



**The Duchess's Diary
(Portland Chronicles #2)**

Allison Lane

Chapter One

I'm in love! I'm in love! I'm in love! Yet my heart breaks. He is far too young for marriage and would never choose the daughter of a minor baron in any case. So I will die a spinster. How can I wed another when my heart is no longer mine?

from the diary of 15-yr-old Eleanor Brentwood, upon meeting the 19-yr-old Duke of Westfield, May 1782

April 1817

The carriage bounced across two deep ruts as it passed between Westcourt Park's stone gates. Architect John Lascar barely noticed. He leaned forward, anticipation roiling his stomach.

"Relax," he ordered himself. "Be calm."

But he couldn't. His hands trembled. His ears buzzed. His mouth felt caked in dust. Too much depended on this commission.

For a man who took pride in a practical, stoic nature that exhibited little emotion even with the most condescending patrons, his current state was puzzling. Even earning his first commission hadn't made him dizzy.

For ten years he'd pursued and won increasingly prestigious patrons. Now, finally, he'd found the one who could install him at the Office of Works. Once the

Duke of Westfield recognized John's architectural genius, he would support John's bid for a seat on that powerful board. The years of study and constant care for his reputation would finally pay off. He could hardly wait. With the war finally over, the government was turning its attention to constructing new public buildings and expanding old ones. The Office of Works needed professionals with vision and style.

Perhaps banishing this unseemly excitement would be easier if he indulged it for a moment while no one could see.

With the thought, he perched on the edge of his seat, nose pressed to the window, and waited for a glimpse of the house. Grounds designed by Capability Brown guaranteed that the first view would be spectacular.

Westcourt Park occupied a rolling valley, protected from cold north winds by a forested ridge. Specimen trees dotted open parkland, and pockets of woodland provided shelter for the fallow deer currently dozing beneath a massive cedar of Lebanon a hundred yards from the drive. Drifts of daffodils carpeted the turf, dancing merrily in a brisk breeze. Sunlight glinted from a distant lake – typical of Brown landscapes. A hint of green lurked among last year's reeds, but their graceful curves barely registered on his mind. Nor did the Ionic temple perched picturesquely on the far shore.

He quivered in anticipation.

"Soon," he murmured as they crossed the Palladian bridge spanning the lake's outlet. Very soon ... the first glimpse should be just beyond...

"Dear God!" He thrust the window open to better see the image shimmering in the distance.

The house was ugly as sin, perched above the park like a gargoyle. Yet even as his mouth sagged open in shock, the structure thrust stony fingers into his chest and confiscated his heart.

It needed him.

Heedless of the icy air whipping through the coach, he collapsed on the seat, panting. Never had he felt such a powerful connection to a building. And to feel it for a monstrosity...

John shook his head.

"What the devil were the dukes thinking?" he grumbled, forcing shock aside to cast a professional

eye over the façade.

A lord's seat should radiate power, majesty, and wealth. Westcourt didn't. Why hadn't Brown fixed it? The man had designed more than landscapes.

Some houses blended multiple styles into a fascinating whole that commanded awe, but not Westcourt. A child combining bits from several builder's models would produce something that better pleased the eye. And the roof! Half a dozen styles jumbled together, their junctions so tangled it guaranteed leaks.

He shuddered.

The walls weren't much better. A baroque façade overpowered a Palladian portico that belonged on a building half Westcourt's size. A tower reared oddly from the right front. An oriel sprouted at the left center. The Tudor wing to the west seemed ready to collapse, its stucco sloughing off in unsightly chunks.

At least it had plenty of windows, but the—

A grove of trees obscured his view.

Sighing, John closed the window and rubbed out his nose print. Excitement returned, dampening his palms. This could be the largest commission of his career, for the house needed far more work than he'd expected, offering a fabulous opportunity to exercise his talents and win the patronage he so badly needed. Surely the duke would agree.

Or would he? How often did the duke visit his seat? So far John had dealt solely with Westfield's secretary. Derring had understated the house's size to a remarkable extent – which raised warning flags. While Derring had hinted at extensive renovations, John's contract covered only leak abatement. And now that he'd seen the house...

Questions crowded his mind. Why had the duke allowed his seat to deteriorate so badly? Was he in debt? Was he a miser? Was he too selfish to care about aught but his own pleasure? If so, John would be unable to rescue the house and would have no hope of patronage.

Pain sliced his chest.

It was insane to feel so strongly about a building he'd not yet entered, but he couldn't help it. Though he could find another patron, there would never be another Westcourt. Surely the duke would listen.

The house returned to view, closer now.

A few external changes would unify its design. John's fingers itched to try. He could make it more impressive than Blenheim, warmer than Chatsworth, more desirable than any other estate in England. With a little effort, Westcourt would raise envy even in the royals. He had to do it. *Had* to.

Every nerve tingled with awareness. Panting, he fought his body under control. This was no time to acquire an artistic temperament. Unless he displayed calm competence and fawning deference, he would accomplish nothing. Aristocrats took advantage of any eagerness to serve. And they disdained emotion.

Steady, he warned himself as trees again blocked the view.

His master, Soane, taught more than design and engineering. He also made sure his students learned proper demeanor. An architect must always defer to patrons, even those who were social equals. It was possible to lead a stubborn owner into making reasonable choices, but only if he thought the ideas were his own.

John had learned the lesson well, though he hated deferring to idiots. But he'd not had an emotional stake in the outcome until now.

The drive twisted, offering a longer look at the house.

It was sited atop a low rise, providing an excellent view across the park. If he had a free rein, he would heighten the tower, give it a more interesting parapet, then duplicate it on the left corner, removing the oriel in the process. That tumbledown wing had to go, and not just because of its condition. It destroyed Westcourt's symmetry. The portico needed replacing, as did—

"Water damage first," he reminded himself. Stopping the leaks would likely require a new roof. If the damage was as extensive as the current roof suggested, it might be cheaper to tear the place down and start from scratch.

Disappointment screamed through his head. The house deserved more respect.

But if anyone could save it, he could. He reveled in projects that challenged his creativity. Solving puzzles provided hours of pleasure. If he could do that with structures that didn't stir his senses, how much more could he accomplish with one that had already

burrowed into his soul?

The battle to wrestle his emotions under control lasted to the doorstep. But even *his* enthusiasm dimmed as he mounted the stairs. Westcourt was in serious disrepair, with peeling paint and crumbling mortar. Either the duke was clutch-pursed in the extreme – postponing maintenance always cost more in the long run – or he was in debt.

Neither condition boded well. Before John broached the subject of renovation – or even committed himself to repairs – he must learn more about the duke's finances. Lords were notorious for ignoring bills, so John refused any commission that might leave the laborers unpaid. Few of them had savings they could draw on in lean times. Thus he must first judge the duke's sincerity. Since lords were exempt from debtor's prison, no threat could force them to meet their obligations. Appealing to their honor rarely worked because in their eyes honor applied only to their peers...

He stifled memories of the invoices he'd been sending Lord Moxley for eight years now and concentrated on his upcoming meeting with the duke. Discovering a lord's financial condition was tricky in the best of times. Most took pains to conceal any lack, and all of them considered questions to be impertinent. So he must step carefully. A duke who could advance his career could also destroy it.

His knock drew no response. No one had appeared to help his coachman, either. Yet he was expected...

He was raising his hand to try again when the door opened, revealing an ancient butler in a threadbare coat and scuffed shoes.

"Mr. Lascar, by appointment, to see His Grace," John announced, raising his voice in case the man was hard of hearing.

"His Grace is not at home," the butler announced, starting to close the door.

John's arm shot out to halt the motion. "Nonsense. We have an appointment for two o'clock."

The butler frowned as if deep in thought. "I do not recall—" His head shook as he backed to let John step inside, keeping hold of the handle to steady himself. "I will see if you be expected." Leaving John in the hall, he shuffled off, muttering.

John inhaled sharply. Something was seriously

wrong.

Relax, he repeated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The butler seemed unlikely to recall his own name, let alone orders about expected callers.

He checked his coat for dust, examined every inch of his hat, used his handkerchief to buff his boots, then concentrated on his surroundings. He hadn't been this nervous since he'd approached Soane about an apprenticeship at age thirteen.

The hall was large, with the ornately painted ceiling typical of baroque decor. But the painting was too encrusted with smoke to discern its subject, and the linenfold paneling was more appropriate to a seventeenth-century manor house than a ducal seat. The fireplace had not been lit for some time, leaving the air dank.

He was squinting into a high corner when the butler returned. John followed him to a small office.

"Mr. Lascar, sir," the butler announced.

John stepped inside, keeping his face blank though he nearly passed out from the unexpected heat. The duke might not squander coal elsewhere, but he didn't stint on fuel for his own comfort.

The man put artisans firmly in their place, though. The office was tiny and stark, probably where the steward met with tradesmen, for it was hardly suitable for a duke. Yet here the man sat behind a battered desk.

John froze in his tracks, terror balled in his throat as he fought the urge to flee. What was wrong with him today?

Westfield was a study in contradictions. Despite the laugh lines that marked him as a genial man, he stared down a haughty nose, making no attempt to rise. Iron gray flecked thinning brown hair. Signs of dissipation were everywhere – florid complexion, sagging jowls, and a bloodshot gaze that spoke of considerable brandy last night. The depths of his amber eyes were cold enough to send shivers down John's spine.

Curses burst through John's head. Westfield had lived hard and recklessly, probably squandering fortunes on every vice available to men of power and leisure, for he was utterly selfish.

Westfield's thin lips pursed, then announced, "I am Lord Chester Willowby, Westcourt's steward."

“Lord Chester?” John quickly shuffled his impressions, stifling fury that he’d again been passed off to an underling. The urge to flee increased tenfold, but he ignored it. “Has His Grace been delayed?”

“My nephew isn’t here, not that it matters. I run the estate.” Lord Chester took in John’s appearance with a slight frown.

“I see.” He didn’t, though he could hardly demand clarification. Lord Chester might be Westcourt’s steward, but he was also an aristocrat. The social gulf separating them prohibited personal questions.

Would he ever meet the duke? Did it matter? There was no evidence that the duke cared for his property or his responsibilities. Such a man would never exert himself to help others. So John could bid any hope of patronage goodbye.

Disappointment weakened his knees.

Lord Chester was on the shady side of fifty, so the duke was likely young, which boded ill for the question of payment. Aristocratic cubs gamed far too much, often with disastrous consequences.

Yet the house called, louder than ever, practically screaming in his ears. Even the little he’d seen strengthened his need to address its problems.

And perhaps his instincts were wrong for once. Lord Chester might raise John’s hackles, but he seemed amiable. As steward, he would know what was due the duke’s consequence, so he would surely rectify Westcourt’s problems. And he might even convince Westfield to support his aspirations. All John needed was a letter requesting that the government consider him for a post with the Office of Works. Soane was already a member, so half the battle was won...

“I trust your journey was smooth.” Lord Chester relaxed.

Curbing his impatience, John responded with the social banter the upper classes used to fill any silence. He hated the pretense of friendliness, especially when Lord Chester kept him standing, hat in hand, as if he were a supplicant.

“Derring explained the problem, I presume,” Lord Chester finally said.

“He mentioned leaks, but offered few specifics. I would prefer to hear the details from you to prevent misunderstandings.”

Lord Chester nodded. “Water damage is a

continuing problem, but there is no point in making repairs until the leaks are corrected. The local builder is incompetent. He suggested I hire an architect."

"When did the problem begin?"

"No one knows." He shrugged. "Much of the house is closed, some of it permanently. Some of the damage dates back five years."

John bit back a sigh. No wonder the west wing was buckling. It had likely been under siege for a decade or more. "How many leaks do you know about?"

"Three. One each in the north wing, east wing, and Tudor wing."

"There are likely more. Small ones go unnoticed until they create extensive damage. I must study the roof before I can determine the scope of the problem. Identifying all the damage in a building of this size could take days. The repairs will likely be extensive. Have you considered other renovations?"

Lord Chester nodded.

"It will cost less to address everything at once. From what I've seen, it appears the house has not been redecorated in some time."

"True. My mother did the public rooms sixty years ago, but nothing structural was done then. My grandfather added the portico, but the last serious renovation occurred in 1697. Westcourt will see more use once the duke weds, so the public rooms must be updated."

