eden held her head high. "Polly was

sneaking out at night to meet a beau, leaving the door unlocked. A vagrant took advantage of her negligence to ransack the study, looking for cash. Fortunately, Mr. Portland caught him before he could escape. You will agree that I had no choice but to turn her off without a character.”

“Truly?”

“Of course. Could you condone such behavior?”

“Well, no.” She frowned.

“And now we see her true colors. Spreading lies to cover her own culpability is beyond acceptable.” Anger snapped in her eyes.

“I think your original fear was correct, Miss Seagal,” said Alex, taking charge of the conversation before anger released Eden’s fear and revealed too much. “In all the excitement over last night’s burglary, Miss Higgins likely forgot the day. She mentioned at breakfast that she’d nothing suitable for half-mourning. Quite distressed about it. She must have dashed off to her dressmaker. She will doubtless return for dinner, embarrassed by her own confusion.”

“I will remind her of proper manners when she does,” added Eden. “There is no excuse for such laxity.”

Miss Seagal took the hint, rising to make her farewells.

Eden escorted her to the door, phrases like *unwarranted hysteria* and *frightening my staff* floating back. She was making sure Miss Seagal believed all was well.

But she was frowning when she returned. “Dressmaker?”

“It was all I could think of. I would have mentioned the ailing Mrs. Sommers, but Olivia made that call before lunch, something Miss Seagal will undoubtedly hear, as closely attuned to rumor as she apparently is. We don’t want an avaricious gossip thinking Olivia was abducted. Miss Seagal only came here to prove misbehavior. Besides, I’ve not known a female yet who didn’t descend on her dressmaker at the least excuse.”

“Of course. But do you really believe—”

“That she was abducted? Yes. She’s been gone too long. But I doubt she was heading for Seagal Manor, despite her Thursday routine. Now that we know she did not suffer an accident, we can find out where she *did* go.”

“She never leaves the grounds without a groom except to visit Prudence.”

“If she had merely gone riding, she would not have told Billy she was going to Seagal. It is possible that she wished to be alone for a time, but I don’t like the way she slipped off.”

“My God! Are you implying she arranged an assignation?”

“I’m not implying anything. But you must agree the situation warrants investigation.”

“At this point I would even welcome an elopement with Jeremy,” she admitted glumly.

Alex pulled her close, stroking her back until she relaxed against him. “Don’t give up hope, my dear. Even if my worst fears are realized, we’ll find her. Come. We’ll need horses. It will be too dark to see before long.”

“Of course.” She hugged him hard, then headed for the door.

He followed, again kicking himself. The day he’d arrived at Ridley, Olivia had looked thoroughly kissed. Given Eden’s distrust of young Jeremy, he would not be surprised to discover more than one assignation in Olivia’s past. Opposition made it irresistible. And her friend’s experience would have taught her to tell absolutely no one.

* * * *

Alex stopped Eden at the end of the ride while he dismounted and examined the ground. The soggy turf held tracks well. His footprints and Eden’s walked into the right path and ran back, as did the footman’s. Billy’s horse had trotted in and out of the center path. Olivia’s— He bent closer, then circled a stony spot.

“She took the left trail.”

“To the lake?” Eden sighed in relief. “So she didn’t leave the grounds. There’s a temple on the bank where she often goes to think. Perhaps she fell asleep. That would explain why her horse did not return. He will be tied to the rail.”

“Perhaps.” But he didn’t believe it. The girl had not looked sleepy at lunch. “Come, but stay behind me and watch for any sign that her horse left the trail.”

The left path was brighter than the others, moving in and out of the trees to provide views of the house and gardens. It was also narrow, a cozy walk for a couple but impossible for two horses abreast. Three

quarters of the way to the lake, it crossed a stream.

“Stop,” he ordered, staring at the arched bridge.

“It’s quite safe,” Eden assured him. “I’ve never had a horse balk here.”

“Olivia’s did.” Again he dismounted.

“Did she fall?”

“No.” He studied the marks. “The tracks show two horses, but I don’t think she expected company. She emerged from the woods, then wheeled as if to return.”

“Percy. Dear Lord.”

“Steady, Eden. We’ll find her.” The horses had milled about, then turned downstream. “Where does the stream go?”

“The Melton Mowbray Canal, but that must be ten miles from here.”

“Where is the nearest road?”

“A little-used lane crosses perhaps half a mile away. A better road is beyond that.”

“He’ll use the lane.”

“What did you see that I missed?” she demanded as he mounted.

“As she whirled to leave, the other horse cut her off. Both horses turned downstream. Since I doubt she went willingly, he must have knocked her out, then draped her over the saddle. But he cannot escape unseen without a carriage. The lane sounds ideal.”

“Where will he take her?”

“I don’t know – yet. First we need to verify my hunch. If I’m right, we’ll find her horse tied to a tree. Then you will return to the house while I call on Sir Richard.”

“You can’t leave me behind. I’ll lose my mind.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll be too busy. While I make absolutely certain that Percy is our man, you will check Debrett’s and every county register you have. Find every piece of property owned by a Montagu or someone related to them by marriage, especially relatives of Percy’s mother and grandmother. If you can’t find a likely hiding place, then I must ask Lady Debenham for ideas. But involving her will make it impossible to keep this quiet.”

“Right.”

“I expect to receive a ransom note this evening. We must be ready. Knowing Percy’s identity is our only advantage.”

“He can have the stone,” she swore. “It’s just a rock,

of no real value.”

“The stone is the least of our problems. We must recover Olivia. Giving him the stone won’t achieve that.”

* * * *

Eden rode down the stream, shivering as trees closed in on either side. This shaded waterway had seemed cozy when she’d restored John’s garden eight years earlier. Now it looked sinister. A secret path leading straight to hell.

Sinister.

Was Percy left-handed?

She concentrated on their task, grateful that Alex was accustomed to danger, intrigue, and even violent action. His decisiveness soothed her. He hung low over his horse’s neck, nodding whenever he spotted another track. Most men would be paralyzed with fear by now – like her father. Or they would succumb to rage, issuing conflicting orders as their wits vanished.

Alex did neither. She could feel his brain humming – calm, logical, competent. No wonder the Home Office found him so valuable. John had been right to recommend him.

Alex turned left when they reached the lane. A hundred yards later, he entered the woods. Olivia’s horse was tied to a tree. Eden didn’t know whether to be relieved or hysterical.

“Can you lead it home?” he asked.

“Of course.” If her heart didn’t stop completely.

“Hurry. The sun is nearly down. Where does this lane emerge?”

“Nowhere useful. But if you take the first footpath to the left, you’ll reach the post road.”

“Good. I’ve got the sketch and will return as soon I can. Eat. It may be a long night. Prepare food packets in case we need to ride out. Small packets. We can’t take a carriage.”

“Go. I’ll be fine. But please be careful. Percy is obsessed enough to attack you.” Her heart blocked her throat at the thought.

Alex patted her hand. “He’s no longer nearby, but we’ll find him.” Handing over Olivia’s reins, he pulled her into a hard kiss, then vaulted onto his horse and was gone.

Eden turned back to Ridley, hoping she wouldn’t find blood on the saddle.

Chapter Nineteen

This time when Alex was ushered into Sir Richard's library, it was Jeremy who faced him across the desk.

"What are you doing here?" Jeremy demanded.

"I have business with Sir Richard Marlow. Magistrate's business."

Jeremy shook his head. "It will have to wait. He's ill."

"How ill?"

"Very. Probably the fish. Half the household is suffering. The other half didn't eat it."

Frustration fisted Alex's hands. "This can't wait." He drew the sketch from his pocket. "I won't bother him myself, but would you show this to him? Wake him if you have to. Yes, it's that urgent," he added over a protest, passing him the image. "I must know who this is."

Jeremy glanced at it, then settled deeper into his chair. "It's Mr. Mason."

"Mason." Alex sat, feigning relaxation, though every sense pricked to the alert. Did this mean Jeremy was Percy's unwitting accomplice? Percy might be using his knowledge of antiquities for his own purposes. "When did you last see him?"

"Last night. It's the only time, actually. We've not been introduced."

"Where?"

"The Pigeon – a coaching inn five miles from here that's a favorite spot for cards."

"Five miles. Which direction?"

"Southwest. On the turnpike." He frowned. "You should have passed it riding over here. It's only half a mile from Ridley's gate."

"How do you know Mason if you weren't introduced?"

Jeremy shrugged. "He was speaking rather loudly to the innkeeper just outside the taproom door."

"What time?"

"Well past midnight – three, perhaps? I'd been playing cards with the squire's son until another game distracted us with its deucedly high stakes. Lasted until dawn. I didn't notice Mason until he summoned the proprietor. He was seeking his brother – the man didn't return from his last trip to London."

“What?”

“He’d traced him as far as Melton, or some such. I didn’t pay much attention until they started talking about the highwayman who attacked John. I hoped we could finally identify him, but it wasn’t Mason’s brother. Mason stopped in the taproom for a bite to eat, then left. We never spoke.”

And just as well. If Percy had connected Jeremy to Christine...

When Jeremy held out the sketch, Alex shook his head. “It is more important than ever to show that to Marlow.”

“Why?”

“Mason is not his real name. I must know if Sir Richard knows him and by what name. But take care,” he added. “No matter what Sir Richard says, accept it without surprise and leave. Let’s not make his illness worse.”

Jeremy clearly didn’t understand, but he went upstairs.

Ten minutes later, he returned, shaking. “It can’t be,” he murmured over and over. Brandy spilled as he tried to pour it into a glass.

“Sit before you collapse.” Alex returned the sketch to his pocket, then poured brandy for both of them. He’d been right. Relief left him weak.

“He must be sicker than I thought,” murmured the boy. “He’s delirious.” His eyes revealed a mixture of horror and anguish. “Do you know what he thinks?”

“He swears the sketch depicts Sir Harold Iverson.”

Jeremy choked. “Sir Harold died ten years ago, so how could I have seen him at the Pigeon?”

Alex returned to his chair, confident that the boy had nothing to do with Percy. “Sir Harold did indeed die ten years ago,” he confirmed. “But Sir Harold never visited Marwood. The man currently calling himself Mason killed him and stole his name.”

Jeremy dropped his glass. “You mean Aunt Christine’s killer is alive?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll find the bastard and—” He headed for the door.

“Enough!” Alex’s voice froze Jeremy in his tracks. “You’ve done your part. Confirming that this is the man I seek will help me find him.”

“I’m going with you.”

“You have no training, Highbottom. He is

dangerous, with a growing list of murders to his credit and other crimes too numerous to mention. Now if you will excuse me—”

“Why did you claim this was urgent? Aunt Christine died ten years ago.”

“But he has been busy in the years since. He killed a man in London only three days ago. If I don’t stop him, someone else will die.”

“Who?” Jeremy gripped Alex’s arm hard enough to leave bruises.

“The lady in question is blameless, but revealing her name could damage her reputation.”

“Who, dammit! Olivia asked me to meet her this afternoon, then didn’t come. I— I intend to marry her. If anything happens...”

Alex paused. “If you intend to wed her, why haven’t you spoken to Mrs. Marlow?”