"Will his wife not address decoration?"

"He wants it done now so it will be ready. He also wants to add several water closets and two bathing rooms. And his crest must appear prominently in all the public rooms."

"What about the kitchens?" If Westcourt had not seen improvements in decades, they would be hopelessly out of date.

"Cook's problems are mostly water, so addressing the leaks will solve them. A bell system would be good, though, reducing the number of footmen we must employ."

"How many rooms do you wish to include in such a system?" John frowned at this hint at pinching pennies. Bells were useful, but few households cut the staff when they were installed. Footmen had too many other duties.

"The duke's apartments and all the public rooms.

Perhaps more.”

“Very well. That detail can wait until later, as can the specifics of decoration. Once I know the general layout of the house, I will need several days of close study before I can produce suggestions and estimates. At that point you can decide which changes you want implemented.”

“Excellent. Westfield’s ward understands his desires. She will conduct your tour and answer any questions. We will speak again tomorrow.” He gestured to a woman sitting in the corner. “Show him everything, Miss Harper. We want no more trouble.” His tone terminated further discussion.

John stiffened, for he was unprepared to meet a lady, especially one he hadn’t realized was there. Forcing a passive expression onto his face, he turned. An architect must reveal no interest in the females of the household, either family or servant.

But he nearly staggered as Miss Harper stepped into the light. *Not now!* he silently cursed as electricity sizzled between them, more powerful than the jolt he’d received from the house.

The fates ignored his plea. Lust rolled through him in a powerful wave. Totally inappropriate lust. Damnation! He couldn’t think about women when he was working. What had he done to deserve this?

He’d battled a powerful libido from his earliest days with Soane. An architect could not afford a reputation as a rake, for few would allow such a man in their homes. He couldn’t even satisfy his needs in a brothel, for the clean ones were patronized by potential patrons, and he wouldn’t risk the others. Over the years he’d enjoyed a series of discreet widows, but the most recent had begun eyeing his income rather than his body, so he’d had to dismiss her. He’d yet to find a replacement.

Now he would pay for his procrastination. Lust would put him through the torments of the damned. Relieving it was impossible. Even the duke’s servants were off limits. A ward was as high as the duke himself.

London would not consider Miss Harper a diamond, but she *was* arresting, with huge green eyes made larger by high cheekbones and a pointed chin. Her crowning glory was rich auburn hair that made his hands itch to touch. Absolutely fascinating. He’d

always had a penchant for auburn hair.

Again he cursed his inattention. He wouldn't have noticed her hair if he hadn't been reeling with disappointment because the duke wasn't here.

And why she was unwed? She had to be approaching thirty.

He stifled speculation about her purity. If he was to gain anything from this commission, he must remain a model of propriety. Anything less could not only lose this job but tarnish his reputation for years to come.

Miss Harper smiled absently as she headed for the door.

John's head whirled as the half-smile forced his gaze to her lips. Sumptuous, sensual lips ripe for kissing. He wanted them all over him, hot, moist—

He reined in his runaway thoughts, cursing fashion's tight pants that revealed inappropriate reactions. Fantasy was fine during the wee hours of the morning when he couldn't sleep. But not while working.

Never confuse fantasy with reality, John. His mother's voice echoed in his mind. *Fate rarely lets men choose their paths. Every position comes with duties that cannot be ignored...*

He'd bucked fate by becoming an architect despite his low origins, but this time she was right. A duke's ward was as far above him as Lord Chester. Even gazing on her with lust was inappropriate. If he indulged in air dreaming, he could too easily slip, destroying his career even as he heaped unforgivable insult onto a lady.

He could not risk it.

So he focused on her gown. It screamed another warning to him. Despite being Westfield's ward, her clothing would shame a housekeeper. Even her gloves were frayed. More evidence of ducal penury? Why would she wear something that even the poorest merchant's wife would disdain? Especially to meet a caller. Granted, an architect was little higher than a servant, but he knew of no other lady who would dress so poorly.

The anomaly renewed his fears. Miss Harper was long past the age when girls made their bows to society. Unless she had ruined herself – and oh, how tempting that thought was – the duke's sponsorship alone should have won her a husband. Many men

would do anything to gain approval from a duke, even wed a ward who was a wart-riddled hag or carried another man's bastard. A beauty like Miss Harper should have had her pick of suitors – unless the duke was drowning in debt.

Instead of agreeing to survey the damage the moment he'd heard the magic word *duke*, John should have followed his usual practice of studying the family before committing himself. In truth, he knew nothing about Westfield and couldn't recall seeing his name in the newspapers – a suspicious lack now that he thought about it. Had Westfield fled the country? It might explain why his steward controlled the estate. Perhaps the imminent marriage – about which the papers were also oddly silent – involved an heiress...

He followed Miss Harper into the hall, still fighting to banish lust. A slight limp imparted an alluring sway to her hips that washed him with heat. His fingers itched to rip away that hideous gown and replace it with something more suitable. Even a modicum of effort would turn her into the most arresting female in London – just as Westcourt could be arresting with a little help.

Tearing his mind from where it had no business straying, he concentrated on business. He knew all too well the consequences of forgetting his place. A fellow student had succumbed to temptation with a patron's flirtatious daughter. When her father caught them kissing, he'd charged Nigel with assault, sending him to Botany Bay for ten years. A lasting lesson to anyone tempted to look too high, for a lord's word always prevailed in court...

John shook away the memory. Miss Harper would know the duke's whereabouts and financial state. Once he learned the details, he could decide how to approach this commission – or whether to risk aristocratic wrath by declining it.

But his gaze stubbornly returned to that swaying rump.

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Faith Harper led Mr. Lascar to the entrance hall, praying for time to catch her breath and restore her composure. Never had she been so startled by a male.

Startled? Talk about understatement!

She knew better than to look at gentlemen with interest. Doing so guaranteed heartache, for none

would return her regard. But this time she'd had no time to prepare. The moment she'd met his gaze, hundreds of icy fingers had raced across her skin, followed instantly by blazing heat. Then the trembling had started.

She'd clasped her hands to hide it, but it hadn't helped, especially after he brushed against her as he pulled the door shut behind them. The quaking from that single touch had nearly knocked her to her knees. Her legs remained limp. She hoped he wasn't speaking, for buzzing deafened her ears, even to the click of his boots striding across wooden floors.

At twenty-eight, she was firmly on the shelf and ought to be long past girlish idiocy. But the paralyzing shock had tossed her sense out the window. Never had she felt so powerful an attraction, not even for Lord Pomfrey, whose visit had set every female heart in the neighborhood fluttering eight years ago. A baronet's disowned granddaughter was far too low to have attracted Pomfrey's notice, of course, even without her other handicaps, but that hadn't kept her from dreaming for several weeks afterward. He'd had warm brown eyes and long, delicate fingers...

Stop this! She rounded one of the many corners that turned Westcourt into a maze. *Concentrate on duty.*

Chester's decision to address Westcourt's problems was a surprise. He had never cared a whit for the house. Since his announcement, everyone had speculated wildly about what else the future might hold. But they couldn't ask. His temper was chancy at best. Whatever his real plans, they would learn of them in due course. The one certainty was that life would never be the same.

Especially for her.

Faith inhaled deeply. Inciting Chester's wrath would see her tossed out with no money and no reference. A terrifying prospect, and not just for her. Without her protection, Westcourt's staff would suffer badly. Thus she must control her reaction to Mr. Lascar. It ought to be easy. At least *he* posed no threat.

But no matter how she tried, she could not ignore him. Her fingers wanted to touch, to find out if his hair was as silky as it appeared, to discover whether his muscles were real or produced by judicious padding. Again, she clasped her hands to prevent any mischief.

Part of the problem was Mr. Lascar's youth. He didn't look much past thirty. That couldn't be right, of course, for he had a well-established practice. Since few architects finished their training before their mid-twenties and took even longer to build a reputation, he had to be at least forty – not that her body believed it.

Yet even youth could not explain why he left her breathless and tingling. Reginald never affected her that way, and he was about the same age. Not that Reginald could make *anyone* tingle...

Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!

She couldn't. Mr. Lascar was handsome as sin, radiating a more intense masculinity than any of Chester's rakish friends. And tall! He must stand over six feet, with shoulders broad enough to brush the sides of a doorway. His sable hair waved deliciously, the errant lock that dangled over his forehead begging her to comb it back.

Then there were his eyes. Their brilliant blue pierced clear to her core, making it impossible to look away. It was the clearest blue she had ever seen, clearer even than a summer sky. But more than color froze her breath. Emotion swirled in those eyes. And heat. And something that sent excitement rippling along her skin until the mere touch of her gown was too much to bear.

Her hand actually moved to rip it off before she recovered her senses.

The rest of his face was equally entrancing, with rugged planes that made his beauty wholly masculine. No one would ever consider him pretty or weak. When added to impossibly sensuous lips, a squared chin with an intriguing cleft, brows that hooked up slightly at the ends, adding an exotic look...

Stop this at once!

She clenched her teeth. One glance could not possibly have pierced her heart. There had to be another explanation.

Familiarity niggled at her mind, as if she'd seen him before, though it seemed impossible. He was not a man anyone would forget. Besides, the only men who called at Westcourt were Chester and his dissolute friends, and since Chester preferred the pleasures of town, even they were rare visitors. But she could swear she'd seen Mr. Lascar. Perhaps...

"Did you design the renovations at Coulter Manor?"

she asked as they reached the entrance hall.

His eyes blinked, then brightened as he smiled. "Yes. Are you familiar with the work?"

"No. I've not met the man, but I heard that he'd hired a London architect." Relief left her weak. She *had* seen him, though not consciously. Coulter Manor lay just beyond the market town of Great Marlow. She'd likely passed him on the street. One would think she would recall so dashing a figure, but she tried to avoid notice when she was out, rarely looking directly at anyone lest she be caught staring.

"Mr. Denning mentioned Coulter Manor when he first approached me," he continued, clasping his hands behind his back as he pivoted to study the cornice. He nodded twice, then produced a small book and made a note.

Professional to the bone.

At least he'd not sensed her silliness. Ignoring how his voice brushed her skin like a caress, she adopted a businesslike tone and set out to acquaint him with Westcourt, its problems, and Chester's renovation plans. Whatever her own feelings, her assignment was clear. Chester never forgave an insult, so she could not afford to irritate him.

"As Lord Chester mentioned, aside from the ducal apartments, which were redone by the eighth duchess, the house has seen no changes since the seventh duke assumed the title in 1766. The only change to be made in here is to add a ducal crest opposite the door where it will be noted by all who enter. He wants it carved from mahogany, at least eight feet across. We've seen no leaks."

"Then you haven't looked. There is water damage above the door." He pointed.

She squinted upward and sighed. He was right. The painting disguised it from all but the sharpest eyes, but the plaster was blistered and the paneling slightly buckled. Not badly, but it boded ill. This wing had seemed intact.

"Will he insist on a carved crest?" Mr. Lascar continued, making another note.

"I hope not. He has abominable taste."

"Then perhaps I can suggest something more elegant. Wood has been *passé* for a century, and while plaster remains acceptable, Coade stone is even better. I would also change the walls. Plain wood is disdained

in every household with even faint pretensions to fashion. A duke's seat deserves marble. If finances don't allow marble, then the paneling must be painted. And this must be the only ducal seat in England that greets callers with a wooden floor. Marble would be best there, too, or at least carpet."

"Good luck. He is quite set in his ways." Sighing, she led him toward the drawing room. The afternoon promised to be long. Westcourt contained a hundred rooms. Even at two minutes each, they would be late for dinner. Mr. Lascar had just spent four in the hall after standing there for ten on arrival.

Would her hip hold up? She rarely managed to stand an hour before the pain started – not that Chester cared.

Chapter Two

Westcourt is a maze. I can scarce find my rooms and will likely disappear without a trace 'ere the week is out. One day some future duchess will find my moldering bones and swoon.

From the diary of Eleanor, Duchess of Westfield, upon her marriage, May 1784

John cursed his libido as Miss Harper entered yet another bedchamber – Westcourt contained far too many of them. Every time she stopped beside a bed, his lust grew. There was no logical explanation for his inability to control it. All he could do was pray she didn't notice. Even were she willing – unlikely for a lady – he would not risk his career for a moment of pleasure, no matter how intense his need. The duke would see him transported – or worse. No one would dispute a charge of grand theft and a fast hanging.

His eyes traced the soft curve of her neck, where an auburn lock caressed alabaster skin. It would be smooth, silky, warm—

Pay attention!

"This is the duchess's suite." Her prosaic tone proved how ridiculous his fantasies were. To her, he was merely a servant, to be instructed, then forgotten. "No one has occupied these rooms since the eighth duchess died twenty-five years ago."

"Which is why no one noted the leaks." He sighed. It was an exchange they had repeated a dozen times

already, and he'd seen barely a quarter of the house. Why didn't the staff air rooms regularly? Keeping them closed courted mold. Beyond his professional fury burned a growing agony over the waste. Westcourt had once been elegant – and would be again, he vowed. With the duke poised to wed, this wing would be needed.

Miss Harper bit her lip. "The current residents use only the west wing." She sounded apologetic, though it was hardly her fault. "A maid airs the others once a month, but the staff is so burdened that they often miss signs of trouble." Her eyes blazed in unexpected fury.

It likely mirrored his own. He'd not yet asked the questions burning in his gut, but here was more evidence that the duke never visited Westcourt. He must spend all his time pursuing vice and idleness in town. Aristocratic selfishness was no surprise, but that the steward did nothing to alleviate the consequences was. Lord Chester should have kept the house in order despite the owner's absence.

Yet he hadn't, and John had seen evidence that the staff was wholly inadequate for a house of this size. Where were the footmen the bell system was supposed to replace? Where were the maids who should have noted the dampness? He'd spotted only two servants since arriving – the ancient butler and an elderly maid.

He needed details about the duke's finances. Yet he couldn't force out the words to a female so far above his station. So he turned his attention to the walls. The water damage in here was the worst yet, for the duchess's bedchamber adjoined the tower directly beneath an obvious roof problem.

The suite had once been comfortable, he admitted as he made notes. And oddly peaceful. Also the happiest room he'd seen, though he didn't try to define that strange thought. Its cut-velvet walls and decorated ceiling were elegant yet avoided the excessive ornament he'd found in the state apartments. Of course, the state rooms hadn't been touched in more than a century, while this suite had obviously been decorated by Adam.

"What's in the tower?" He gestured to the door beyond the bed.

"How do you know that's the tower?" She raised her brows. "Westcourt is such a warren that everyone gets

lost.”

“Not architects.” He held up the book where he’d sketched floor plans as they traversed each wing.

“Of course.” She laughed.

Her sudden dimple riveted his attention, reviving his libido. Would it deepen in the throes of passion? Could he—

Cursing, he fled to the tower room, then cursed again, for she was slow to follow. She must have noted his overlong stare. It was a mistake he could not afford to repeat. If she complained of excessive familiarity...

He must work harder to remember his place.

“Dear Lord,” she groaned, halting behind him in the doorway. “I had no idea it was this bad.” The tower had once contained an elegant sitting room. Now it held a marsh. Algae stained the walls. Water pooled on the floor and soaked the Holland covers. The furniture would be a dead loss.

“Why should you?” He raised his brows.

“I help the housekeeper when she is overburdened.” She shrugged. “We should have checked for new leaks after last week’s rain.”

“There was nothing you could do.” He lifted a cover to expose a ruined inlaid table. “This has been wet longer than a week, and not from the roof. See?” He pointed to a stain that started midway up one wall. “That needs immediate repair. If water freezes in that crack, the wall could go.”

“But how could there be a hole in the wall no one noticed? This overlooks the entrance.”

“Mortar probably crumbled. It eventually happens to all masonry walls. The tower likely needs repointing – circular walls require wider mortar joints and thus fail faster than straight ones.”

She sighed. “Add it to your list.”

* * * *

By the time they reached the attic, Faith’s hip throbbed, and her leg threatened to buckle with each new step.

There was no way they could complete the tour today. Dinner was in an hour, but they had yet to finish the four wings surrounding the main courtyard. Two older wings extended beyond it, leading to a jumble of offices and outbuildings. Even discounting the tumbledown Tudor wing, they were barely half done. It would take most of tomorrow merely to finish

his preliminary survey.

Chester had said nothing beyond that Mr. Lascar would fix the leaks and refurbish the public rooms, but she couldn't let this opportunity pass. Perhaps he could convince Chester that ignoring maintenance would ultimately destroy the house.

But first they must finish the tour. In her nineteen years at Westcourt, she had explored every room, but never all at once. And never in the company of a man whose presence stole her breath and made even dank chambers more enticing than spring gardens or summer woods – not that she could blame *him* for her inappropriate response. Was she so pathetic a spinster that she would form a *tendre* for the first personable stranger she met?

Don't answer that, warned the voice in her head. *Unmarriageable females can't afford impossible dreams. Even thinking about him is absurd.*

Yet she couldn't help it. Mr. Lascar was different from other men. And not just because she couldn't breathe when he looked at her. When they'd found Ruby cleaning the library fireplace, he'd actually apologized for interrupting her – an apology no different from the one he'd offered Reginald upon entering his study. That he would treat a maid with the same courtesy he offered a duke's cousin was shocking – and highly alluring.

"You needn't apologize to the staff," she'd murmured as they'd left the library.

"Why not? It costs me nothing, yet recognizes that she is a person little different from me."

"But you are an architect." She'd regretted the protest instantly, for he'd smiled, turning her knees to jelly.

"I wasn't always an architect," he'd explained as they entered the next room. "I've held gentlemen's horses for half-pennies, carried messages, delivered packages."

"Were you poor, then?"

"No. While I knew boys whose earnings meant the difference between a full belly and starvation, Mother's income supported us. But I needed drawing supplies the way most people need air. They come dear."

The words had sent shivers down her spine, for she could so easily have faced a similar dilemma. Without the duke—

Wrenching her thoughts back to the attic, she pointed to a door in the corner. "Access to the roof."

"Good. You needn't accompany me. It is dangerous for those hampered by skirts."

She nodded, grateful for a few minutes alone so she could uncover a chair and rest her hip.

"This will likely take half an hour," he continued. "I can meet you downstairs if you prefer."

"Why not leave the roof for morning? The light is already going, and we cannot finish the tour before dinner."

"I can finish these wings, then start on the Tudor wing this evening."

"Not in the dark," she informed him. "The Tudor wing is dangerous. It's been locked for years."

"Then Westfield should remove it. It is an eyesore."

"I know, but you'll lose that battle. The trustees won't authorize any destruction."

"Trustees?" His blue eyes locked on hers. "Just where is the duke, Miss Harper? Still at school? Mr. Denning told me he would be here. It's all very well for Lord Chester to claim authority, but I'll need more than a steward's signature before committing further time."

Faith sighed. "Lord Chester likely is the duke."

"He doesn't know?"

She cursed Chester's arrogance for claiming a title not yet his own when dealing with tradesmen. "Chester is the ninth duke's heir. No one has heard from the duke since the day he left Westcourt. Once we prove he is dead, Chester will assume the title. In the meantime, the trustees installed him as steward, retaining control only over the dukedom's finances."

Mr. Lascar frowned, then crossed one ankle over the other and leaned against the door, the relaxed pose at odds with the fingers tapping steadily against his thigh. "I don't wish to pry, but if I accept this commission, I must know who I am working for and what authority he holds. There is no point in designing changes that will not be implemented. Replacing the roof and repairing the water damage will be expensive, and that doesn't include any renovations. Unless I know the workmen will be paid, I cannot continue."

"Of course." Faith limped toward a dusty window to hide her surprise. No gentleman cared a whit about underlings – which underscored Mr. Lascar's inferior

breeding. Yet she applauded his concern. "The situation is rather odd. While the trustees can be overly cautious about expenditures, once they approve a project, they pay accounts promptly."

"Have they authorized these repairs?"

"Chester would not have brought you here without their consent, but I doubt they know how bad the situation is. I tried to bring the leaks to their attention two years ago, but Chester allows no one to infringe on his authority, and he despises any reminder that others hold the purse strings. He keeps financial negotiations private, especially from ducal dependents."

"But I am not a dependent, and I will not design repairs until we agree on the cost."

She nodded, her heart light. Mr. Lascar could help Westcourt better than she ever could. Chester wanted his expertise, and the trustees respected his profession judgment. They would listen to him. But Chester would never forgive her if he learned that she had encouraged Mr. Lascar to act on his own. So she chose her words with care.

"A prudent man would submit a full list of repairs and an explanation of why they are necessary to both Chester and the trustees. Prudent trustees would inspect the damage themselves before committing to the expense – none have called since I moved in. Travel might prove impossible, though. They are elderly men and may well suffer from it – another reason they put Chester in charge of the estate. The old steward ignored the house."

Mr. Lascar nodded. "How is it that no one knows the duke's fate? Did he disappear in battle?"

"No." She paused, but there was no reason to hide the truth. Society had already dissected the scandal twice and would do so again when the current search ended. "It is a story more suited to a fairy tale than to real life." She inhaled deeply. "Once upon a time there was a kind and generous duke, who lived with his beloved wife and son in a wonderful castle. The depth of their love scandalized a society that considered emotions vulgar, but they didn't care, for they had each other. Then tragedy struck, killing the duke and shattering the duchess's happiness. Her grief could tolerate no reminder of their love. So she sent their son to be fostered out of her sight."

“What? That’s mad!”

“Not really. They fell deeply, passionately in love when she was fifteen and he barely nineteen. The archives contain the letters they exchanged during the two years until they could wed. Very intense. Their devotion scandalized society, of course. She was barely twenty when he died. I can understand why grief hit her so hard.”

“I cannot believe that anyone sane could send a child away,” he snapped. “All she had to do was avoid the nursery. This place is certainly big enough.”

“Many people agree.” She sighed. “They call her mad, then cite her behavior as proof that emotion is dangerous. Part of that is guilt that they didn’t stop her – the boy was gone before anyone suspected her plans. That was thirty years ago. The scandal rocked society, and not just because she sent her son away. She entrusted him to her French maid, who took him home to be raised in obscurity. He was barely two at the time.”

“My God!”

She nodded. “The maid swore to see him properly educated and to send him home when he came of age. But by then we were at war with France. Hope ran high after Napoleon’s first abdication, but the duke didn’t return. Nor did he appear after Waterloo. No one has heard a word of him since the day he left Westcourt. The accepted verdict is that he perished in the early years of the revolution. Now that France is again open to travelers, the trustees hired an investigator to discover the duke’s fate. But after all this time, he is unlikely to be successful. In the meantime, the house is suffering from neglect.” She kept her voice light to hide her fears. Proving the duke dead would be a disaster for her. Never could she tolerate Chester as her guardian.

“Is it Lord Chester who plans to wed, then?”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it, but I must assume so.”

Mr. Lascar’s eyes narrowed in consideration. “How much work did the trustees actually approve?” he finally asked.

“Only Chester can answer that, for I do not correspond with them. But the leaks must be stopped. It will be up to you to determine how. The water damage must be repaired if the house is to survive.

The public rooms need work, and modern amenities are desirable. Despite Chester's reluctance, I would definitely include improved kitchen facilities on that list. And the servants' quarters make dungeons look cozy. I hope you can make a strong case for improving them, for Chester will balk. But Westcourt is isolated enough that finding servants is difficult. Without a duke in residence, no one calls, so the staff has few opportunities for earning vails. Even if Chester gains the title, there will be little entertaining, for he prefers town. So improving the servants' wing is something I will insist on."

"What authority do you wield?"

"None," she admitted, leaning against a sheeted cabinet to lighten the tug on her hip. "But the housekeeper has been failing for some years, so managing the house falls to me. If I don't protect her, Chester will toss her out without a pension. Others, too."

He raised a brow, but though his eyes seemed darker than they'd been even a moment ago, he said no more on that subject. "What about ducal crests and other decorating details?"

"Only the trustees can answer that question. Frankly, I find Chester's taste vulgar, so I would hesitate to give him free rein until he has the title in hand. But I have no authority, of course. You might figure the costs with and without those changes, then let him deal with the trustees. They might approve, for they believe he should exercise the full authority of the title. He has run the dukedom since Waterloo. By the time you finish the roof, he might have the title. If I know him at all, his first act will be to replace the Tudor wing with new ducal apartments, which can only be an improvement."