“John’s death shocked Mrs. Marlow into irrational antagonism. She forbade me the house.”

“She had her reasons.” He shook his head. “If you seriously hope to wed Olivia, you’d best behave like a gentleman instead of creeping about behind Mrs. Marlow’s back.”

Jeremy flushed. “That was Olivia’s idea. She doesn’t know why her sister suddenly took me in dislike, but it seemed best to put off a formal courtship yet again.”

“Again?”

“I’ve loved her for years but had to wait until she grew up. Enduring Cousin John’s interminable lectures was the only way to see her. But it taught me enough about antiquities to bring me here now.”

“I heard you were organizing Marlow’s collection.”

“The chance to spend months near Ridley was too good to pass. Then I discovered I was no longer welcome there.”

“Where have you been meeting her?”

“The temple by the lake. No one else uses it. I swear nothing untoward passed between—”

“Don’t tell me. It is Mrs. Marlow you must convince, and frankly, keeping assignations with an innocent will not advance your case. But enough of that. If you truly wish to help—”

“I do.”

“—then come with me. I’ll explain the problem on the road.”

As they cantered down the drive, Alex began his tale

with the oddities Eden had noticed about John's death. They hadn't gone a mile before Jeremy proved his worth.

"Dressed?" he echoed about Sir Richard. "I'm not surprised. He spends most nights with his mistress, returning just before dawn. I suspect the six hours of sleep he takes in the mornings is all he gets."

* * * *

Eden tugged Alex aside the moment Jeremy appeared in the doorway. "Why is he here?"

"He's helping."

"I won't have him—"

"Hear him out, Eden." He waved Jeremy toward the drawing room. "He's not involved with Percy. He doesn't want John's collection. And—"

"How do you know?"

"I asked him – and before you malign my judgment, which we both know is questionable, please listen to him. He endured what he calls *Cousin John's interminable lectures* because it kept him near Olivia while she was growing up enough to be courted. He accepted employment from Richard so he would be near Olivia. She summoned him to the temple this afternoon—"

"Why?"

"Probably to tell him you hoped I would offer for her. She saw through your pretense as easily as I did." He shook his head. "She'd already accepted Jeremy's proposal but was afraid to tell you because you threw him out. He's been trying to persuade her to stand up for herself."

She blanched. "I would never deny her a hearing."

"I know that, but she doesn't." He softened his tone. "You have carried the burden of raising her for so long that you still think of her as a child, my dear. But she's grown and has a mind and interests of her own. Offer guidance, but it's time to let her make her own decisions."

"To wed a pauper barely out of leading strings?"

"I don't think he is as purse-pinched as you fear, and he is far steadier than most men his age."

"So what now?"

"Set aside your antagonism and accept his help. He is frantic. If he doesn't work with us, he'll look for Olivia on his own, which could draw Percy's attention and harm Olivia."

She nodded. Had she really misjudged him? But—
“What can he do?”

“Plenty. He knows why Sir Richard was dressed at dawn the day John’s body turned up – it has nothing to do with John. He saw Percy at the Pigeon just after the break-in here. Richard confirms that the sketch is Sir Harold, so that question is resolved. I hope it lets us locate him.”

She nodded then pulled out a letter. “This came an hour ago.”

He grabbed the sheet, then sagged. “From Terrence.” Disappointment twisted his face. “We’ll read it in the drawing room. Time is too precious to keep repeating news.”

She followed, berating herself for raising his hopes that it was from Percy. Yet Percy’s silence increased her fear. Why hadn’t he presented his demands? Olivia had been gone for nearly seven hours. Had something gone wrong?

Please let her be all right, she prayed, joining the men.

“—no word yet,” Alex was saying.

“What’s that?” demanded Jeremy.

“A report from the Home Office.” He broke the seal, then nodded.

“We are progressing.” He handed the page to Eden, then turned back to Jeremy. “It is Barclay who headed for Italy, so our so-called highwayman must be Emerson – Percy Montagu’s secretary,” he added to Jeremy. “Percy probably started the Italy story to account for the man’s disappearance.”

Eden skimmed the note. “Did you see the part about Mr. Jasper.”

“Yes.” He repeated it to Jeremy. “John’s agent was badly injured when he was attacked by footpads just outside Paris. A farmer took him in and nursed him through the resulting fever. He’d only just recovered his senses when Terrence’s man arrived.”

“What does that have to do with Olivia’s abduction or John’s murder?” demanded Jeremy, pacing to the window and back.

“Jasper recognized the leader of the attack as Barclay.” Alex sighed. Jasper had killed Barclay, at which point the accomplices fled. But it was yet another death to be laid at Percy’s door. Not that Barclay would have lived long in any case. Percy would

have seen to that.

“I still don’t understand,” said Jeremy.

“In brief, Montagu wants the Sarsos treasure, but he wants no one to know he has it. Everyone who acquired a piece of it for him is gone. Everyone who has noticed his interest or that of his agents is gone.”

“Except Jasper and us.”

“Because he doesn’t have the last piece.” Alex held out his hand.

Eden put the stone in it.

Jeremy stared. “So John really did find it.”

“And died when Percy sent Emerson to steal it.”

“We didn’t know the stone remained here until this afternoon, and by then it was too late,” added Eden.

“So that’s why he grabbed Olivia.” Jeremy clenched his fists. “He wants a trade.”

“We hope.” Alex turned back to Eden before she could ponder his words. “Did you finish that list of properties?”

“It’s in the study. But it won’t help much. The Montagues own a great deal of land, and their connections own more – and that’s just in the six counties I’ve checked.” She headed for the door.

* * * *

Alex sat behind the desk, shaking his head over the list. The Montagu family was extensive, and their holdings more so. He scowled at the seventy-two parcels Eden had found within fifty miles of Ridley. Why the devil did this have to be Quorn country? Everyone and his brother kept hunting boxes here, most of them vacant this time of year.

Eden and Jeremy murmured softly in the corner, apparently discussing Jeremy’s courtship and prospects. Words like *Consols*, *banns*, and *love* washed over him. He could feel Eden’s antagonism softening as it became clear that Jeremy was far from destitute.

He relaxed. Eden loved her sister too much to reject Olivia’s choice when his only fault was youth. And Jeremy wasn’t *that* young. Which removed the last impediment to his own courtship. Or nearly. Mourning remained an obstacle.

If only his other problems could be so easily solved. He had no idea which cousins Percy might ask for shelter, so could only pray that knowing his identity would give him an edge.

He arranged the list by distance and direction from

Ridley. Percy would not have gone to his own home – his estate was well over a hundred miles away – but eliminating one house didn't help. How many properties had Eden missed? Maternal cousins in remote degrees. Friends. Acquaintances. Had he hired a place? Owners would be delighted to find a tenant during the off season.

It also bothered him that no note had come. With each passing hour, his doubts grew. Was Percy taking her home after all? Might he use her for a time before demanding ransom? Had Alex missed a clue, precipitating disaster?

Simms finally appeared in the doorway, a letter on his silver salver. "This just arrived, ma'am. By one of the village lads. I've kept him in the hallway."

Eden reached for it, then hesitated, hand shaking. "You read it, Alex."

He broke the seal and silently skimmed. It was short and to the point.

Mrs. Marlow,

I do not like cheaters, as your husband learned when he reneged on our deal. Let us hope that you are more honorable.

If you want Miss Higgins back, take the Sarsos Stone – the real stone – to the King's Arms in Derby. The landlord will exchange it for your sister's direction. You have until sunset tomorrow. If you fail, I know a brothel that pays well for comely country wenches.

Come alone.

Oakdale

"Bring the boy," Alex ordered Simms.

The others stared, eyes wide with fear. But neither said a word.

The boy was no more than eight. "Who asked you to deliver this?" Alex asked calmly.

"Old Rory, down at t'Pigeon. Give me a penny, he did."

"Did he say who left it?"

"Uh-uh. Just said to deliver it quick-like 'cause 't'was already late."

"Which you did very well. Thank you." He handed the lad another penny, unsurprised that he knew nothing. The innkeeper would likewise know nothing. At best he would report that Mason had asked him to

deliver a message. A common request. More likely, he'd found the missive lying on his desk with a coin to pay for its delivery.

"What does it say?" demanded Eden the moment the boy left.

"Montagu wants the stone."

"Where do we meet him?" demanded Jeremy.

"We don't. He designated a place to leave the stone, but he won't be there. He signed the note *Oakdale*."

"A mistake," said Eden. "Oakdale is dead."

"Another death?" squeaked Jeremy.

"Old age and a long illness. Oakdale has nothing to do with this. Percy borrowed his name, just as he borrowed Sir Harold's. But this means he's out of touch with recent events. If he doesn't know of Oakdale's death, I doubt he knows that Jasper survived."

"Why is he openly pretending to be Oakdale?" Eden frowned. "He must know he can't get away with it."

"I don't care why," snapped Jeremy.

"You should care," said Alex. "Unless we understand Montagu, our mistakes could hurt Olivia." He paced the room, trying to think his way into Percy's head. "He has sought the Sarsos relics for more than twenty years," he said at last. "Obsessions turn to madness in that time. But he retains enough sense to cover his tracks. Using Oakdale's name hides his own identity. Oakdale is one of the few peerages with no connection to the Montagues. And it makes us waste time by following bogus clues – or so he believes."

"There may also be a touch of vengeance in his choice," said Jeremy. "Percy once tried to talk Oakdale into backing his claim that his grandfather is the true Duke of Travers – or so a classmate told me; his mother is Oakdale's niece. Oakdale refused, sending Percy away with a flea in his ear."

"Oakdale is lucky Percy didn't retaliate by burning the house down around his ears."

"I've been thinking about that," said Alex. "He believed you had the stone, so he can't have meant to kill you that night. He probably hoped to snatch you in the confusion so he could force you to reveal its location. Just as his attacks in London were aimed at your companions. Success would have left you vulnerable."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Jeremy.

Alex explained.

“Interesting, but that doesn’t help find Olivia.” Jeremy put his head in his hands. “We need to figure out where he took her.”

“Does knowing his identity reduce or enhance Olivia’s danger?” asked Eden, suddenly serious.

“Neither, because Percy doesn’t know we know,” said Alex. He wouldn’t remind them that the only way Percy could cover his tracks was to kill Olivia. He could only pray the man had not already done so. The delay in sending the note might cover a burial, and Percy’s history was hardly reassuring. “He wants Mrs. Marlow to bring the stone to Derby,” he said to deflect their minds from Olivia’s danger.

Jeremy frowned. “Why Derby?”

Alex stared at the list of properties. “Perhaps because Mrs. Marlow has no acquaintances there who could help her. More likely because he has a safe place to stay – he will not be at the King’s Arms.”

“He’s barely giving me time to drive there,” said Eden. “The roads are terrible, and it’s all of thirty miles. I must pack. Even if I leave at first light, I will be hard-pressed to arrive before mid-afternoon. I can use your carriage, can’t I?”

“We’ll ride, but we’re not leaving until we know where to go.” He glanced toward Eden. “Is the food ready?”

She nodded.

“Then change clothes. A habit will do for now, preferably an old one, and you’ll need a servant’s cloak and gown.” He pulled out the Derbyshire map and studied the list.