"I see." He shook his head. "I have more questions, but I need to survey the roof before dark. Do I meet you here or downstairs?"

"Here."

Once he disappeared through the doorway, she settled into a chair, praying yet again that time and war would obscure the ninth duke's fate. She had always felt oddly close to him. When she'd arrived at Westcourt, the duke's elderly dog had been more arthritic even than Baines. But Buster had taken to her immediately, comforting her grief and offering a

willing ear when she railed at fate, as she'd done too often in those days. His death a year later had added a new loss to her life. But without him, the move to Westcourt would have been much harder.

Buster's friendship had made her curious about the duke, so she'd read everything she could find about him, which had led to studying his parents and other family members. That in turn had convinced her that Westcourt was better off in the limbo of no duke at all.

Chester would make an abominable duke. He was a dissipated profligate, selfish to the core, who would begin his reign by turning off the elderly staff and poor relations currently living on the estate. None would receive a pension, for he begrudged every groat that went for their upkeep. The moment he was officially her guardian, he would settle her in the most degrading position he could find. Their mutual dislike was too engrained to expect more.

Which was why she would never tell him what she'd learned from studying the family archives...

But speculating about the duke could not divert her for long. Mr. Lascar filled her mind. He was a surprisingly sensual man. Most people gauged their surroundings with their eyes, but not Mr. Lascar. He brushed walls with his fingertips, making her insides quiver as she imagined those fingers feathering across her skin. He sniffed the air, his nose leading him unerringly to the dampest spots. And his tongue often stroked his lips, seeming to taste trouble.

How would *he* taste?

Tearing her thoughts free, she lurched to her feet, lifting covers to check furniture and trunks for damp. Everything was in fine shape. Somehow this room had escaped the water that permeated the rest of this wing.

True to his word, Mr. Lascar was back in under half an hour. "Cellars next," he announced, following her to the door.

"Did you find the source of the leaks?"

"I was forming overall impressions this time. The roof is the biggest hodgepodge I've ever seen. Repairs have made it worse. Water pools with no provision for drainage."

"Our builder claims that nothing short of replacing it will do the job."

"Because the only fix *is* replacement. And with a different design. Replicating what is there won't work."

“Then definitely send the details to the trustees. Chester swears that a good architect can repair it, saving the cost of replacement. He accused the builder of trying to feather his nest at Westcourt’s expense.”

* * * *

John fisted his hands as he followed Miss Harper down the winding servants’ stairs. He couldn’t believe that merely speaking with her could incite his body to riot. But her husky voice coated him like sweet honey, seeping into his pores. When he’d returned from the roof, she’d looked so sad that he’d nearly pulled her into his arms – which underscored just how dangerous she was. No one had threatened his control in years.

His mother had worried about the high spirits that too often destroyed his control, urging him to curb them for his own safety. *No good ever came from showing the world what’s in your mind*, she’d preached. *If people know your thoughts, they can twist you round – like Sammy*, she’d added, naming a neighbor. *He’s weak-willed and let’s everyone know it. Never saw a body who invited so much abuse. You mark my words, that boy’s for the gallows.*

She’d been right. Not that Sammy had died on the gallows. He’d been killed for peaching on his accomplices in a botched robbery. But the lesson remained clear. So John had built a façade of calm, competent rationality, carefully burying emotion in the darkest corner of his mind. And he’d learned to weigh schemes carefully before participating.

It worked. His friends knew him as an unemotional man who dealt efficiently with problems and always kept one eye on his goals. They wouldn’t recognize the stumbling wreck he’d become in a few short hours. Westcourt and Miss Harper proved how thin his shield really was.

He fought free of the sensual haze. “Why has Lord Chester allowed the family seat to deteriorate so badly?”

“To be fair, he’s been steward less than two years so hasn’t had an opportunity to do much. He temporarily patched the worst spots while studying the broader problem. Now he’s ready to address the whole.”

“What happened to the old steward?”

“He died – no great loss. He was both lazy and incompetent. Since the trustees never visited or even

sent an underling to check his books..." She let her voice trail off, then glanced over her shoulder. "Chester is more methodical than I would like, taking months to consider options before making a decision. But he gets there in the end. At least this time events speeded the process."

"What happened?"

"The latest leak is above his bed. His is the largest suite that is livable, so he had to choose between making repairs or accepting inferior accommodations."

He nodded. "You said *events*. What else?"

"He brought several friends out here last month. They are mostly boorish louts with little discernment and no awareness of their surroundings. Yet two of them referred to Westcourt as a moldering pile. Their disdain forced him to finally look at the house. Embarrassment is not something he tolerates. It is the only reason he addresses responsibilities at all."

John nearly cursed, but managed to halt the words. This commission was becoming stranger by the minute. He ought to swallow his pride and follow Lord Chester's orders to the letter. It would put him first in line for ducal patronage once the investigator found his evidence. Yet the house demanded more than what a self-centered lord with no taste would approve.

If he wanted to turn Westcourt into an elegant seat, he must court support from several elderly trustees, then convince Lord Chester that the results were his own idea. If Chester didn't accept that, John's career could suffer a permanent decline. But the house demanded his best efforts. And manipulating Chester and the trustees into doing what was right would prepare him for the Office of Works, which was answerable to Parliament, the Regent, and a variety of government officials, all with conflicting ideas.

Miss Harper hurried down another flight, her auburn hair glowing in the light of his lamp.

He had remained in her room longer than any other, in part because his eyes kept straying to her possessions. He'd never seen a lady's bedchamber so Spartan. No perfume bottles decorated the dressing table. No jewelry box. She had no dressing room and only a small clothes press. Which made the ivory elephant surprising.

Ladies rarely owned such things, yet it had been the only object on her dressing table aside from brushes

and a dish of hairpins. He wanted to ask where she'd got it and what significance it held, but the question was too personal.

So he stifled memory of her room and followed her silently to the cellars.

The hallway at the bottom made him shudder. Dim. Dank. Dingy. There was no excuse for keeping servants in such dismal surroundings. It was a wonder they hadn't all died of consumption.

"The kitchen is this way." Miss Harper moved down the flagged passage, then pointed to her right. "If you need to inspect the wine cellar, talk to Baines. Only he has the key."

John nodded, noting the wax seal covering the lock. At least the butler was up to snuff in this area.

She pushed open a door across the hall. "This used to be the root cellar, but we had to move the vegetables to reduce spoilage."

John raised his lamp, then handed it to her so he could write. Water dripped down the outside wall. "This is ancient." He stared up at the vaulted ceiling.

"We're under the state wi— You know that." She gestured to his book. "The park originally belonged to a monastery that burned in 1357. The fourth earl acquired the property —that was before the family gained the Westfield title. He built a fortified manor, incorporating the old cellars." She returned to the corridor. "We've had to abandon all the rooms on this side due to damp, but the kitchens occupy a seventeenth-century service wing, so—" She tripped on a flagstone.

John caught her before she could fall, pulling her back against him. Heat exploded from head to toe. Her hair smelled of lavender, raising images of fragility, of summer gardens, of laughter and...

He was trying to bring an elusive memory into focus when he realized that she was struggling not for balance but for freedom. His arm was banded across her bosom.

He released her so fast she nearly stumbled, then hurriedly backed away. "Pardon me, Miss Harper. I feared you would fall." His voice was husky. He could only pray she would attribute it to something other than desire.

"Of course." Embarrassment crept up her neck, clashing with her hair.

"Are all the floors this uneven?" he asked to cover his rapid breathing. Holding her added urgency to his lust, tightening his groin. His hand shook until he nearly dropped his pencil.

She inhaled deeply, then nodded. "The flags have shifted badly from the damp."

"Something else that needs attention. Servants have a hard enough life without risking their necks every time they carry loads along a corridor."

Her smile raised his temperature another notch. "I mentioned that very point to Chester, but he prefers to spend his coin where his friends will see the results."

"But leveling the floor is a necessary part of repairing water damage. I will insist on it," he said smoothly even as his fury at Lord Chester increased. It was wrong to blame the man for exhibiting the arrogance of his class, but he did.

Miss Harper led him around a corner. "These are the larders we currently use. The meat safe is on the end."

He dragged his eyes from her neck so he could expand his sketch of the cellars. Since it was easier to keep his eyes on his notes if he could hear her voice, he asked, "How did you become the duke's ward?"

"The usual way." She shrugged. "My parents died, naming him as guardian."

"Someone who has been missing since before you were born?" He met her gaze.

"Papa didn't know that."

"Why?" When she didn't respond, he smiled. "I admit it's none of my business, but I'm curious. So tell me the story. *Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess...*"

"Hardly." She glared.

He softened his smile and let his eyes plead.

"Oh, very well. But you started in the wrong place." She sighed. "Once upon a time there was a clumsy boy who was the butt of every joke at school. Only one classmate ever stood up for him, a powerful wizard who wouldn't let others belittle the lad just because he was small for his age and not very bright."

"A wizard?"

"A duke, actually. The eighth Westfield. As a *bona fide* duke rather than an heir, he was the highest ranking student at Eton, and he used his power to help the lowest when they were unfairly persecuted – Papa was merely the younger son of a baronet. The

two were never friends, but the duke was a fair-minded lad who hated bullies and took pains to control them. Thus many years later, after Papa begat children of his own, he named his old protector as their guardian. He knew that the duke would treat us fairly despite our inferior breeding.”

“Wasn’t the eighth duke dead by then? You said he died thirty years ago.”

“Papa bought colors at sixteen. Some years later, while home recovering from injuries, he fell in love with his sister’s governess. His father refused to consider the connection, in part because she was ten years his senior, so they eloped. His father disowned him. Her father condemned them to hell. They sailed for India shortly afterward.”

That explained the ivory elephant.

“He wrote his will when George was born,” she continued. “Because he remained furious at his family, he named as guardian the only man he trusted. Westfield died the following year, but Papa didn’t hear about it. News from England never interested him. Thus he never revised that will. And since he named the Duke of Westfield without further clarification, the guardianship follows the title.”

“And your brother?”

“Dead. Fever swept the compound twenty years ago. I was the only one from my family who survived.”

“With the duke still a child, I’m surprised the trustees didn’t return you to your family.”

“They tried.” She frowned, making him sorry he’d asked. “Papa’s brother had died a year earlier, childless, though his father refused to let Papa come home to take up the heir’s duties. By the time I reached England, his father was also dead, passing the baronetcy to a distant cousin in dire financial straits who won’t house anyone for whom he has no legal responsibility. Mother’s family also refused. Her father was a vicar who felt shamed by her behavior and couldn’t accept anyone raised in a heathen country.”

“So you came here, to waste away in perpetual spinsterhood,” he growled.

“Don’t blame the trustees,” she protested. “The duke was supposed to return eleven years ago. It is no one’s fault that time drifted when he did not arrive.”

It was, but he’d already pried too deeply into personal matters. He owed her an apology for reviving

memories of past traumas, but one would not form. Even as a child he'd been quiet, turning most of his thoughts inward. He wasn't very good with words.

He wondered at her calm acceptance, though. She might have had food and shelter at Westcourt, but her attachment to the servants proved she'd received no respect. Did she know anyone of her own class outside this household?

He was suddenly glad to be male. He'd also been orphaned young, but he'd been able to direct his own fate. Hard work had raised him from the working class to the professional class, letting him control his destiny and pursue a career he loved. He wasn't constrained by the aristocratic focus on duty above all else.

She pulled him from his thoughts by returning to business. "We had a rather nasty problem with flies in the meat safe last summer. Can you remedy that?"

"Screening," he said automatically. "There are several styles of metallic mesh that will keep insects and rodents away. When was maintenance last done down here?"

"I doubt anything has been done beyond sweeping the chimneys since 1697."

He poked his head in the door of each storeroom, estimating dimensions, then glanced up as laughter echoed along the corridor.

She smiled. "The kitchen is ahead, but dinner will be served shortly. Join us in the blue parlor at half five. We will conclude the tour tomorrow."

"Very well." A bark sounded in the distance. "You keep dogs indoors?"

"They turn the spit." She must have noted his surprise, for she added, "The kitchen is very traditional. Cook swears her mother's cottage has better facilities."

John made another note.

Chapter Three

When Mother explained wifely duties, the marriage act sounded disgusting. But with Richard, it is delightful. Under his tutelage, I've become quite wanton and would gladly remain abed forever...

Duchess of Westfield, May 1784

After changing for dinner, John headed downstairs. Eating with the family was unusual, but then Westcourt's household was far from typical – understaffed, ill-maintained, and he had no idea why a duke's ward had been pressed into helping the housekeeper. Or why she'd agreed to do so.

It cast new doubts on this commission. If he wasn't so attached to the house, he would be on his way back to town. That he wasn't...

I am not losing my mind, he insisted as he donned the mask of a deferential professional and pushed open the door to the blue parlor. Five people and a cat were already inside.

It was a more intimate space than the drawing room. Also shabbier. The blue silk covering the walls had faded until it matched the silver hair of the elderly lady hunched over a tapestry frame near the fire. Frayed seats made age-darkened chairs look dreary, except for the half dozen that sported fresh covers. A seventh took shape in the frame as the lady's needle flashed in and out of the canvas.

The only occupant he recognized was the young gentleman who had stomped angrily out when John had checked his study for leaks. Now the fellow scowled fiercely, then turned away in a pointed cut, staring raptly through the window as if fascinated by the deepening twilight outside.

John bit back a curse. He hated cuts at any time, but especially when administered by popinjays. This one was a dandy of the foppish sort. The bright green coat with excessively padded shoulders looked absurd on his slender frame. Exaggerated shirt points had nearly pierced his eyes as he executed his cut. And John had never understood the lure of Cossack trousers. They bagged as full as a skirt around the fellow's legs. A plethora of lace didn't help. Nor did the canary yellow waistcoat embroidered with butterflies. In John's experience, idle dandies delighted in tormenting anyone they considered inferior.

The rest were a motley bunch, shabby genteel at best. Yet they were ducal dependents, so he could hardly introduce himself. No butler or footman had been in the hall to announce him. Until Lord Chester or Miss Harper appeared, he could only fade into a corner. Approaching the fire would be too bold.

It would be a long, cold wait, though. Two middle-

aged ladies murmured softly, ignoring his presence. A straight-backed old gentleman gazed into the fire, pointedly oblivious to new arrivals. Only the cat acknowledged him, staring haughtily as if daring him to step closer. John clasped his hands behind his back and studied the threadbare carpet.

Five minutes dragged by before the old lady jammed her needle into the tapestry and rose, leaning heavily on a cane. Despite unfashionably high hair and a spot of rouge on each cheek, she looked frail enough that a slight breeze should knock her down. But her blue eyes remained clear, giving her a formidable air. And though she was a foot shorter than he, she stared down her nose as she approached, muttering imprecations at the butler for dereliction of duty.

"I am Lady Catherine Brubeck, widowed sister of the seventh duke," she announced haughtily. "Who are you?"

If she didn't know, then he was wrong about her clear mind, but he played the game by bowing deeply. "John Lascar, architect, my lady. I am here to address the leaks."

"About time." She scowled. "Not that I expect much. My nephew spends money only on himself. Never yet saw him hire anyone competent."

"The trustees approved my commission." He forced calm into his voice. "You will find my credentials more than adequate for Westcourt's needs."

"I doubt it. Fools, the lot of them."

Her deliberate provocation sparked his temper. "Maligning a man without evidence can prove embarrassing, madam. I have won Italy's *medaglia dorata*, the Royal Academy's Gold Medal, and the design competition for Portsmouth's records hall. I've yet to encounter a dissatisfied client, including Mr. Coulter, one of your neighbors."

"Upstart!"

"Socially, that is true. His fortune derives from coal. But he has definite ideas about architecture and was satisfied with my design. Lord Whitfield had very different ideas, but he was equally satisfied."

"Perhaps." She pursed her lips, then puffed out air in what a less haughty personage would consider a snort. "We haven't the staff to handle trays. Since you're above the servants, you will have to dine with us."

John bowed stiffly. He preferred to avoid social gatherings with those of the upper classes. Especially those who begrudged sharing the same air.

She gifted him with the barest of nods, then thumped toward the fireplace. The gentleman turned, revealing a hook strapped to his right arm. His left gripped a cane. Close-cropped iron-gray hair framed a ruddy face that had seen years of sun.

"This is Colonel Parker," announced Lady Catherine. "His maternal grandfather was my father's younger brother. Mr. Lascar, Colonel. The architect."

The colonel inclined his head a fraction of an inch while studying John from head to toe. "On the young side," he announced.

"But well-regarded." John snapped his mouth shut. He had already defended himself once. Repeating his credentials would appear over-eager. Lady Catherine could still banish him to the servants' hall. She was haughty enough.

Colonel Parker frowned. "Did you design the pavilions for the victory celebrations in '14? Harum-scarum job. No substance and less style."

"Nash received that commission, sir. And they were meant to be temporary."

"What about that Indian folderol at Sezincote? Some youngster did that, I hear. Rubbishy place."

"Cockerell was in charge. It's his uncle's estate."

"Ahh. But you cannot deny your youth."

"I am thirty-three, sir. In your line of work, I'd be a colonel by now."

"Hmm. Look younger." That hard stare again moved from head to toe. "Do you work hard, boy?"

"Very. I—"

"Good. What are your plans?"

"It is early days yet, sir. I've barely glanced at half the house."

"Should be enough. Place is a wreck. Inexcusable laxity in the staff. In *my* regiment—"

"Yes, yes," said Lady Catherine, interrupting. "We know your men were perfect, and it was your leadership that made them so."

John nearly smiled.

The colonel waved his hook. "Hard work and discipline are what count. If I'd been commanding in America, those colonials would have toed the line right enough. Never would have come to this. Wretched

showing the first time and worse the second. No discipline these days. None here, either. Westcourt needs discipline, boy. Apply the proper discipline and we'll have no more trouble."

"I will do so."

"See to the chimneys, too. Mine don't draw right."

Lady Catherine thumped her cane to silence him, then moved on. "My nieces, Miss Hortense Willowby and her sister, Miss Esther Willowby. Mr. Lascar, girls."

"Ladies." John again bowed, fighting to control inappropriate levity – calling them girls was eccentric even for the aristocracy. They looked as old as Lord Chester.

If Lady Catherine hadn't called them sisters, he would not have suspected it. The cat in Miss Esther's lap glared daggers, but the woman smiled vaguely, keeping her eyes on his waistcoat even when she raised her head. Tippetts fluttered from a spinster's cap that hid nearly all of her yellow-gray hair. Bony shoulders peeked out from a voluminous shawl.

In contrast, Miss Hortense could anchor a warship in a hurricane. No spinster's cap for her. An uncompromising knot pulled her black hair tight against her head. Black eyes blazed from under black brows. Black bombazine rigidly encased her sturdy figure from neck to toe. She looked more like a housekeeper than a duke's niece. A book on animal husbandry lay in her lap.

"Don't look old enough to know a hammer from spoon." She shook her head. "But Chester never spends a groat more than he has to. I'll be patching leaks again before the year is out."

So *she* was responsible for the amateur roof repairs. John clenched his fists. Before he could respond, Miss Esther tugged on her sister's arm. "Do be quiet," she begged *sotto voce*. "Chester will turn us off if you question his decisions. Then where will we go?"

"Somewhere better than this ruin," snapped Hortense, but she inhaled deeply. "My apologies, Mr. Lascar. I meant no insult. We have long begged for repairs lest the house collapse around our ears, but Chester would rather laze about town than spend a farthing to benefit others. Not that it matters to you. Can you really fix this place?"

"Of course."

"Do forgive us," begged Miss Esther, flushing. "She meant no disrespect."

He nodded as Lady Catherine dragged him away, this time toward the young man still staring out the window.

"Mind your manners, Reginald," snapped Lady Catherine, thumping her cane. "I won't tolerate sulking."

Reginald reluctantly turned, his eyes hard and cold.

John wondered why Reginald lived at Westcourt. Spinsters and widows he could understand. Most country houses sported at least one. A retired military officer he could understand. Even a ward. But Reginald was too young for retirement and seemed hearty enough. Another aristocratic wastrel, if John was any judge. The idle too often held themselves superior to those who kept occupied.

"This is Mr. Simmons," said Lady Catherine briskly. "His maternal grandmother was my father's sister. Mr. Lascar, Reginald." Her cane jabbed his foot.

Mr. Simmons reluctantly bowed. He was opening his mouth to choke out a greeting when Miss Harper arrived. "You're late," he snapped petulantly, rushing to her side. "How dare you! First you run off with that filthy tradesman, then you ignore my summons. I won't have it! How am I to finish my epic without my muse at hand? *Fair is she, a rival to the sun, the charm that opens hearts and minds—*"

"Thinks he's a poet," scoffed Lady Catherine as Baines announced dinner. "Don't let him spout verse at you, or your head will split." With that, she thumped her cane twice, then hobbled briskly away, giving him no chance to offer his arm.

Colonel Parker followed, his own cane beating a rapid tattoo as he overtook her in the doorway, passing her without a backward glance. The sisters followed, Miss Esther twittering like a demented bird.

"Go, Reginald." Miss Harper shooed him toward the door. "Dinner is ready."

"But you must listen—"

"I said go!" she hissed. "I must see to our guest."

"He's *not* a guest and should eat in the kitchen with the other servants," snapped Mr. Simmons, grabbing her arm. "How dare he intrude on his betters? You must help me. There is something wrong with the meter."

“Later. I am far too busy to bother with it now.” Slapping his hand aside, she approached John, her face twisted into apology. “Forgive them for rushing away. We are unaccustomed to entertaining. Dinner is ready, sir. If you will step this way...”

“Should we not wait for Lord Chester?” But he held out his arm. The surge of heat that skittered along his skin as she laid her hand on his sleeve proved he’d not fully leashed his baser instincts. Cursing, for a meaningless touch should not addle his brain, he worked harder. Reginald’s antagonism sounded suspiciously like jealousy. The man must have sensed John’s interest.

Miss Harper shook her head. “Chester has little patience for family. He eats at the village inn, but don’t join him. He likes his peace and can be quite irritating when annoyed. You won’t see him again until tomorrow, probably about four. He will have broken his fast by then and be in as pleasant a humor as is possible.”

Reginald still hovered in the doorway.

Miss Harper frowned. “You are blocking the way, Reginald. Catherine won’t be pleased. Do you wish to delay everyone’s dinner?”

“This will only take a moment. You *must* tell me what is wrong with this verse.”

“I cannot believe such ramshackle manners,” she snapped. “This is neither the time nor the place. Either behave, or I won’t listen to it at all.”

Reginald glared at John, but reluctantly headed for the family dining room.

“Is he facing a deadline?” asked John.

“Heavens, no.” She lowered her voice. “His poetry is abominable, but it keeps him occupied.”

“If it is occupation he seeks, why does he not do something useful?”

“Many activities are closed to him – weak chest. And as he won’t set aside his verse to serve as a gentleman’s secretary or demean himself by accepting some lower post...” She let the sentence hang as they entered the dining room.

If Simmons was strong enough to throw petulant fits, he could certainly earn his keep. Even duke’s younger sons were expected to support themselves once they came of age. Their great-grandsons...

But it wasn’t John’s place to interfere, so he seated

Miss Harper, then took the place to her right that had been laid for him.

The first bite distracted him from lust, puzzles, and everything else. The food was awful. Half was oversalted, the rest unrecognizable. The fish had turned some time ago. No wonder Lord Chester ate elsewhere. If this was the usual fare at Westcourt, he might have to do the same.

Forcing a polite expression onto his face, he gamely chewed.

* * * *

Faith kept her head down lest Mr. Lascar note her embarrassment. If only she hadn't been delayed, she could have contrived a warmer welcome. He deserved better than snubs. His consequence was equal to the doctor's, yet Hortense and Reginald were treating him like the village looby.

Of course, it had been three years since Doctor Bainbridge had last dined at Westcourt, so everyone was out of practice. Or perhaps they were as embarrassed as she that a stranger had invaded their private sanctums, seeing how poorly they lived. Catherine received callers in the formal drawing room, which was kept as elegant as they could contrive, but no one had penetrated the rest of the house since Cook's last spell.