By the time Eden returned, he had it – he hoped.

“Here,” he said, pointing to an estate two miles from Derby. “Foley Manor belongs to his mother’s cousin.”

“Is that where Olivia is?” asked Eden.

“I doubt it, but I think Percy is there. Only he can tell us where Olivia is. Order three horses. Your turn to change, Highbottom. You look like a dandy. We don’t want to draw notice.”

He put the lad in Tweed’s capable hands while he readied himself.

* * * *

“How can we not be noticed?” demanded Jeremy two hours later as they entered Derbyshire.

They had ridden hard, changing mounts every few

miles, grateful that the night was clear and the moon full. Alex had noted Jeremy's shock when he'd produced his silver greyhound, the badge of the king's messengers that assured they got the speediest service and fastest mounts at every stop. He'd neglected to turn it in when he'd resigned.

But they did not go unnoticed.

"He won't be watching the posting houses," explained Alex, pushing his latest mount to a canter. "When we get closer, we will be more careful."

"I would never have believed we could move so fast," admitted Eden.

"Nor will Percy. He will expect you to drive straight to the King's Arms. He will hope that you arrive by noon, but will not grow worried until nearly sunset."

"You mean we are not going there?"

"No. Olivia is not there. Nor is Montagu. At best, a servant will be there, but whoever he sends will know only that he is to exchange a letter for a package. If Montagu tells him anything, it will be that the letter contains payment for the package. The servant will not give up hope until well after dark, no matter what his orders – few servants will admit failure, for it usually costs them dearly. Not until he reports that the package did not arrive will Percy act. So we have until sunset to find him. Probably longer."

Half an hour later, he left the turnpike. "Now we must be careful," he said, following a stream until they were out of sight of the road. They dismounted to stretch stiff muscles. "I am a merchant," he announced, changing his voice, accent, and demeanor as he reversed his cloak. He'd donned a suitable coat before leaving Ridley.

Eden stared. "I'll never get used to how you can suddenly look like a someone completely different."

He shrugged. "You are my wife. It's a role I know you can play," he added, for she'd demonstrated it that night at the inn. "We are not rich."

Eden nodded. "Do you prefer vulgar or unobtrusive?"

"Unobtrusive." He rearranged his hair and replaced his hat with a cap.

"My dressmaker, then," murmured Eden. "She can shrink into the background and nearly disappear." Donning a vacant expression and clutching her hands before her, she moved hesitantly across the clearing.

“Excellent,” said Alex. “You just learned that your mother is dying. Scrape your hair back and knot it at the neck. As for you,” he said, turning to Jeremy. “You are my servant.” He had already dressed Jeremy in clothing borrowed from Eden’s groom.

“Servant?”

“Why else would you be traveling with us?” Alex demanded sharply. “A lowly merchant does not have a valet. You are a man of all work, the only male on our tiny staff. Remember to be subservient. Never look your superiors in the eye. Shuffle your feet when anyone addresses you. And keep that cap on. If anyone spots your hair, you will be revealed. Servants don’t favor the Brutus.”

“Where are we going?” asked Eden.

“The inn at Foley Village. We are headed for Lancashire and traveled far into the night, hoping to reach your mother’s bedside in time to bid her farewell. But you are exhausted and must sleep before we can continue. You are to say nothing, understand? You are grief-stricken, for her illness came on without warning. As for you,” he added to Jeremy. “Your name is Jem and you are too tired to talk. If you try, you will give the game away and probably harm Olivia. Grunt if anyone requires an answer.”

“What about you?” demanded Jeremy.

“I must discover whether Percy is at Foley.” One of Travers’s grandchildren owned a house ten miles further on. Percy might have gone there, though it didn’t seem likely as he’d cut most of his Montagu cousins. He should feel safe at Foley, for no one would look for a thief and killer in so noble an establishment.

Alex entered the village at a walk, letting his horse’s head sag so any watchers would see three exhausted travelers.

The inn was tiny, with only one room available. The innkeeper apologized, volunteering that Foley Manor was celebrating the imminent nuptials of the owner’s daughter. Not only Foley, but all neighboring estates were crammed with revelers. Many servants were at area inns. Only the departure of Foley’s solicitor had left him with a vacancy.

“Damn,” Alex muttered when he closed the bedroom door. Jeremy could only play his part by bedding down in the stable.

“What’s wrong?”

“With so many strangers about, no one will have noticed Percy, though at least it adds credence to his being here.”

“But surely he cannot have Olivia here!”

“No. He could never hide her from such a crowd.” He didn’t mention that the house party increased the likelihood that Olivia was already dead. Eden wasn’t up to hearing that fear. Nor was Jeremy. All he could do was pray that Percy valued Olivia as a bargaining chip and would not dispose of her until he had the stone.

“How will we ever find her?” she asked bleakly. Tears trembled on her lashes.

“Don’t lose hope, Eden.” He hugged her close. “We can only move one step at a time. At dawn I will talk to the Foley grooms. They will know if Percy is here and how often he rides out – he must make sure that Olivia does not escape.”

“Won’t they tell him of your inquiries?”

“Why would they? With guests quartered at several estates, it will seem natural that one of Percy’s cousins joins him on a morning ride.”

“What if Percy is one of those quartered at another estate?”

It was a good question. One he hadn’t considered – which proved how weary he was. And how nervous. Percy had to have arrived late, possibly without warning. He could not have known in advance when his abduction plot would succeed.

Alex fought the paralyzing fear. He’d made so many mistakes. If another cost Eden her sister, she would hate him for all eternity. And he could not protest. But he had to keep her spirits up by pretending certainty.

“In that event I will profess confusion and ask if anyone knows where he is staying.” He stroked her back. “Relax, Eden. There is nothing you can do right now except sleep.”

“My mind will never allow sleep,” she admitted. “There is too much to fear – and to ponder. I still cannot accept that Jeremy wants Olivia. How can I believe him? John swore he was destitute.”

He sat down, pulling her into his lap as if she were a frightened child – this was not the time to press his suit. Taking advantage of her terror would be reprehensible. “I can discover the truth easily enough, my dear, though his explanation makes sense. He

exaggerated his interest in antiquities to explain his frequent visits. But he doesn't want to own artifacts, so whenever John mentioned an item for sale, he claimed it was too dear for his purse."

"He could have told the truth."

"At nineteen, when Olivia was barely fourteen? You would not have accepted his love and would have barred the door to his return."

"Perhaps." She didn't sound happy.

"Relax, Eden. Unless you rest, you will be useless tomorrow."

He massaged the back of her neck, loosening the knots in her muscles.

She sighed, sliding her arms around his waist. Even that tiny motion ignited fire in his loins.

Her arms tightened.

"Don't," he murmured. "I'll not be accused of taking advantage of your fears."

"You wouldn't." She framed his face between her hands. "Make love with me, Alex. In every way you know how. I am terrified for Olivia, and that will only get worse if I must lie alone in that bed. Relax me. Soothe me. Wear me out until I must sleep whether I will or no."

"Are you sure, sweetheart?"

"Can't you see how badly I need you?" she demanded, touching the nipples that pressed hard against her gown. "I cannot wait to touch you again." She rubbed one thigh against his hardening shaft.

"Eden," he breathed. "My heaven on earth." His mouth took hers.

Even before their tongues had mated fully, she was pushing his coat down his arms. He stood, maintaining the kiss as he shucked off coat and waistcoat, then attacked her ties.

She tugged open his pantaloons, shoving them down so she could clasp him.

"Easy," he choked, flinging garments aside in a frenzy that belied his own words. "I want to savor you. All of you. And I want you to savor me."

"Every way I can," she vowed. "Make me forget for an hour, Alex."

"All night, love." He laid her on the bed, drinking in her nakedness.

She shuddered, then reached for him. "Don't stand there, Alex. Those smoldering looks are wonderful, but

I need your touch.”

As did he. Trying to leash his need so he could savor her as she'd demanded, he slowly joined her on the bed, hardly noticing that it sagged into a mass of lumps beneath his weight. “Since you'll be boneless by morning, I'd best enjoy them now.”

He explored her collar bone with his tongue. Then her arms. Her fingers. Her spine.

There were times when seduction needed coaxing and gentle persuasion. This wasn't one of them. She shook as he moved to her toes, and he shook with her. His erotic words aroused her until the room was rank with passion, the very air pulsing against them. When his breath feathered over her inner thigh, she nearly climaxed.

Carefully skirting her most sensitive places, he moved back to her mouth, plunging inside to savor her sweetness.

She sucked him deeper, nails ripping his back as her tongue fenced with a violence that astounded him. But when he reached down to cup her, she shoved him onto his back.

“My turn,” she panted. “If I'm to be boneless, you must be, too.”

“I already am.” But his voice turned to a groan as her teeth scraped across his chest.

“Ah, you like that, I see.” Her purring promised torture beyond his wildest dreams.

Eden spread her fingers, reveling in the feel of rippling muscles and nipples that tightened into flat buds at a touch. He was everything she'd expected – and more, for beyond his perfect form lurked evidence of the sacrifices he'd made for the crown.

“Not everyone you've met has been kind, I see,” she murmured, tracing silvery scars that could only have come from knives.

“Ugly.” He reached to pull her away. “I shouldn't have undr—“

“Never ugly. They are marks of honor.” Batting his hands aside, she bent to kiss them, her tongue tracing each one.

He shook, moaning, as she shifted her attention to other spots. A patch on one shoulder where he'd been burned. Two ridges left by shots. A maze of small marks she couldn't identify.

“You've a beautiful body,” she breathed, refusing to

flinch when she discovered a slice that had nearly pierced his groin. “Gloriously masculine. Remarkably alive. And you like to be kissed.” She skirted the groin itself, unwilling to drive him to completion too quickly.

But her own desire was growing so urgent, she could not prolong this much longer...

Alex fought for control, a difficult job when she was so clearly enjoying herself. No one had looked on his collection of scars with aught but shock for so long that he'd forgot what it was like to have an honestly enthusiastic bed partner. But Eden had never flinched from his imperfections, so he was determined to endure until she'd had her fill – provided he lived that long. His heart was pounding so hard that if it didn't explode, it would likely stop from exhaustion.

She stroked every inch of him, whispering touches alternating with teeth and nails until he lost all sense of time. His shaft strained for release, but she barely touched it, instead finding sensitive spots even he hadn't known existed. But when a bite on the side of his neck nearly brought him to completion, he broke.

“Now!” he choked, rolling her beneath him, her swollen breasts brushing his chest.

“Yes!”

He plunged.

Ah, the relief. The tightness. The moist heat closing around him.

“So big,” she moaned even as her legs hooked around his hips, pulling him deeper.

He froze.

“Don't stop, Alex. I've never felt anything so exciting – stretching – filling—” She pulled his mouth to hers. “You make me forget I'm a lady.”

“You're a perfect lady,” he panted.

“I'm wanton.”

“Perfect,” he managed before his last coherent thought whirled away in a cloud of need.

She rose to meet each stroke, beyond beautiful as she urged him on with hands and voice, sharing her joy, her lust, her need for more in broken cries and earthy commands. He answered in groans, no longer capable of words. It was all he could do to hold on until a final stroke pushed her to climax. Only then did he follow, shattering into a million fragments as he let her milk him of every last drop.