Poor Cook. Tonight's dinner was worse than usual. How much longer could Faith protect her from Chester? Or from Catherine, for that matter. If Mr. Lascar complained...

Yet he might help there, too, in the end. If he convinced the trustees to visit Westcourt, they would see for themselves that they must pension off those who had served long past their time. Chester wouldn't do it, but the trustees could, if only they would exercise their power. Even if they couldn't visit in person, surely they would send a representative to validate Mr. Lascar's report.

"You'll love what I wrote today," Reginald murmured, sliding his chair closer. He struck a pose and began a verse extolling the glories of the sun – maybe. His confusing imagery made his poetry so obscure she often didn't understand a word of it.

"Not now," she said crossly. "One cannot pay proper attention while eating."

"You converse while eating."

"Conversation does not require deep thought."

"Faith! You must—"

"No. Manners require that you speak with Esther this course. Move back where you belong."

"What nonsense! We never follow formal rules at dinner."

It was true. The family generally spoke over and around each other, often disagreeably. Fighting vied with complaining as their favorite pastime. She was rarely included in such conversations, of course, but she didn't object. It was enough that Catherine no longer treated her like an insect.

Reginald was responsible for that change, which was why she tolerated his *mus*e nonsense. But it was growing tedious.

"Manners always demand formality when the table includes guests," she reminded him.

"How many times—" He snapped his mouth shut when she scowled. "Please, Faith," he tried instead.

"Later." Faith turned to Mr. Lascar, who was eating silently – Baines had left an empty seat between him and colonel, so there was nothing else he could do. "We will finish your tour in the morning, sir."

"Thank you. Are the outbuildings as neglected as the house?"

"No. Chester demands adequate stabling."

"God forbid that his horses live as poorly as we do," muttered Hortense, jumping into the conversation.

"That's enough, Hortense," said Catherine. "You know very well that it is Firby who maintains the stables. He is a stickler for order."

Something flashed in Mr. Lascar's eyes, but he said nothing beyond, "We will begin in the Tudor wing. It looks unstable. A collapse may endanger the house."

She sighed. "Very well."

"You needn't accompany me for that portion. I won't risk anyone else."

"Nonsense. Someone must be at hand to summon help when you are dispatched by a falling chimney or rotten floor."

"There's no need—"

Reginald tugged on her arm. "If you're going to run off tomorrow, then you *must* help me now."

"I haven't time."

"You had time to invade my study this afternoon!"

"Chester ordered Mr. Lascar to inspect the entire

house. If you object, discuss it with him."

"First you must help me with this verse. *Rays command and blossoms stay / hapless 'mongst the dawning day / to me they—*"

"Chester should have joined us this evening," Catherine barked, thankfully drowning Reginald's voice. But interrupting his perorations in front of a stranger revealed how furious she was. "I'm ashamed to claim kinship with that man. His manners are deplorable."

"Nonsense," snorted Hortense. "He knows better than to eat this rubbish. The fish has gone off again." She gulped wine to wash away the taste even as she signaled the footman to remove her plate.

Catherine glared. "Mind your own manners, Hortense. Condoning his irresponsibility won't earn you the dower house. You know you hate him as much as we do."

"I know no such thing," snapped Hortense as Esther cringed beside her. Esther hated strife.

Faith shook her head. Catherine and Hortense had been at odds over the dower house for years, though it was hardly dinner-table conversation. Each wanted to live there and did everything she could to draw favorable notice from Chester. He would never agree to open it, but everyone had dreams.

Catherine pushed her soup aside. "You would do better to consider how to support yourselves, girls. Once Chester has the title, he'll see the lot of you on the road."

Esther dropped her spoon. Hortense frowned. It was the first time any of them had admitted the possibility aloud.

"That was unkind, my lady," the colonel growled, forking fish into his mouth. "Chester may be selfish, but he cares greatly for society's welcome. Ignoring his duty would lower his consequence."

"But what is duty?" demanded Catherine. "Some gentlemen limit their duty to parents and children. Others don't even go that far. Do you really think Chester will provide for distant cousins?"

Everyone burst into speech, even Esther and Reginald.

Faith shrank into her chair. The brangling was bad enough, but how could they argue here? Even if Mr. Lascar remained silent, the tale would sweep

Buckinghamshire by morning, for the staff owed them no allegiance.

At least Faith had already planned her own future. Now the others must do likewise. No longer could decisions be postponed until the duke returned.

"Chester would never toss *us* out," shouted Reginald, interrupting Catherine. "We're his family and his responsibility. But you will be gone. Marriage severed our duty to you. It's time your husband's family lived up to their responsibilities."

"How dare you!" Catherine snapped. "I will certainly remain. It was Chester himself who suggested I return home, so he will never toss me out. It is you who must leave. Your own argument condemns you, for your only connection is through two females. Where is your father's family if you truly need help?"

"How dare—"

"Don't curse me for pointing out truth. Chester doesn't tolerate wastrels. Nor will he accept other men's responsibilities. Don't think you can twist him round by claiming patronage of the arts. He was selfish from the moment he was born."

"You're wrong. He won't waste money on those who shamed the family"—he smiled maliciously—"but he will never deny a poet. All gentlemen support the arts."

"Hah!" Catherine straightened an already stiff back. "He has no use for poetry or any other genteel occupation. Your wishes matter only if they match his own."

"Then the dower house is ours." Hortense smiled. "He *is* obliged to house *us* but will not wish us underfoot."

"Blind as bats, both of you." Catherine shook her head. "He is obliged to pay you a quarterly allowance. Nothing obligates him to more."

"But we could never support a cottage on what he pays." Esther's voice cracked.

"Cease your incessant megrims," snapped Catherine. "Spinsters can't afford to put on airs. It would serve you right if Chester tossed you out without a farthing to your name."

Esther burst into tears.

Faith shrank into her seat as a furious Hortense turned on Catherine. Meals were never pleasant, but this was the worst she could recall. Voices rose from all sides. The colonel ordered Esther to buck up and

face the future like a man. Catherine barked insults. Reginald kept tempers on the boil.

Esther's cat jumped from her lap, taking advantage of the chaos to sink its claws into Reginald. He smacked the beast into the wall, sending Esther into screaming hysteria.

Faith couldn't recall a worse evening. She hid her flaming face as Mr. Lascar valiantly sipped soup, more of a gentleman than anyone else at the table.

Chapter Four

Westcourt's staff is very good, which leaves me little to do. Mrs. Baines runs the house with a firm hand, and Cook's scones would tempt a god. So I will look for occupation outside. Westcourt has no rose garden. No flowers of any kind. A curious lack...

Duchess of Westfield, May 1784

"Ignore them," Faith murmured to Mr. Lascar as she signaled for the next course. "They are unsettled just now. No matter what the investigator discovers, change is coming."

He shifted so the footman could replace his plate, then met her gaze. "Will Lord Chester really turn them off?"

"Probably. He despises them. Your arrival is forcing them to confront the future."

"But why must they leave? Every estate in England houses family connections."

"Chester doesn't care. He considers us all parasites so there is little hope that he will behave kindly." She lowered her voice, leaning closer as the argument grew louder. This wasn't a topic anyone raised with strangers, but nothing about this meal was usual. And she needed an impartial ear to help her organize her thoughts. She had so little experience in the world.

"The real problem is that they have nowhere to go. I can find a post as a companion, but Colonel Parker's pension won't cover more than a shabby room. Even a cottage is out of his reach. As it will be for Esther and Hortense – Chester will slash their allowance the moment he controls the ducal purse, for he despised their father. Lady Catherine has no income at all. Her husband lost everything at faro, then killed himself. His brother blamed her. He has his own financial

woes, so refused to take her in.” She shrugged. “If Chester really did suggest she apply to the trustees, it can only be because he hoped she would drive the rest of us off.”

“I don’t understand why Lord Chester would object to any of you. The house must be maintained whether people are in residence or not. Is the estate so pinched that feeding six mouths threatens it with ruin?”

“Of course not. The dukedom has always been wealthy, and the trustees have made it more so. Chester games often and deep, so he does not skimp when it comes to his own pleasures, but he resents spending a groat on others. Repairing the house to create an impressive seat suits him. But he will not share. Nor will he open the dower house.”

“So inflating the price of his most unsuitable requests will not discourage him.”

It took her a moment to follow his thoughts. “He will pay whatever he must to obtain what he wants, for he is selfish rather than miserly. If anything, he will prefer extravagant changes because they are out of reach of the average man.”

The argument finally ceased as Ned set the last serving dish on the table. It looked even less appetizing than usual.

Faith picked at her food. Something had to be done about Mrs. Foley. Her last spell left her unable to work a full day. What she did manage was far from her old standards. Tonight she’d sent up a stringy joint, grayish cabbage, overdone turnips, and something that might have been beans.

“No wonder Lord Chester dines elsewhere,” murmured Mr. Lascar so only she could hear. “Does he keep an incompetent cook to encourage you to leave?”

“No.” She would have continued, but the colonel interrupted.

“Mutton again,” he growled.

“Cook must have scoured the county to find a sheep this stringy,” grumbled Hortense.

“Cook does her best.”

Faith nearly dropped her fork, for the comment came from Catherine. The woman usually led the outcry against Cook. Only Chester’s refusal to pay more than twenty pounds a year kept Catherine from firing Mrs. Foley. A decent cook would demand as

much as a hundred and expect to serve guests frequently, thus gaining a reputation for excellence.

But perhaps this was Catherine's way to atone for her appalling manners. By now she must realize that Mr. Lascar was not only superior to the average tradesman, but that he had access to upper class homes. If he reported this scene... A shattered reputation would make it impossible to return to her husband's family.

Catherine's next words validated Faith's suspicions. "Forgive us, Mr. Lascar. Our hospitality is sadly lacking. We do our best, but..." She paused to grope for an excuse. "Westcourt has been deteriorating for thirty years. What the duchess was thinking to send the ninth duke away I will never understand. Better to keep the boy home so he could learn about his inheritance."

"You know she didn't think," said Esther hesitantly. "She ran mad."

"Of course she ran mad." Catherine scowled. "What else can one expect from chits who wear their hearts on their sleeves and ignore every precept of proper behavior? Why Richard thought her suitable... Bewitched, he was, and uncaring of how an ill-bred wife would affect us all. But he should at least have anticipated where it would lead. He saw the credence she put in that medieval rubbish."

Faith nearly choked. Catherine's purpose was now clear. By blaming the duchess for Westcourt's deficiencies, Catherine could sidestep any responsibility – she'd reigned over Westcourt for fifteen years.

"I heard that she ran mad," said Mr. Lascar slowly, keeping his eyes turned from Faith. "But no one mentioned medieval rubbish."

"She loved tales that extolled the virtues of fostering heirs away from the competition of siblings." Catherine lifted her head in judgment. "Richard was barely cold before she sent poor Montrose away. And him but two, with no siblings at all! A fragile, sickly child, small for his age. Yet she sent him away! Murderous to expose his constitution to the vagaries of the world. She might as well have smothered him and been done with it."

"Fustian!" snapped Hortense, misreading Catherine's purpose, as usual. "Her Grace had no

interest in medieval tales, as you would know if you'd spent more than two minutes with her. Granted, she was odd, but that was from inferior breeding, not madness. Her mother's family was quite common."

"All the more reason to blame Richard." Catherine glared.

"And I can assure you she had no interest in chivalry," added Hortense. "I've always believed the maid put that nonsense into her head, then abducted Montrose the moment they escaped Westcourt. You know how venal the servant class is."

Mr. Lascar ground his teeth.

Faith covered his hand. "She doesn't mean you," she murmured. "Hortense is blunt to a fault and often exaggerates. I suspect she's just being contrary, for there is less evidence for abduction than for an interest in chivalry."

He said nothing, but he seemed less tense.

"I've never heard a more preposterous theory," snapped Catherine.

"Because you don't listen."

"But there was no ransom demand!" Catherine set her knife down so hard it bounced.