“How did you hide such passion from John?” he

asked some time later, so drained he voiced a question too personal to ask.

“I didn’t. I never knew it was there until I met you.”

He rolled to his side, amusing himself by playing lightly with her breasts while he considered her response. “Never?”

She smiled. “I told you I’m no lady, Alex. You turn me quite wanton.”

“Enjoyment of intimacy has nothing to do with breeding, my dear.” He kissed her lightly. “It’s a gift from the gods that you should respect and nurture as you would the most precious flower.” He grinned. “I will be happy to help you tend it.”

“I’m not sure I can summon the energy.”

“We’ll see.” Settling between her thighs, he inhaled their mingled scents, then kissed her. When she pressed closer, he smiled. “It seems you’ve energy enough, sweet Eden.”

“I’m quite abandoned. Completely shameless. Shall I describe how that feels?” And she did, her voice growing huskier with each word, arousing him once more. But not until she shattered did he again enter her, working slowly to rebuild her fires before plunging them into oblivion.

When he woke, he had no idea how much time had passed. Eden lay like the dead beneath him, sound asleep. She would be a maze of bruises by morning if he stayed in this position, he realized, noting how uncomfortable the bed was. There was only one way to fix that.

He rolled, smiling when she protested. But it took only a moment for her to settle atop him. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled up a sheet and let her slide deeper into dreams. It didn’t matter that the bed felt like a pile of boulders beneath his back, for he could not afford to sleep. Before dawn, he must leave for Foley.

Beyond that, he had no plans. Every thought ended with Eden.

Chapter Twenty

Shortly after dawn, Alex rode through Foley’s gates, cursing his weakness. He should have spent the night preparing for the task at hand. Instead, he’d been stupidly indulgent, creating memories that distracted

him enough to cause critical mistakes.

For the first time in his life, he couldn't lock the images away. Leaving Eden asleep at the inn had been the most difficult thing he'd ever done, and not only because their lovemaking had increased his need instead of dissipating it. She'd clung to him even in sleep.

He'd had to leave without waking her, so he'd carefully slid out, ignoring her mumbled protests as he tried to make her as comfortable as possible. By the time he collected his horse, his mind should have forgotten everything except the job at hand.

But it refused. His body still tingled. Her curiosity had pleased him more than the most accomplished courtesan. The afterglow remained, changing how he perceived the world – especially Eden.

So this was love. Deep, abiding love. For the first time he understood the glances Helen shared with her husband and thanked heaven that she'd eloped instead of wedding him. What he'd called love had been no more than gratitude and attraction – as she'd claimed at the time but which he'd never truly accepted.

Now he did. While memories of Helen and plans for their future together had kept him sane through the most dangerous of his assignments, in truth his image of her had been more fantasy than fact. Eden was so much more than Helen could ever be. He needed everything about her. Her passion. Her competence. Even her insistence on doing things *her* way instead of following his advice. Her feistiness might break up his peace at times, but it would never be boring.

But could he have her?

If Percy harmed Olivia, Eden would never forgive him. This was one point on which her expectations were clear-cut. Oh, she might criticize Stratford for punishing every fault. She might spout nonsense about human error and learning from mistakes. But when it came to Olivia's safety, she would accept nothing less than perfection.

Nor should she. Philosophy vanished in the face of reality. Alex had already failed her by not preventing Olivia's abduction. It was galling to admit that Percy's cunning had again outwitted him. If anything more happened...

She would kick him into the next county and never

allow a return. And who could blame her when every meeting would remind her of the sister she'd raised from birth?

He thrust recrimination aside, lest it lead to new mistakes. But it was harder to lock away memories of Eden's passion. Last night might be the last time she touched him, for he feared, with a fear more intense than he'd ever felt before, that Olivia was gone. Too many bodies lay in Percy's wake, including females. Olivia must have seen him, so she could not be freed. The directions Percy would exchange for the stone would send Eden on a wild-goose chase, giving Percy time to escape, so why would he keep Olivia alive?

The drive emerged from the woods to reveal Foley Manor a hundred yards ahead atop a knoll. A dozen horses stood saddled in the stable yard.

Straightening, Alex adopted the role of a jolly young gentleman. He'd covered his scars with stage paint – a skill he'd refined at the Home Office. Only the closest scrutiny would detect the injuries in the milky light of dawn, especially if he kept his left cheek in shadow.

He'd also turned the fashionable side of his cloak out. Now he added the *bon homie* confidence of a well-born gentleman.

"Is Percy Montagu down yet?" he asked the nearest groom, then raised one brow at the collection of saddled horses. "I hadn't expected a throng. This was to be a private ride."

"Mr. Percy, you say?"

Alex nodded.

"I've no instructions 'bout *his* mount, sir. This crowd's headed for that mill up at Winster."

Alex chortled. "I knew the old man wouldn't be ready!" It was easy to sound jolly now that he'd confirmed Percy's presence. "Had a tenner on it. The silly clunch likely forgot – he was three sheets to the wind when we arranged it. I'll roust him out, then roast him for his laziness. Thank you, my good man."

He tossed the groom a penny, then rode toward the front door. But the moment the stables were out of sight, he swerved into the woods, backtracking until he could see both the front entrance and the stable yard. It wasn't an ideal post, but it should do. He doubted Percy meant to slip out the back. The man must know that only behaving normally would prevent notice.

He'd hardly made himself comfortable when the house disgorged a laughing crowd of gentlemen, some playfully sparring as they traipsed toward the stable. Three winced as if protecting morning heads brought on by late night conviviality, then gulped from flasks to relieve their pain. One cub veered aside to leave his breakfast in the shrubbery before staggering back indoors followed by the derisive hoots of his friends.

Alex shook his head. Had he ever been that young and stupid?

* * * *

The longcase clock in Foley's hall struck eight as Percy Montagu passed. He'd chosen the perfect time to leave. The cubs bent on watching Bolton pound Raines were gone, and the ladies remained abed. He could depart without facing impudent requests to accompany him.

He could barely contain his excitement, for this time he was sure to succeed. He'd learned enough about Mrs. Marlow to know she'd kill herself if it would protect her sister.

Not that it would do her any good. As soon as he was sure of the stone, he would deal with the chit, slowly and with great relish. And Mrs. Marlow, too. He deserved the thrill for the trouble Marlow had caused.

A growl rumbled in his throat when he recalled how Marlow's treachery had turned his triumph to ashes.

He'd been so furious at Emerson for killing Marlow, then leaving the body in plain sight, that he'd shot the fellow without even exchanging greetings. Once he'd collected the stone from Emerson's pocket, he'd hurried home, covering the hundred and fifty miles in only fifteen hours and nearly foundering several horses. But that hadn't mattered. Twenty-five years of study and planning had finally come to fruition.

His legs had been rubbery by the time he'd arrived, but he'd ignored them, racing to the chapel that had stood in readiness for so long, eager to carry out the ritual he'd reconstructed after long years of study.

Even knowing that everything was perfect hadn't kept his hands from trembling as he'd donned the waiting robes. At last he could correct history's error and take his rightful place in the family and the world.

The memories sent new tremors through his hands...

It took three tries before he could kindle a fresh flame

in the brazier and light the waiting torches. Only when he added the incense did he calm, breathing deeply as the power rushed into him.

The opening words of the chant sent smoke curling upward to twine around the ancient beams. The chapel's hush deepened as if the very stones strained to hear his command. But before command must come blessing and invocation...

He poured mead into the chalice. Mead made by his own hands according to an ancient method all but lost to mankind. Murmuring incantations in an archaic Greek dialect, he stirred three times with the sacred spoon, then poured a libation to the sorcerer whose power was now his.

Vitality filled him as he drank. And peace. And the sorcerer himself, returning from beyond the grave to right the wrongs of the world.

As that spirit became one with his own, anticipation quickened his breath, driving his pulse faster and heating his skin until it glowed bright as the brazier. He was Sarsos. Immortal. Invincible. Divine. His voice resonated, gathering the gods to await his command. As the call swirled to the rafters, he set the chalice aside and lifted the stone, invoking its wisdom as he slid it into the staff that would tap its power.

"Return what is mine to my control," he began, thumping the base of the staff on the altar.

The stone popped out, landing on the floor.

"No-o-o!" Shock replaced euphoria, weakening his knees.

Minutes passed before he realized there was no problem. He'd merely inserted the stone backwards. Or upside down. Or—

But no manner of twisting made it fit snugly. In a maelstrom of fury, he accepted the truth. Marlow had cheated, displaying a decoy good enough to trick the unimaginative Emerson. The real stone remained in the hands of Marlow's wife.

Percy bit back a howl of outrage, recalling the pain he'd suffered since that night. He'd immediately left to retrieve real stone, of course, but by the time he again reached Ridley, she was gone. Nothing had been right since...

But tonight that would change. Tonight he would hold the stone, the real stone, in his hands. When that happened, when his transformation into Sarsos was

complete, he could finally take his rightful place in the world. Then those who had mocked him all these years would pay...

In the meantime, he had to be careful, for he was not yet invincible. To prevent anyone from noting his departure, he swallowed his pride and walked to the stables instead of demanding that his horse be sent to the door.

"Are you still here, Mr. Percy?" asked a groom the moment he reached the stable yard. "I thought your friend woke you two hours ago."

"What friend?"

"The one you were riding with this morning." He glanced around as if expecting a companion.

Percy frowned. "He named me?"

"You *are* Mr. Percy Montagu, are you not?"

"Yes, but I have a cousin with the same name." Something that had annoyed him for more than twenty years. The family should accord him more respect.

"Ah. That would be it, then. The friend was youngish. Drinking together last night, I gathered."

"My horse." His curt order cut off further conversation.

The groom scurried away, leaving Percy in impotent fury. Damn Percival Montagu, anyway. They'd addressed the name problem ten years earlier and resolved it – or so Percy had thought. The lad had conceded use of the shorter name to Percy, who'd already employed it for a lifetime, vowing to remain Percival in all matters. Percy should have known better than to believe him. Percival's branch of the family abounded in dishonorable cads. Stealing his name was the least of their crimes. He would have to blister the cub's ears when he returned.

Or perhaps not. By tonight, he would wield power beyond their comprehension. Then they would pay. Painfully. Every last one. No one would blame him for avenging a lifetime of spite.

* * * *

Alex frowned at the middle-aged man speaking with the groom. This was the fourth such man he'd seen, revealing a new obstacle. Generations of intermarriage had produced a family peppered with tall blonds indistinguishable from a distance.

But his instincts claimed this one was Percy. Unlike the others, he was alone, unusual at a gathering of

this magnitude. Then there was his demeanor. The others had laughed and talked. This one was haughty and furious.

Alex was too far away to hear what was said, but the groom's friendliness vanished in a trice. He rushed off to ready a horse.

Alex mounted his own animal and prepared to follow. He'd resumed his role as a struggling merchant, turning his cloak so he no longer looked like a gentleman. His posture and expression matched. It wasn't hard to seem weighed down by cares, for Percy carried nothing. He wasn't taking food to Olivia.

* * * *

Eden woke when sunlight hit her face. The joy she'd found in Alex's arms quickly turned to fear for Olivia. They should be busy searching, not lying abed well past nine. She turned—

He was gone.

Panic nearly blinded her until she spotted his note. Her fingers fumbled as she opened it.

Eden,

Ring for breakfast immediately. Be upset that you overslept. Add hysterics that your mother might die before you arrive. Eat, then leave. I settled with the innkeeper, mentioning that I would bespeak a carriage in Derby. You and Jeremy must follow, but wait for me in the first copse large enough to hide the horses.

Alex

She swore. If he expected her to hide while he did all the work...

Yet what choice did she have? He would seek her in the copse. If she wasn't there, he might waste valuable time looking for her.

So she hastily dressed, then used her fear for Olivia to make her role believable.

The maid who answered her summons was the talkative sort. In five minutes, Eden learned that forty people were staying at Foley Manor with another forty distributed among four nearby homes. Next week's wedding would be the grandest affair anyone could recall. Until then, daily expeditions meant that 'andsome gents were constantly passing the inn. Many stopped in the taproom, and for more than ale. The maid had already made two pounds above her wages.

But so many people riding about would make it impossible to follow Percy unnoticed. It also made it harder for him to hide Olivia.

Her hand shook as she forced eggs into her mouth. Was she clinging to false hope? She knew what Alex had not said. Unless they rescued Olivia before Percy's deadline, Olivia would die. Percy had no reason to keep her alive. He might already—

It was with a heavy heart that she and Jeremy rode west.

* * * *

Alex's fears grew as he followed Percy into Derby, where the man paused at the King's Arms long enough to leave a letter. There was no point in interviewing the innkeeper, for he would know nothing useful.

Percy then spent a desultory hour visiting shops. But he purchased nothing and spoke to no one. Was he filling the hours before Eden delivered the stone, or did he suspect he was being followed?

Not that he would notice Alex, who was too experienced to be seen. He kept his distance, changing his appearance from time to time and twice entering shops before Percy did.

Percy eventually returned to Foley Manor, where he was swept into a billiards competition before he even reached the front door.

Alex slipped away to find Eden. It was nearly noon. Her patience would be wearing thin. And Percy would now stay put until sunset unless he wished to draw notice.

* * * *

Something rustled in the underbrush. Eden jumped so high she nearly fell off the boulder she was using as a stool. Surely if it was Alex, he would identify himself. He knew she was here.

Silence descended, as if someone were listening intently.

Jeremy muffled the horses' faces with his cloak so they would remain silent.

Two birds set up a ruckus over rights to a nearby tree. A squirrel protested loudly. Would the sounds convince the watcher that he was alone?

Hoofbeats clattered along the road.

Alex?

A new image burst through her head. Percy, crouched behind a tree, waiting to attack as Alex

approached. She half rose to stop him, then forced herself back down.

It could as easily be Alex waiting until the rider passed before making his presence known. Or Alex might be somewhere else entirely.

A rook shrieked.

She held her breath until spots danced before her eyes.

The hoofbeats passed, continuing unchecked until they faded away.

Her breath whooshed out, though she tried to remain silent. There was still someone out there. Could it be an animal?

“Eden...” The whisper barely penetrated the trees, too soft to identify the voice. “Eden? Are you here?”

Had Percy forced Alex to reveal her hiding place? Had one of Percy’s servants recognized her at the inn? The place had sheltered secretaries, three valets, and a host of footmen. If Percy knew where she was—

She slid off her boulder and crouched behind it. Jeremy met her eyes, his own terrified.

A curse exploded, louder than the whisper. “Damnation! I told her to wait here.” Definitely Alex.

“Over here,” she called softly.

In moments he burst into her clearing. “Why didn’t you answer me?”

“There was more than one person out there. How was I to know which was you?” She frowned. “What did you do to your face?”

“The scars?” He touched his cheek. “I erased them.”

She stepped closer, staring. “It’s like magic.”

“Just stage paint. Did you have trouble at the inn?”

“No. But the maid claims that dozens of people are riding about this week. The Foleys hold excursions, picnics, and competitions. And half the guests are staying elsewhere.”

“I noticed.” When she raised a brow, he continued. “I watched the house this morning. One party left for a mill. Others are riding. And several ladies are heading for the Derby shops as we speak.”

“Shouldn’t you be watching Percy?” Instead of her earlier anger at being shunted aside, she now feared that fetching her would let Percy escape.

“He is playing billiards, having just returned from Derby, where he left an envelope with the porter at the King’s Arms.”

Jeremy led the horses closer. “You saw no sign of Olivia?”

“None. Nor did I expect to.” Alex lifted Eden onto her horse. “Percy won’t visit her until after his deadline. She cannot be at the house, and he cannot risk leaving while others might follow. At sunset, he will send a servant to collect the package from the King’s Arms. The man won’t return until it is full dark. That is when Percy will slip away.”

“But why would he go to her if he doesn’t have the stone?” asked Eden.

“He will fear that she escaped – he will not believe that you would abandon her. Nor will he think we know where she is or who abducted her. So he will make sure she is still there. We will follow. Let’s go – and hope no one decides to explore the woods this afternoon.”

Half an hour later, he led them through Foley’s gates, then left Jeremy on watch while he moved Eden and the horses deeper under cover. Jeremy knew Percy by sight.

Chapter Twenty-one

Eden stared as Alex emptied a bag of paint pots onto a stump. “You said you were going to sleep,” she hissed.

“Later.”

“You have to be exhausted. Did you sleep at all last night?” She blushed, recalling why he’d not.

“Some.” He scrubbed his face with a towel until his scars gleamed white against reddened skin. When she again tried to protest, he met her eyes. “Enough, Eden. I won’t fail you. There will be time to sleep when this is over.”

“I know that, but—” She sighed, for he was no longer listening. “What are you doing?”

“Changing my appearance.”

“That’s obvious.” He was daubing color on his face. Reds, whites, and blues that expanded his scars until they covered the entire cheek and part of his forehead, puckering the skin into grotesque blobs. He looked like the victim of a terrible fire. She could barely stand to look at him. “Why?”

“I have to make sure Percy is still here.”

“You said he was playing billiards.”

“So he was an hour ago. He was swept into a game when he returned from Derby, but he could have extracted himself by now if he wanted to.”

“But surely— You can’t mean you are going in there!”

“Of course.” He glanced up at her. “How else am I to learn if he’s there? I can hardly ask the butler.”

“I know, but—”

“I must also find out how many servants he has and explore the house. We can’t see all the entrances from here.”

Her mouth was hanging open – from surprise as much as fear for his safety. Fascinated, she watched him put the finishing touches on his new face, worried that someone would notice that it was fake. But he was a skilled artist. The few imperfections revealed by close scrutiny would not be seen by a casual observer. Few would take a second look. Society hated deformity. Those with infirmities learned to stay in the shadows.

He pulled a livery jacket from his bag.

“You can’t mean to walk in the door!”

“Would you rather I climbed in a window?”

“Of course not, but won’t someone stop you?” she asked. “How do you know that is the Foley livery?”

“With so many visiting servants, few will question yet another strange face. Nor will they question mismatched livery. I saw at least three designs while watching the house this morning.”

“They will certainly remember you, though.”

“No. They will remember this scar. Remember what I said about giving people something to focus on? Few will look far enough to recall the color of my hair. Most will turn away the moment they spot it.”

Clever, she realized. No one would actually study his features. The scar was too obvious. “Be careful,” she said as he repacked his bag.

“Of course. Stay here and rest. I’ll need you to be fresh this evening.”

“I—” She threw her arms around him, loath to see him go.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he murmured. “Don’t smear my face.” He pulled back, raising her hands to his lips for lingering kisses. “I should be back in an hour or two. I’ll rest then.”

He tied the bag to his saddle, then shuffled away,

his demeanor so like an outcast footman that she felt her jaw drop. How could he have left a position that let him use such magnificent talent? He must miss that part, at least.

Half an hour later, she joined Jeremy, too nervous to sit on the stump a moment longer.

“What are you doing here?” he whispered.

“I needed to stretch my legs. Is anything happening?” She nodded toward the house.

“I think they are eating. Several groups returned from morning excursions. No one has yet left for afternoon activities. A straggle of servants arrived half an hour ago, probably the ones staying in the village.”

“How many?”

“Six. Two looked like secretaries. The other four were footmen. One had trouble maintaining a brisk pace, but the others wouldn’t wait for him, which is why I suspect they are eating. Extra footman are needed to serve at meals, but not at other times. Turning up late could cost them vails.”

Eden nodded, silently congratulating Alex for his brilliant timing. She stared at the house so Jeremy wouldn’t see that she was barely containing laughter. Despite watching Alex’s performance last night and noting his skill with stage paint only an hour ago, Jeremy hadn’t recognized him, seeing only what he expected to see.

She remained for some time, but nothing stirred at the house, so she eventually returned to her stump, nibbling bread and cheese to hold her fears at bay.

Another hour passed.

She was so tense that every rustle made her cringe. Had someone penetrated Alex’s disguise? Was Percy already seeking her?

A twig snapped behind her.

She whirled, a hand stifling her scream.

Alex stepped into the clearing.

“You’re safe!” She threw herself against him, relief turning her knees to jelly.

“Of course.” He turned her head up to expose damp eyes. “What’s all this, sweetheart?”

“I’m sorry. But you were gone so long...”

“It’s all right, Eden.” He kissed her gently.

She tried to deepen the kiss, but he held back. “Later,” he promised. “I had to serve at lunch, which was more protracted than I’d expected. But I answered

all my questions – except where Olivia is. Here.” He handed her a package.

“Wha—” Delectable odors wafted out.

“Leftovers,” he explained, grinning. “I’ve eaten, so you and Jeremy can share these while I take a turn on watch.”

He cleaned his face, donned his merchant’s coat, then disappeared into the trees.

She dumped several lumpy napkins onto the stump. One held chicken, another lobster patties. A third contained cakes and lemon biscuits. But the *pièce de résistance* was a dozen delectable strawberries, swamping her with memories of that dinner in London...

* * * *

“He’s back.” Alex shook Jeremy awake.

His excursion indoors had done more than confirm that Percy remained at the manor. He’d identified Percy’s valet. Thus he’d recognized the man who had headed for Derby to collect the stone.

While waiting for his return, Alex had brought Jeremy and Eden to the watch post so they would be together when Percy received the bad news. Then he’d readied the horses and forced Jeremy to sleep.

It was gratifying that he’d judged the man’s nature correctly. The valet had timed his departure so he would arrive at the King’s Arms at sunset. But he had not returned when no package awaited him. Instead, he’d stayed. And stayed. And had undoubtedly drawn attention by repeatedly asking the innkeeper if he was absolutely certain that nothing had been delivered.

The valet left his horse standing at the front door and rushed inside as if his tail were on fire. Another mistake, preventing Percy from leaving undetected. The butler and at least two footmen now knew something was amiss.

“We have to be careful,” he reminded Jeremy and Eden. “If Percy suspects we are following him, he will either avoid Olivia’s hiding place or kill her the moment he arrives. He has nothing to lose, for he already faces hanging.”