"Of course not. The boy died during their escape. The duchess realized that revealing that truth would see her tossed out – or prosecuted for collaborating." Hortense waved her fork, sending a clump of mutton flying. "I recall that period perfectly well. The duchess swore that seeing Montrose worsened her grief, though we knew that was false. Montrose eased her mind; she was always calmer with him at hand. So the maid must have suggested that explanation."

"Hardly," scoffed the colonel. "She'd made that claim for days before the maid left."

"You're wrong. The *maid* made that claim, harping on it until the duchess agreed to send him away for a few days. But she never intended his exile to last. Not once did she think the maid might be false. When she discovered her mistake, she nearly died of the shock."

"Nonsense!" snapped the colonel. "If she meant to bring him back, she would know where he was supposed to be. But she swore time and again that she knew nothing. I was here the last year of her life, as you were not – not once did you call. Even on her deathbed, when she knew the end was near, and we begged and pleaded for information, she could not tell

us where the boy was. Because she didn't know."

"Because she was deluded by her maid," insisted Hortense. "They hadn't gone to the town house like she'd ordered."

Catherine thumped her cane. "If she fell prey to anything, it was medieval chivalry."

"Of course," ventured Esther with a sigh. "Just like a Minerva Press tale. The duke will sweep home in our darkest hour to rescue us. I can see him now, thundering up the drive on a white charger. Tall like his father. And strong. Kind and gentle, yet firm in his resolve. Nothing will ever go wrong again."

Hortense choked.

"Very poetic," agreed Reginald, nodding. "I should love to see it, though it will never happen. The duke died thirty years ago. And I, for one, am grateful. A poetic hero would scoop my dearest Faith into matrimony. A tragedy of the highest order. Soon my epic will sweep England, eclipsing Byron's mundane verse. Without her by my side, I will never write another, which will prostrate my devoted followers. So you must remain free, my inspiration and devoted love." He reached for Faith's hand.

"Don't be ridiculous." She jerked it out of reach.

"It's true, and—"

"You're as barmy as the duchess and show even less sense," announced Catherine. "Spare us your imagination, boy. What the devil would a duke want with a nobody? She's not even up to your consequence."

Faith nearly protested, but they'd had enough strife for one evening. And there was no denying truth, however painful.

"While you are correct that I did not live here in those years"—Catherine continued, glaring at Hortense—"I corresponded with the duchess until her death. Thus I know more about her than schoolroom chits ever could. I also attended Montrose's christening. Despite his frailty, he was a sunny boy, already smiling though barely a month old. The duke and duchess doted on him – perhaps too much."

"They were more devoted to themselves," said Hortense. "Scandalous the way they lived in each other's pockets. Even I heard the whispers, though I was indeed barely out of the schoolroom."

"It would have been better had they not," agreed

Catherine. "But they were young."

"Regular infants." The colonel turned to Mr. Lascar. "Married the day he turned twenty-one, with her barely seventeen. Can you believe such haste? Claimed they were in love – as if that were possible!"

"But if he'd waited until a more seemly age, there would have been no son at all," Lascar replied mildly.

"Hardly. Boy that age would live in town. Could have avoided that accident entirely if he hadn't run back and forth so often."

"Doubtful," said Hortense. "Even as a lad, he preferred the country to London."

"But you have a point." Catherine nodded to Lascar. "Without Montrose, Chester would have become duke thirty years ago. Then where would we be?"

Esther fell into a new spate of weeping.

"Exactly," continued Catherine. "Be thankful Richard made a love match, and much as I hate to suggest it, be doubly thankful his wife sent the boy out for fostering. Chester will not make a reputable duke, I fear."

"Did the duchess know that?" asked Reginald unexpectedly. "Maybe Montrose died here, and she spirited his body away to thwart Chester."

"Rot," growled the colonel. "But what can one expect from a poet."

Catherine glared at both men. "The duchess never met Chester. He was still at school."

"She would have heard stories, though," said Hortense unexpectedly. "Chester's temper was famous even in the nursery. Richard banished him from Westcourt after their father died. I heard it was because Chester tried to kill him."

"Lies." Catherine glared. "That rubbish was put about by a footman turned off for disrespect. He retaliated by exaggerating a shoving match between grief-stricken brothers into a murderous plot. No one of breeding listens to such tales."

Reginald leaned forward. "Maybe the duchess killed Montrose and the maid, then made up that story to explain their absences. Their bodies might be locked in the Tudor wing."

"That's even more ridiculous," snapped Catherine, clearly out of patience. "It is too late to know why Montrose left. He has been gone these many years, one

more tragedy to attach to the family's history."

Curiosity flashed across Mr. Lascar's face. "Tragedies?"

It was the colonel who answered. "Family's been cursed for generations. Males never die peacefully in bed. Ninth duke missing, eighth dead at twenty-four. His youngest brother dead at eight. Chester's all that's left of the direct line."

"Another brother?" asked Mr. Lascar.

"Lord Thomas. Sickly child. Escaped his nurse and came to grief in a fall. Seventh duke drowned a month later. Girls' father"—he nodded toward Hortense and Esther—"broke his neck when his horse refused a hedge. And Cousin Henry set his bedhangings ablaze. Drunk, of course. Another cousin—"

"We needn't trot out all the family skeletons, Colonel," said Catherine firmly.

"I beg your pardon, my lady," said Mr. Lascar, bowing his head in apology. "I merely wondered if any incidents had affected the house. Fire weakens beams faster than damp. What problems have you noted aside from the roof?"

His adept change of subject stampeded everyone into speech, allowing Faith to relax. At least the bickering was over for now.

Catherine must have been grateful as well, for she let everyone talk, not asserting control of the table until the covers were off and the sweet course laid out. Only then did she add her own observations. "Chester must replace the ghastly paneling in the entrance hall. It does not invoke awe as a ducal seat should."

"I had noted that," he agreed. "Marble is a better choice. Does anyone know what the ceiling painting depicts?"

All eyes turned to Catherine, who had grown up at Westcourt.

"Nymphs," she admitted. "My governess swore it is the Garden of Eden, but I suspect it is a Roman debauch. That would fit my grandfather's character well enough. He was the last to substantially change the place."

"I see. New ceiling, then."

Faith nearly laughed.

"What else?" Mr. Lascar asked.

Lady Catherine launched a lengthy recitation of structural defects and decorating woes that proved she

had a firm grasp of the subject. She finished with, "Stand firm on taste, Mr. Lascar. Chester has none. For now, the trustees must approve everything, so let us hope you can finish before Chester receives the title. Once the work is done, he is unlikely to change it, especially if his friends approve the result."

"Be sure to replace the roof," ordered the colonel. "There is no hope of fixing it."

"Of course. Repairs would postpone the inevitable no more than a month or two." Mr. Lascar nodded toward Hortense to acknowledge her efforts. "The original design is faulty and must be corrected."

"New design?" Reginald leaned forward, staring at Mr. Lascar in sudden approval. "What wonderful news. Perhaps pinnacles such as the Regent is planning at Brighton. Or a glass dome to protect the courtyard from the weather. Imagine the spectacle that would make! A rival to St. Paul's, allowing us to enjoy the air in all seasons." When Catherine thumped her cane, he donned a mischievous grin. "Or perhaps two domes, rising heavenward with the grace of a lady's bosom, glowing in the sunlight like sleek, virginal offerings to—"

"Enough Reginald," snapped Faith.

He reddened. "Forgive me, my dear Faith. Not the thing to mention before innocents. You quite put me to the blush. But a glance does that anyway, inciting raptures to flutter in my breast."

"Eat, Reginald."

"Yes, Reginald. Eat," ordered Lady Catherine. "We've had enough of your idiocy for one evening. As for style, the best way to handle Chester is to offer only one solution to the water problem." She glared at Mr. Lascar. "Never give him a choice. And remind him that following your suggestions will elevate his consequence and turn his friends green with envy. He only noticed how shabby things had got because others disparaged the place."

"Aided by me," admitted the colonel. "I started that particular conversation. It was time he faced his responsibilities. That roof will collapse without help."

John remained silent.

"I would so love Chinese wallpaper in the drawing room," ventured Miss Esther, dabbing her eyes with her napkin. "The kind with birds in a garden of trees and flowers."

"Paint is better," said Lady Catherine firmly. "It would lighten the room. And remove the wall between the library and the tower. The library is too small for any gentleman, let alone a duke, though I doubt a single volume has been added to the collection since my brother's death forty-one years ago. He would be appalled to see what has become of his home."

That spawned new suggestions. John let them chatter while he enjoyed a decent piece of cheese. But his mind kept returning to the eighth duchess. Whatever her motives, nothing could excuse abandoning her son. Sending him off with no way to recall him was little better than tossing him into a dustbin. Aside from insulting every man charged with overseeing his upbringing and inheritance, it condemned that inheritance to years of decay. If she were alive, he would throttle her. It was the most revolting display of selfishness he'd ever seen.

The strength of his fury was nearly as aggravating as her behavior, though. His senses had spun out of control the moment he'd passed Westcourt's gates. Unless he recovered them, he would never convince Lord Chester to adopt his ideas. That job required logic, something in remarkably short supply today.

* * * *

Faith departed the dining room on Catherine's heels, leaving the gentlemen to their port. Meals were rarely comfortable at Westcourt, but this one had been the most contentious she could recall.

And it wasn't over.

Catherine motioned the others into the blue parlor, then stepped in front of Faith. "Watch yourself, girl," she snapped. "I saw you making sheep's eyes at Mr. Lascar. I won't have it. You will not shame this house by chasing after a tradesman."

"You wrong me." Faith could barely speak through her shock. "I have no interest in the man beyond his ability to fix the roof. Lord Chester ordered me to escort him through the house, but the tour was strictly business." *Liar*, screamed her conscience, but she ignored it.

"And did he also order you to hang on his sleeve through dinner?"

"No, but he did request that I answer all of Mr. Lascar's questions and see that he is treated with the same respect we would show any other professional,"

she dared.

Catherine reddened.

"If I overstepped my bounds in trying to distract him from a raging argument, I apologize. I can assure you that flirtation never crossed my mind."

"I hope you are right. Throwing yourself at a man when everyone knows no one will look twice at you will make you a laughingstock. I won't have the family name besmirched by such behavior." She turned away.

Faith clenched her fists.

Catherine paused in the doorway. "Are you coming?"

"Not tonight, my lady. I've not yet finished today's chores."

Catherine nodded, then closed the door.

Faith sighed. Catherine's scold didn't matter. She hadn't wanted coffee anyway. Reginald would join them within the hour and insist on reciting today's verses. She was too on edge to tolerate it. But Catherine's frequent snubs were hard to bear.

Reginald would search for her the moment he discovered her absence, so she must avoid her usual evening haunts. No checking on Mrs. Baines or Cook. No relaxing cup of tea in her room. No going over the accounts in the housekeeper's office. It would make tomorrow more hectic, but no matter.

Instead, she would spend an hour in the portrait gallery. It wasn't something anyone would expect, for the pictures badly needed cleaning. Without strong sunlight, it was difficult to see anything. But it would give her time alone with her thoughts.

Or so she thought. Barely ten minutes later, footsteps sounded on the stairs. There was no place to hide.

She was frantically seeking an excuse to escape Reginald when Mr. Lascar entered the gallery. She'd forgot that his room lay just beyond it.

"That was fast." The words were out before she could stop them, so she mentally shrugged and continued. "I hope Reginald did not drive you away."

"Not at all. I need to note the problems we discussed at dinner. And I'm not much for port in any case."

"Ah." As he stepped closer, her mind turned blank.

John hadn't expected to run into Miss Harper. He knew he ought to continue to his room, but he couldn't forget her mortification over the utter lack of

manners that had characterized dinner.

And that wasn't all that bothered her. He'd seen her blanch at the colonel's recital of untimely deaths. How could they callously remind her that she had lost her entire family? He'd done what he could to deflect conversation to the house, but he was still seething. He ought to slip away so she could recover her composure.

But he couldn't.

Cursing his weakness, he joined her.

"Why did you not remind them that grief alone explains the duchess's actions, Miss Harper? You seem to know more about her thoughts than they do."

"True," she agreed. "But I am not related to the duke, nor is my breeding high enough that I can discuss his affairs with his family."

"Yet Lord Chester ordered you to share them with me. So why do you reject their explanations?"