Eden paled, but nodded.

Jeremy clenched his fists.

“Hold your temper,” he added to Jeremy. “This is no time to let emotion override sense.”

“Right.”

He must take his own advice. Never had he found calm so hard to achieve. It didn't help that he was wagering Olivia's life on assumptions he could no longer trust. Would Percy take his valet's horse rather than call for his own? Panic should override sense, but the man had been methodically pillaging and killing for twenty years. He would have learned to plan for all contingencies. So he would have prepared a story to explain his sudden departure.

Yet madness had its own logic. And Percy's certainty that power would soon be his might make him careless. Alex hoped so, for an orderly departure with coachman and valet would make it harder to follow him in secret, to say nothing of rescuing Olivia unharmed when they arrived. Eden might be stubbornly courageous, but a female and a budding dandy wouldn't be much help against three men.

He'd convinced himself that he should slip into the house and was actually rising when Percy emerged, stalked down the steps, and leaped onto the horse. His fury was obvious. Foley's servants must wonder why.

"He is going to kill Olivia," choked Eden, lunging toward the drive.

"Shhh." He pulled her close even as relief swept over him. This was the first evidence that Olivia might be alive. "His fury is good. It will muddle his senses, which will make following him easier."

Percy was already galloping down the drive.

"I hope he doesn't have far to go," said Jeremy. "He'll founder the horse if he keeps that up."

"Watch the gate," ordered Alex. "Which way will he turn?" If Olivia was already dead, he might head for Ridley to attack Eden.

A narrow gap in the trees offered a glimpse of the estate entrance.

"Left," said Eden.

"Left," agreed Jeremy.

Ridley lay to the right. Heart light, he tossed Eden into her saddle. "Let's go."

By the time they reached the gates, Percy was barely visible in the distance. If not for the full moon, they would not have seen him. Wind whipped the trees, covering his hoofbeats – and hiding sounds of pursuit.

* * * *

Half an hour later, Alex halted his companions in the narrow lane they'd been following for two miles. A

momentary lull in the wind had brought a curse to his ears. Percy remained furious.

Dismounting, he crept to the next corner and peered around the hedge.

Percy stood a hundred yards away, swearing at his horse. Perhaps the brutal pace had strained something. Or the beast may have picked up a stone. Whatever the reason, it was dead lame.

Alex exhaled fully. The weak point of his plan had always been that following Percy meant Percy would arrive first and could have Olivia in his control before they caught up.

Now, finally, they had a real chance to save her.

The moon broke from behind flying clouds, illuminating a low ridge with three cottages scattered along its base. None displayed lights.

Percy glanced in their direction, again cursed, then set off on foot, leading his lame horse.

Alex hurried back to the others. "This way," he whispered. "We need to get ahead of him."

He backtracked to a gap in the hedge, then circled toward the ridge. "Stay low," he murmured. "He's between the hedgerows, but there are plenty of gaps. Don't make an obvious silhouette."

The moon cooperated by ducking behind another cloud. Objects only a short distance away disappeared.

Alex's sense of direction had always been good, as was his night vision. In minutes, he reached the first cottage. Percy remained a quarter mile away, still cursing.

"Around back," he whispered.

Posting Eden to watch for Percy, he tried the back door. It opened to his touch. A quick search showed no residents larger than mice. Evidence of Percy's planning. The other cottages would also be uninhabited. Percy wouldn't risk anyone hearing cries for help.

A stream followed the base of the ridge fifty feet away. Trees grew along its banks, offering cover to anyone on the far side. He slipped across, then hurried to the second cottage.

It was also empty.

"One more time," he whispered when he returned to the horses. The hedgerows had ended at the first cottage, giving Percy a good view, so Alex had to stay beyond the stream.

The ground rose as they picked their way around several outcroppings, seeking turf to muffle the horses' steps. Every minute stretched longer than the last. He finally crossed back and dismounted under a large beech. The third cottage stood a hundred feet away.

"Leave the horses here. Their shoes are making too much noise." He tethered his to a sapling, then looked for Percy.

The lame horse must have been slowing him too much, for Percy no longer led the beast – which explained why the night seemed quieter. Anticipation pushed him to a near run. Already he'd passed the second cottage.

He was wearing Arthur's sandals.

"We can't break in without making noise," whispered Jeremy. "This one won't be open."

"No." Alex frowned. He didn't want Eden in the cottage until he knew what they would find. "Stay here and keep the horses quiet," he told her. "Highbottom, you take the back. Do whatever you must to get inside. Understand?"

Jeremy nodded.

"I'll delay Percy. Just don't make any noise until you get there."

He ran along the stream, Jeremy on his heels.

* * * *

Eden stared after them, biting her tongue. She would not endanger Olivia, but there was no way she was staying safely out of sight. The horses were fine.

Scooping up a pair of fist-sized rocks, she followed, careful to stay on grass. The bubbling stream hid her footfalls. Shadows cloaked her movement.

Alex left Jeremy testing the back door and slipped around the far wall. Percy was hurrying toward the front, clearly visible in the moonlight.

Eden shifted to put the cottage between them, then followed Alex.

"Stay where you are, Montagu." Alex's voice sliced through the night, deeper than usual and chillingly forbidding.

"Who the devil are you?"

"I am Sarsos. How dare you claim my power?" He'd adopted a strange accent. "You know my curse. *Death to he who seeks gain. Agony to he who causes harm.* Think you that hiring others protects you?"

"No-o-o-o!" Shock permeated the shout. And fury.

Eden edged closer to the corner.

"You lie," screamed Percy. "I am Sarsos, protector of a proud heritage. I seek restoration of order. Only those who oppose justice need fear my power."

"Did Emerson oppose justice? Or Peterson? Higgins certainly didn't," intoned Alex. "My power *never* does harm, no matter what the cause. It is over, Montagu."

"Never! I am Sarsos, more powerful than any king. The curse is mine to repeal, the power mine to use as I will."

Eden peered around the corner. Percy stood by the front door, pointing an accusing finger.

Alex paced slowly forward, pulling the stone from his pocket. It glittered strangely in the moonlight. "It is not yours, Montagu. It will never be yours." He shoved the stone out of sight, pinning Percy with a glare. "Enough—"

A crash reverberated as Jeremy attacked the rear shutters.

Percy lunged for the door.

Alex charged.

Eden gasped.

For all his size, Percy was fast on his feet. Quicker than a blink, he whirled, sidestepping Alex as he pulled a pistol from his left pocket and fired. Alex crashed to the ground.

"No!" screamed Eden, hurling a rock at Percy's head. It bounced harmlessly off his shoulder but distracted him from smashing the pistol into Alex's face.

"Damn," grunted Alex, scrambling to his feet. "I told you to watch the horses."

* * * *

Alex circled warily. He could have grabbed Percy while the man was unlocking the door, but Eden's gasp had turned him around. Now he'd twisted away again.

The ball had hit his left arm, leaving it practically useless. But he couldn't let Percy harm Eden. Or Olivia.

Again he charged, plowing a fist into Percy's gut and trying to wrestle him to the ground. The man was slippery as an eel and strong as a lion – legend credited madmen with uncanny strength. It didn't help that Percy was several inches taller. A giant indeed.

Alex dodged a kick, then planted a shoulder in Percy's stomach, bowling him over. But he couldn't pin

him. In moments, they were rolling down the hill, accompanied by a series of crashes from the cottage.

Mistake! screamed his instincts. Revealing the stone had been a huge one. Instead of creating confusion, it had tapped the mad core that believed in magic.

“Thief,” Percy growled, clawing at Alex’s pocket. “Surrender. You have no chance of beating me. I hold Merlin’s power as well.”

“Fool!” Alex landed a blow to Percy’s jaw, scrambling to his feet when Percy flinched. “Those sandals were made last month in Leeds.” He had to end this soon. The blood pouring from his arm was taking his strength with it, leaving him sluggish.

“Liar!” Percy reached past his guard to grab an ear, nearly tearing it off.

“Never!” Two blows bounced harmlessly off Percy’s shoulder. He circled to find an opening.

Percy tripped him. Alex landed a facer as he fell, but Percy was on him before he could roll away.

“Got you now,” he crowed. “No one defeats Sarsos.”

Alex narrowly avoided a finger in his eye. But he was fading fast. A foreshortened punch barely brushed Percy’s jaw. He couldn’t pull a breath past the weight on his chest.

Then Percy closed his hands around Alex’s neck and squeezed.

Alex tried to break the grip, but he couldn’t move, and blows in such close quarters lacked power. His sight dimmed. Imagining Eden unprotected gave him a last burst of energy...

Eden whacked Percy on the head, then grabbed his hair, jerking with all her might.

Percy’s fingers loosened.

Gasping, Alex smashed Percy’s temple, repeating the blow with more force as Eden held the man’s head steady.

Percy sagged.

“Are you all right,” she gasped, shoving Percy aside to reach Alex.

Alex sat up, sucking in a ragged breath. “I’ve been better. Thank God you don’t follow orders. I hadn’t expected a pistol.”

“It matches the one he left with Emerson.” She ripped a flounce from her petticoat. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Don’t make light of it, Alex.” She pulled off his coat

so she could wind the bandage around his arm. “I thought he’d killed you.”

He nodded, swallowing hard. His throat was on fire. “The arm will be fine. Percy is more important. Fetch the rope...” He glanced around. “I dropped it by the corner of the cottage.”

She retrieved it. But the moment he finished binding Percy, she pushed Alex back down and finished bandaging his arm.

Another crash reverberated from the cottage, this time from inside.

“Dear Lord!” gasped Eden. “I forgot Olivia.”

“Easy, Eden. Jeremy would be screaming if she was hurt.” But he climbed to his feet and headed for the door. Percy had dropped the key on the stoop.

The cottage’s main room held only a rickety table and two stools. One had fallen when Jeremy tumbled through the broken shutters. Alex held Eden close as he turned toward the second room, unsure what they would see...

Olivia sat on a pallet, rubbing her wrists. Rope still bound her feet.

“Olivia?” Eden’s voice cracked.

“I’m fine.” But tears rolled down her face. Eden sat next to her, pulling her close when Jeremy finished untying her ankles. “H-how did you find me?”

“Mr. Portland.”

Alex stepped closer, drawing Olivia’s attention. “Do you remember what happened?”

“Not much. I was riding toward the lake to keep an assignation” —she glanced at Jeremy— “when pain exploded in my head. My next memory is waking up here.”

He’d probably fed her laudanum the moment she’d begun to revive. Evidence of illness remained on the floor. It was the usual reaction upon awakening from an excessive dose.

“I wish you had explained about Jeremy,” said Eden, shaking her head.

“Forgive me, Eden,” Olivia said contritely. “I should have spoken earlier.”

Alex nodded, but contented himself with, “I wish you happy, Miss Higgins. And you, Highbottom.”

“As do I,” added Eden.

Olivia broke into a wide smile.

Alex turned to Jeremy. “Fetch the horses. She will

do better to eat before leaving.”

* * * *

By the time Jeremy returned, Alex had laid his plans. While Eden fed Olivia and treated her injuries, he and Jeremy tied Percy to Alex’s horse.

The man woke raving, his struggles spooking the animal.

“Silence!” barked Alex at last, pulling out the stone.

Percy’s crazed eyes drank it in.

Alex touched it to Percy’s forehead, letting him feel its heat. “You are not Sarsos,” he intoned in a Greek accent. “You are cursed already by your own greed. Should one word, one allusion, one mention of Sarsos or its power pass your lips again, you will die in that instant. Sarsos has spoken.” He slipped the stone out of sight. “Do you understand?”

Percy nodded, eyes bulging.

“Good. Don’t move and don’t speak.” He turned to Jeremy. With five people and only three and a half horses, they needed help. “Ride to that posting road we passed and find a carriage. Meet us at the end of the lane.”

“Right.” But his eyes strayed to the cottage.

“She’ll be fine. Now go.”

Jeremy had hardly reached the lane when Eden emerged, supporting Olivia. They mounted her on Eden’s horse, then began the long trek back.

* * * *

Dawn was breaking when Alex emerged from the magistrate’s house. His arm throbbed. Spots swarmed before his eyes after three nearly sleepless nights. But he had one more job to do before he could join the others at their new inn. News of Percy’s arrest would reach Foley by breakfast, so it couldn’t wait.

The magistrate had been incredulous when Alex laid murder, attempted murder, and abduction charges against Percy. But he could hardly ignore the ball in Alex’s arm or close his ears to Olivia’s abduction. So he accepted that Percy had also killed John and Emerson.

Once the magistrate locked Percy away, Alex sent the others to an inn while he laid out the story in more detail and wrote reports. To protect reputations and keep from reviving old grief, he said nothing of Sarsos and nothing of Percy’s older crimes. It was enough that Percy be tried for the events in Leicestershire.

Peterson's death would go down as an unsolved robbery.

The tale was simple enough. Believing that his cousin John and his secretary Emerson were plotting against him, Percy had killed them. He'd then turned on Eden, whom he thought had supported the plot. Obviously, he was mad as a March hare.

Foley Manor was barely stirring when Alex slipped inside, again disguised as a footman. It took only minutes to find Percy's room and remove the other Sarsos relics so they would not raise questions.

He'd barely reached the woods before the magistrate himself arrived. When Percy's valet escaped out the back, Alex sighed in relief and rode away. His story would stand.

Exhaustion crashed over him as he dragged himself up to his room. He was asleep before he hit the bed, barely aware that Eden had waited for him.

Chapter Twenty-two

Eden was glad to return home. It had been a long, frustrating day. Alex hadn't awakened until late afternoon, so it was nearly midnight by the time they reached Ridley.

Jeremy helped a shaky Olivia into the house. They made a perfect couple, she finally admitted. He might be young, but he was dependable and knew exactly what he wanted.

She'd spent the day at Alex's bedside, watching for signs of fever. It was the least she could do for him. If she hadn't demanded his help, he would not be injured. So far he'd escaped illness, but the hours alone, staring at his battle-worn face, had given her too much time to think. And not just about passion, wonderful though it was.

Now that all danger was past, she bitterly regretted exploring her newfound wantonness, for she would never again be able to satisfy it. Alex would leave soon, and not just because he must go to London to prosecute Percy. Once he discovered how shamefully she'd behaved...

By the time she'd realized how sensitive he was – and how fragile – it had been too late to recall her letter to Kit. Few men would forgive an outsider for meddling in their affairs. And for a man like Alex...

She hadn't understood how dangerous truth could be. Hadn't realized that severing his family bonds actually made Alex stronger, for Stratford had been a chain around his neck, dragging him into the depths where his spirit would have drowned.

So she must send him away before he discovered her folly. Even if chivalry made him repeat his offer of marriage, she must refuse. Love wasn't enough. She was no good for a man of his breeding.

He would leave in the morning. Since another night in his arms might make her succumb to temptation, she must climb out of the carriage knowing she would never touch him again. Her one hope was that when he entered her dreams – she had no way to keep him out – it would be in the guise of a lover. But she feared they would be nightmares recalling his near-death at Percy's hands. Bulging eyes, red face, feeble blows incapable of breaking Percy's grip. And the blood.

His clothes still bore stains...

"Your turn," he said, lifting her down as she hesitated in the carriage doorway. The job coach was not nearly as comfortable as his, leaving her bruised after only thirty miles.

"You shouldn't use your arm yet, Alex," she chided to cover the thrill of one more contact.

"It's fine. Come. You must be starving. I hope your staff can product dinner."

So did she.

But she forgot food when Simms met them, salver in hand.

"A letter for you, sir," he said, offering the missive to Alex.

"Terrence's next report, I presume." He didn't look at it until they reached the drawing room. Then he paled.

"What?" she demanded softly.

"How the devil did he know I was here?" he growled, tearing the letter in half.

"Who?" She covered his hands to halt further destruction.

"Stratford." He whirled toward the study...

The fire. It was the only room that always had a fire, to keep damp from the books. She raced after him, stepping in front of the fireplace before he could drop the letter on the coals.

"What the devil is wrong with you?" he demanded.

"What is wrong with you?" she countered. "You are

acting like a child in the throes of a tantrum.”

“Child?”

“Exactly. Open that letter and read it.”

“Why?”

“A man who disowned you would only write if it were urgent.”

“Hah! He still seeks to control my life. But I’ll be no man’s puppet.”

“Of course not, so why are you afraid? Read it, then send whatever response it deserves. But don’t hide from it.”

He glared, then ripped the seal off and unfolded the pieces. With a single glance at the first line, he tossed them aside. “I’m not fond of deathbed scenes.”

“Good, because you weren’t invited to one.” She had caught the shards and reached the second line by then. “What do you think this says?”

“He’s dying and wants to inform the family how to go on once he’s gone.”

“Wrong!” She held it up. “Read the whole thing.”

* * * *

Alex ground his teeth, but reluctantly accepted the letter. Why did Stratford have to interfere with his life?

But he could not fight Eden. Not if he wanted her. Her accusation stung. He was not a child and hadn’t been for many years. Children were weak-willed creatures at the mercy of the adults around them, unable to do anything but react—

Which was what he still did with his family. If he were truly an adult, they could not drive him to temper, pain, despair, or anything else. How did Eden see so clearly?

They’d not been able to talk on the drive back to Ridley – not about anything that mattered. He hadn’t even touched her, for Olivia had shared her seat, leaving him and Jeremy facing the rear. Thus he’d spent the time thinking.

He could not leave Ridley. That much was obvious. So Terrence must prosecute Percy – which might be better, for Alex would brief Terrence on only those crimes he wished to pursue. It would reduce the chance of accidentally mentioning other deeds.

Now that the danger was past, he must court Eden properly, which would take time. Not only was she still in mourning, but she must regret their night of passion. She’d spent today pulling away. So he needed

an excuse to stay.

Recovering the stone did not resolve her problems, for it had no value beyond its connection to legend – not something a museum would want. Thus the mortgage remained. But that offered him an excuse to remain at Ridley.

Eden needed a new steward. She had managed until now because Harris believed she'd merely passed along John's instructions. But that pretense was gone. Harris was not one to take orders from a female.

So Harris must find a new post, and Alex would offer to oversee the spring planting. It seemed a friendly thing to do and would give her a chance to know him better in ways beyond the carnal. But first he must deal with Stratford's latest tirade.

Holding the letter together, he forced himself to read, then stared blankly at the page for a long time.

"He is not dying," said Eden at last.

"No, though this apoplexy left him with a limp. But why would he suddenly demand explanations for scrapes he's held over my head for years? He doesn't care why I do anything."

"Many men see life differently after a brush with death."

"Not Stratford. He will never admit that his views are imperfect, so he refuses to consider that opposing ones might be valid. And this isn't his idea." He waved the letter. "Jason insists that he talk to me? What does Jason know? He's been out of the country for fifteen years. I didn't even see him the few times he returned on leave."

"Didn't Jason take a position at Horse Guards?"

"Yes, but—"

"He probably heard about your barony and demanded an explanation. It wouldn't take him long to discover how you earned it. Horse Guards must know something of your work."

Alex cursed. He'd forgot about the damned barony. And it was true about Horse Guards. Half the information he'd retrieved had been stolen from there. The place was a damned sieve. But if a title was what had piqued Stratford's interest—

"You *are* accepting it, of course," continued Eden firmly.

"Of course not. You saw how incompetent I am. Olivia nearly died because of me."

“No!” She glared. “Olivia nearly died because of Percy Montagu. His madness embraced evil. His cunning succeeded for a time. But *you* brought him to justice. *You* found Olivia before she was harmed. You even saw that Percy will pay without creating a public scandal that would destroy Olivia and bring derision on all of us. Even Richard’s poor judgment won’t be questioned because you implied that he called you in.”

“He won’t escape unscathed. The Home Office now knows enough about his blindness that he will have to step down as a magistrate.”

Her mouth quirked up at the corners. “I’m not complaining. But I can’t think of anyone else who could have achieved what you did. And in so short a time.”

“Then why do I have a hole in my arm? I should have known he would have a pistol.” He whirled away to stare at the fire.

“Alex, you did your best.” She smoothed his bandage. “No one can ask for more. That your best brought this case to a successful conclusion is a bonus. But I would not have blamed you no matter what the outcome, for I know you did everything possible.”

He turned, stunned. The idea of judging only on effort was so alien he could hardly comprehend it. “I—” He had to stop. She did not think him a failure? She—

“So you must accept this barony,” she continued firmly. “You have always done your best. And since your best produced spectacular results, you deserve a spectacular reward. Besides, you cannot insult the Regent, especially after bringing Percy to justice. Even the few crimes you are prosecuting make him a threat to all of society. So much so that the government can use this case alone to justify your title.”

He sighed, but she was right. Percy would be tried for killing a baronet’s son and shooting an earl’s son. Such heinous deeds would produce a public outcry, making Alex’s role in bringing him to account impossible to hide.

But something felt wrong. He raised one brow. “You neatly avoided my question. Jason would never bump heads with Stratford without first talking to me. He is a methodical man who checks all facts before acting.”

“But you weren’t there.”

Her eyes slid away, confirming his suspicion. “Did

you write to him?"

"No." She shook her head vigorously. "I don't even know him."

"To whom did you write, then?" He glared. She had to have meddled. It was the only explanation. She was the only one outside the Home Office who knew about his past. And how else would Stratford know where he was?

She bit her lip. "I did mention to a friend that it was a shame Stratford judged when he knew so little about you."

"Friend?"

"Kit Keeling. We grew up together."

"My God! You're the one who saved David's life."

She shrugged.

Alex stared at the ceiling, shaking his head. David Keeling had been a close friend until Alex's secrecy pushed them apart. One of his tales had recounted how his tutor's daughter had dragged him from a pond after a fall had knocked him unconscious. He would have drowned otherwise. David's older brother Kit had been close to Jason, their friendship surviving even Jason's years abroad. Eden obviously knew that. "Meddler."

"Alex, I know Stratford is not a man you can ever care for, but isn't it better to negotiate a truce so you can visit London without fearing another confrontation with Palfry?"

"Hmph."

"His apoplexy gives you a chance. Stratford is more receptive than ever before. More than he will ever be again."

"Why should I care? He hates me. If a title changes that, it means nothing." He strode to the window.

"But it does. Look at me, Alex."

He reluctantly met her eyes.

"He does *not* hate *you*. He hates a fantasy image that has nothing to do with you. That should make a huge difference."

"Why?"

"Hatred based on things that are true is forever – like Richard's hatred of my breeding. All I can do is accept it and find ways to live with it. There is nothing I can do to change my breeding, so it is useless to think about it. But you can blunt Stratford's hatred by revealing the real you."

“He won’t like that, either, because I won’t follow his orders.”

“Perhaps not. But if he rejects the real Alex Portland, it will be *his* lack, not yours. Your worth will not diminish because a stubborn, stupid man refuses to see it.”

“Is that how you dismiss Richard?”

“Of course.”

“Does it work?”

“It prevents me from wasting energy raging at a fool.”

Was that what he was doing?

She laid a hand on his arm. “Alex, try. Even if nothing changes, you will feel better. If it works, you won’t have to avoid town. If it doesn’t, remember that Stratford makes a fool of himself whenever he opens his mouth, because it’s obvious that he might as well live in China for all he knows about you.”

He sighed, for she had a point. Yet her understanding was simplistic. Stratford’s ignorance made it easier to ignore the man’s tirades. But if baring his soul changed nothing, those tirades would hurt.

“Trust me, Alex. I dare you to take this last risk. If it fails, you will survive. His opinion cannot matter as much as that of others who trust, respect, and admire you. But if it succeeds... Isn’t it worth trying?”

Her fingers burned into his arm, reminding him how much he loved her. He couldn’t disappoint her.

“Very well. We’ll leave for London in the morning.”

“We?”

“You’re coming with me, Eden. I won’t do this alone.”

“That isn’t a good idea. Besides, Olivia—”

“—is fine. The staff will look after her, as will Jeremy. She can get along without you for a few days.”

“Perhaps, but it’s not right for me to travel with you.”

“You’ve done it before.”

“That was different.”

“Please, Eden.” He pulled her against him. “I need you at my side.” He tried to kiss her, but she turned away.

“Don’t say that.” Tears appeared in her eyes. “Alex, I cannot be your mistress.”

“Good. I would never consider taking a mistress to

meet Stratford – particularly when this visit is meant to heal a rift.”

She struggled, trying to break his grip, but he held her tighter.

“I want everything, Eden. Wife. Family. Sharing a bed and awakening together.”

If anything, her tears flowed faster, making his chest ache until he feared it would explode. He should not have rushed his fences. She wasn’t ready.

“I know it’s too soon to ask for your hand,” he continued doggedly. “John hasn’t been gone a month. But will you at least consider it?”

“I can’t,” she sobbed.

“Why?”

“You’re only doing it because you pity me.”

“Nonsense! Don’t fabricate excuses, Eden. If you don’t return my regard, then say so. If you hate me for endangering Olivia, tell me.”

“No! You know that isn’t true.”

The shock in her eyes relaxed one fear. “Then what is it? Are you still mourning John?”

“He was a good man, but no.” She drew in a deep breath and met his eyes. “I can wed no one, Alex. Especially you.”

“Why?” It took all his will to control the pain.

“You want a family and your title will demand an heir, but I never once conceived in ten years of marriage. Not the tiniest hint.” Her head dropped as if in shame.

He wanted to kill John. “Christine was wed for twelve. Look at me, Eden.” He waited until she met his gaze. “John could not father children. Surely he told you.”

She mutely shook her head.

He barely stifled a new round of curses. “He knew it. He’d known it since childhood. It was why he never intended to wed. Only a deathbed promise to his mother changed his mind.”

“He knew?”

He nodded. It was widely known that men without testicles couldn’t breed. Those who were born that way developed normally otherwise – unlike castratos – but they never sired children. “When I told him Christine had eloped with Sir Harold, he admitted that he’d known they were lovers and had hoped she would conceive, for he’d always wanted a child.”

“He couldn’t...?”

“No.” His eyes bored into hers. “You dared me to take a chance, Eden. Now I’m daring you to wed me. If you cannot conceive, it will make no difference. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my days with you. I can’t bear returning to Cliffside without you. It was lonely enough before. Now...”

“You love me?”

Hadn’t he just said...

He leashed his temper and nodded. “More than I thought possible.”

She smiled, transforming the room into the Eden he had once dreamed of building. Anywhere she smiled would be Eden. “I love you, Alex. I’d hoped it was merely lust, but when I saw Percy choking you, I could no longer deny it.”

“Then you will have me?”

“Gladly.”

He swept her into his arms, diving into her mouth in a kiss he needed more than life. Happiness exploded, beyond his wildest dreams. He was home. Home as he’d never been before. His family had never understood him, never accepted him, never wasted a moment wondering whether condemning him was wrong.

But that would never happen with Eden. She knew him better than even his closest friends. They could share their innermost thoughts without fear of ridicule, explore any desire without fear of censure.

His fingers fumbled with her gown. It had to be here. Now. Already he burned to consummate their contract. For the first time in years, the future looked bright. With Eden at his side, he could do anything.

She tore off his coat, driven beyond madness by his hands and lips. The rest of his clothes followed. If she was to run mad, she would see that he did, too.

He rubbed against her as he ripped away her gown. Laces snapped. Her corset hit the wall. Hot hands touched everywhere at once.

They tumbled to the floor.

“Alex!” she panted, nibbling his shaft as his fingers slid frantically through her folds. Who would have thought a man could feel so good? Demands, promises, pleas swirled through her head, enough to fill a lifetime. Thank God they would have a lifetime.

Alex groaned, flipping her around to suck her breast

deep into his mouth. He couldn't wait, couldn't go slow, couldn't—

He sheathed himself to the hilt. "Come to me. Now!"

"Yes," she moaned, matching his frenzied pace and pushing him faster. "I love you, Alex. Only you. Forever."

They exploded in a burst of ecstasy.

"Must we wait until your mourning is over?" he panted some minutes later.

"I can't stand another night without you."

He grinned. "Then we'll get a special license when we reach London."

"As soon as we see your family. Give them a chance, Alex. You won't regret it."

He nodded, his heart light. Stratford could never hurt him again. Only Eden had that power now, but she would never use it.

Epilogue

Alex pulled his wife's back against him, cupping his hands around her swollen belly as he gazed past the prow of the yacht. The Channel was calm today – which was why he'd dared venture out so close to her time.

A vigorous kick dislodged one hand.

Eden giggled. "I think he's jealous, my lord."

"Just anxious to leave his cave and explore the world," he murmured into her ear. And a wonderful world it was. He tightened his arms.

The meeting with Stratford had shocked him, ripping apart the world he'd always known. Alex had accepted that his secrecy contributed to Stratford's ever-harsher criticism, but he'd never really thought about it from Stratford's view. Since the man had known nothing about the job that caused Alex's frequent injuries, he'd concluded that his son's youthful trouble-seeking continued. Fearing that Alex had fallen in with bad companions, he'd tried everything he could think of to force him to settle.

Sitting at Stratford's bedside, Alex's jaw had hit the floor as he recognized the love that had driven the man.

You always had a spark of something rare and precious. Stratford's voice had trembled with the

emotion he usually suppressed. *But you feared nothing. It's a dangerous combination that too often leads to serious trouble. If I'd known—* His voice broke, forcing a silence Alex couldn't break. *When Jason told me you'd hunted spies all those years, I cornered Sidmouth and demanded details. Don't worry,* he added when Alex growled. *They will go no further. I understand the danger well enough. But I needed to know, to understand— I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am – and how sorry that my ignorance added to your burdens.*

Remembering that day still tightened his chest.

Stratford had rallied the family to support the prodigal, for his word was still law. Alex knew that Palfry's lip service to the edict would end the moment Stratford died, but Palfry no longer mattered. Eden was probably right in thinking Palfry was jealous of Alex's freedom. Stratford's acceptance could only make that jealousy worse.

"Sailing is exhilarating," said Eden, twisting to kiss his chin. "If someone had told me eight months ago how much would change..."

"I take it you like your yacht?"

"Very much, though I still can't believe—"

Neither could he. It had been a memorable eight months since Eden had arrived on his doorstep.

Percy had been sentenced to death but had escaped hanging by killing himself the night before it was scheduled. No one could explain where he'd got the pistol.

Alex had a good idea. Lord James Montagu, Percy's grandfather, had been appalled to learn that Percy had killed two men. Hoping to mitigate the boy's sentence, he'd made the grueling trip to London to talk to Alex, the man leading the prosecution.

Though Alex had confined the public charges to Percy's recent crimes, he'd told Lord James everything, producing evidence dating back twenty years to support his contentions.

Lord James had nearly expired on the spot. He couldn't believe how the boy had twisted servants' gossip and a family feud. But though he'd accepted Percy's guilt, he'd vowed that no one would make a public spectacle of the boy.

So Alex didn't believe it had been suicide.

That conviction had strengthened six months later. Lord James had fulfilled his vow to outlive his despised brother. Despite suffering a seizure shortly after returning from London, he'd clung to life until two full days after Travers died. His will had shocked the entire family, for it divided his massive fortune equally between two of his nephews – the new Travers and John Marlow, with the provision that Eden inherit John's share to repay in a small way the pain Percy had caused her. Her inheritance included three estates and a yacht. She'd spent the last month setting up benevolent societies.

He shouldn't have been surprised, Alex conceded. Lord James had already arranged for Sir Michael to find the inheritance his father had collected on that fatal journey.

"Are you ready?" she asked, pulling his attention back to the gently rolling sea.

He glanced around. The coast was out of sight. No boats were nearby. "Ready." He lifted the bag at his feet.

"We are doing the right thing, aren't we?"

"Absolutely. We cannot risk another madman seeking power."

She withdrew the chalice. "My love for you is all the happiness I will ever need, Alex." With a last glance at the images engraved around its rim, she dropped it into the water.

"Health has long been ours, my love. We don't need dreams to make it so." The spoon followed the chalice to the bottom.

Eden removed the staff, now lashed to several bricks. "My father died for this, though he did not know of its existence. We have more wealth than we will ever need, but even were that not true, I could not risk others meeting Papa's fate." Rubies glinted as the staff tumbled downward.

"You are wise, Eden." He held out the stone, letting the empty bag fall onto the deck. "Wise and caring. I cannot regret the existence of this stone, for it brought you into my life. I do not know how I lived so long without you. But neither will I regret its loss, for yours is the only wisdom I need." He set it in her hand.

Eden held the stone for a long moment, then opened her fingers, smiling when it splashed into the sea. A fitting end for the last remnant of an island that had

found a similar watery grave.

Alex kissed her, then guided her to the cabin as the yacht headed back to Cliffside. Seducing Eden had been the best idea he'd ever had, even if she *had* landed in his heart as well as his bed. A mistake he could only embrace.

"So tell me about the case you accepted," she ordered as the clouds parted outside, bathing the Channel in sunlight. "Something about a missing heir?"

England's newest private investigator grinned. "You'll find this one fascinating, love. It's almost as crazy as Sarsos. Once upon a time..."

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