She tilted her head as if listening for footsteps, then led him along the gallery. "No one believes anything they said tonight. Lady Catherine raised the subject merely to stifle Reginald." She shrugged. "She knows very little about the duchess. While they did correspond – her letters and copies of the duchess's are in the family archives – the duchess's tone reflects duty, not pleasure. They are formal and lack both warmth and personal detail. Nothing like her other correspondence."

"But Lady Catherine presumably corresponded with others who knew the duchess better."

"I doubt it." When he raised a brow, she lowered her voice. "Lady Catherine hoped the duchess might restore her relations with a family that had denounced her – she wouldn't be here at all if not for the trustees. Each of us is here because the trustees accepted a duty to help us when we had nowhere else to go."

"What did Catherine do to earn the duke's disapproval?"

"Eloped with a man considerably beneath her. He was the youngest son of an out-of-favor earl, which is why she must use her own title; he had none."

Not having been around enough aristocrats to absorb the nuances of address, he'd not considered that point.

She continued. "After she discovered that her husband's claim of undying passion was actually

intense fortune-hunting, she adopted an exaggerated hauteur with her in-laws to emphasize her higher breeding. It is now a habit. If you want her favor, treat her with the respect you would accord a duchess.”

“Very well, but I’m curious about this so-called family curse.” He shouldn’t be. Family history had nothing to do with his work. But his libido was grasping every excuse to prolong this conversation.

She was silent so long that he expected her to bid him good evening. Instead, she nodded. “Take everything they say with a large grain of salt. They have never gotten on, and their mutual antagonism is much stronger now that the future is uncertain. Their most provocative comments are designed to annoy – or are the product of imaginative minds. The so-called curse is one of those.”

“The colonel cited plenty of evidence.”

“The world is a dangerous place. It is hardly a surprise that accidents occur. There was a cluster of them about forty years ago, which convinced Reginald that the family was cursed – very poetic to survive such a foe. But since no one before him ever suggested such a thing, and since he blames the duchess for cursing them despite that she didn’t join the family until ten years later...”

“Ah.”

“Exactly. I would not take it seriously.”

He wondered why she was so adamant, but he couldn’t press. He was already far too forward. “Should I also ignore the theories about the duke’s disappearance?”

“I do. They are nothing but speculation in any case. And since he is dead, speculation serves no purpose. While studying the family papers might piece together what happened in his infancy, it won’t revive him. Looking to the future is more important.”

She was lying. He didn’t know why – or how he was so certain – but she knew far more about the duke’s departure than she would admit. And it mattered to her. That alone made it matter to him. “You believe that studying the family papers will provide the answer?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. I have read enough of them to conclude that the duchess acted from grief – the archives and what passes for a library provided most of my education, as the trustees neglected to send me

a governess. But the archives do not explain her decision, and her correspondence conveys only grief.”

Another lie, or a partial one. What wasn’t she saying? He wanted to grab her shoulders and shake the truth loose, but he couldn’t touch her. Need battled custom until he was dizzy with it.

His sudden fury shocked him. He never allowed emotion to cloud logic – a habit learned in childhood. He could still recall his mother chiding him for fighting with the carter’s son.

Emotion dulls your wits, she’d snapped while mopping up a bloody nose. You will never reach your goals unless you keep your mind clear. That takes control. Always think before you act.

But emotion could serve a purpose. Fury kept lust in check, preventing him from sweeping her into a passionate kiss, which would be idiotic. His best course was to retreat before his baser instincts caused trouble.

He turned toward his room, only to discover that he held her hand.

Shocked – and ridiculously delighted – he scrambled to cover his stupidity by executing a formal air kiss just above her fingers as if *she* were a duchess. Allowing her no chance to react, he excused himself and fled.

“Damn,” he muttered under his breath as he shut his bedroom door. He couldn’t believe how badly he’d lost control. Never had he felt such a powerful urge to drag a woman off to bed. That he would act without conscious knowledge...

He could no longer trust himself.

The only way to survive a week at Westcourt was to avoid her. If she was nearby, he would do something unforgivable, dishonoring a lady and himself. Forming a *tendre* for someone so far above him was stupid. He could not allow it.

Chapter Five

Richard has engaged Reynolds to paint our portraits. His will easily be the most handsome in the gallery, for his ancestors are a motley lot, though I ought not write such things, even here...

Duchess of Westfield, May 1784

Despite a restless night, John rose early, as was his habit. It was clearly not a habit practiced at Westcourt, though. Even the butler remained abed.

"Why am I surprised?" he muttered, staring at the empty breakfast room. Lord Chester was the sort who expected full service, so the staff would have to wait up for him. At their ages, that wouldn't be easy. The entire household probably shifted its hours to accommodate his schedule.

Postponing breakfast, John set to work.

He'd spent much of the night banishing yesterday's obsessions. If he hoped to hold them at bay, he must avoid Miss Harper. She was far too delectable. Aside from the obvious danger – if he remained in her company, he would soon hold more than her hand – she scrambled his wits. Lack of concentration would lead to mistakes, compromising this job and jeopardizing future ones. So he would finish his inspection alone and take evening meals elsewhere so he didn't intrude on the family.

His libido tried to protest, but he ignored it. He could not afford to endanger his reputation. Nor could he insult her by revealing his infatuation. No lady would consider it a compliment. He knew his place.

As for the Office of Works, this setback was good for him. So far everything had gone smoothly, advancing his career at lightning speed. But life was full of disappointments. It was time he learned to deal with them. An architect could not afford arrogance, and he would never remain successful without patience.

There were other routes to a seat at the Office of Works. Even if it took several more years, he would still be the youngest member. And in the meantime, he could save Westcourt.

That obsession was even stronger today. The house had whispered through last night's dreams, begging for aid. Now it cocooned him in a warmth he could not explain, especially given its monstrous style and deplorable condition. It was trapped in limbo, all but forgotten, desperate to resume its role as a showplace worthy of a king. Only *he* could make it happen. And if he did...

Would accomplishing that be enough for the Office of Works?

Stop it, he ordered himself. Goals were laudable, but becoming a slave to them made it impossible to enjoy

the journey. What difference would it make if he won a seat at thirty-six instead of thirty-three? Or forty, for that matter. There were enough projects being discussed to keep the office busy for decades.

His immediate concern was Westcourt. He *had* to serve the house, even if doing so retarded his career. Lord Chester spent so little time in the country that John could mitigate the worst of his taste without him noticing. It wasn't exactly ethical, but...

Never do anything that reflects poorly on you, his mother had often counseled. Soane had been harsher. Raising brows will hurt your career. Even a mild scandal can destroy you, and failing to meet a patron's demands is the most scandalous thing an architect can do. Those who wield power have long memories, so never disappoint them.

"But I must do what is best for Westcourt," he murmured as he headed outside. "I have no choice." And he would not push hard enough to create a scandal. There wasn't an architect in England who wouldn't drool to get his hands on this place. He would make sure that his results drew compliments from all who saw it. All he had to do was avoid Miss Harper, and there would be no problem.

Turning Westcourt into a showplace presented the greatest challenge of his life, starting with the contract, which must be worded to let him do the job right while convincing Lord Chester that the result was what he'd requested. Not an easy prospect.

Despite an overcast, it was light enough to see, so John studied the portico. It was even worse than he'd feared. Shaking his head, he set to work.

Two hours later, he spotted Miss Hortense striding toward the village. Breakfast must be out.

But it wasn't. Wondering if a man could starve to death in a week, he collected the floor plans he'd drawn last night and began tracing leaks.

He didn't usually make scaled drawings this early in the inspection process, but after two hours of touring bedrooms with Miss Harper, he'd needed an exacting occupation to distract his libido. So he'd drawn each floor on thin onionskin. When he stacked the layers, he could trace walls from attic to cellar. Today he would mark the damage more precisely, letting him follow the water back to its source. The process also offered clues to hidden damage where water had not

yet soaked through to the surface.

To avoid disturbing the residents, he began in the east wing, which housed the duke's apartments. He'd already confirmed that the tower's walls remained plumb, so repointing should restore its integrity. But that solved only one problem. The wing held extensive water damage unrelated to the tower leak.

Beginning in the attics, he worked downward, moving furniture and rolling up carpets. Walls. Floors. Ceilings. All were badly compromised.

One problem was that each wing used different roof sheathing – tile, slate, lead. Leaks occurred wherever the different materials met, but some of the leading had also split. It was a common problem in old houses, which was why it was imperative to check the roof frequently. But Westcourt's staff hadn't. Now the attics revealed dozens of minor leaks and three major ones.

By the time he reached the duchess's apartments two floors below, he had a good idea how the water was spreading inside the walls, fanning out as it trickled lower. Two of those fans should converge in her bedroom.

Immersed in his puzzle, he didn't feel the warmth until he stepped fully into her room. Frowning, he returned to the hall.

Cold.

He stepped back inside.

Warm. Comforting. As if loving arms had suddenly wrapped around him.

He shook his head. The fireplace was empty, with no hint of recent use. Even Adam's décor should not make this room more welcoming than others. Yes, Adam had worked here at the peak of his skill. But his hallmark was elegance, not warmth. So the warmth must linger from the duchess.

He'd always been sensitive to atmosphere, though yesterday he'd been too distracted by Miss Harper to notice it. Now it smacked him between the eyes.

Everyone claimed that the duchess had loved her husband to a scandalous degree, and he could now believe it. Their passion had seeped into the walls – which contradicted the image of a cold, unfeeling monster who could discard her son without a backward glance.

The idea infuriated him. While his own mother

would never have abandoned him – she’d worked hard to give him advantages many of his peers lacked – he knew many parents who had. Some did it acceptably, leaving their offspring to a cadre of servants while they enjoyed London society. Others abandoned children entirely, selling them to sweeps or brothels or leaving them to fend for themselves. So why was he shocked that the duchess had sent her son to be raised elsewhere? And why was he now relieved to discover that she’d been capable of love?

Frowning, he moved farther into her space. The blue walls were fading quietly to silver, though the lush draperies retained most of their color. Heavily gilded moldings and picture frames remained on the walls. The soggy carpet mirrored the sculpted ceiling. All very Adam. But blue was a cool color. It wouldn’t incite warmth.

No obvious trace of the duchess remained. Her brushes and bottles had long since been packed away, leaving the Chippendale dressing table bare. Two tarnished candlesticks and a silent ormolu clock stood forlornly on the dusty mantle. Ironically, the driest spot in the room was the water jug and basin. Yet there was something...

The walls brightened into shimmering blue velvet. A shaft of sunlight hit the gilding, blinding him with its brilliance. The clock chimed as voices echoed. *Love ... always ... safe...* Laughter followed, then a vivacious girl with glowing auburn hair exploded from the tower, chased by a dark-haired young man who scooped her into his arms and tumbled onto the bed—

John shoved his imagination back into its cage, glaring at the faded walls. Visualizing a room’s possibilities was never comfortable, but this...

The house was taking over his mind. It had to stop.

But it wouldn’t stop. The warmth increased until sweat trickled down his spine. Fire crackled in the grate. Happiness rolled over him in waves. Barking echoed from the hallway. When the door opened—

“Enough!”

He strode to the window and flung open the casement. Staring at the cloudy sky, he gulped air until his senses settled.

Walls absorbed emotions from the people they enclosed. Even as a child, he’d been sensitive to such feelings, though it wasn’t something he could admit

aloud lest he find himself in a padded cell. The first time, he'd been eight and forced to listen as two men beat a third unconscious by the foot of his bed. His mother swore it was a dream, and he'd eventually let her think so, though he knew better. Dreams lacked such clarity.

At least it didn't happen often, though the worst commission he'd ever accepted had been at an asylum in Kent. Walking through the building had nearly driven him mad. He'd avoided asylums and hospitals ever since.

But even the asylum had not engendered visions.

At least this room's warmth arose from the duchess's love for the duke, with no trace of insanity. That didn't explain why she'd abandoned her son, but it wasn't his affair...

Irritated at himself, John moved furniture so he could examine the walls.

Damp. Mold. Trickling water.

Another year would compromise the structure too badly to save it. Furious, he turned toward the tower room—

—and tripped.

“Mreow!”

As he grabbed a cabinet to regain his balance, its door flew open, dumping him on the floor. For a moment he thought it would fall on top of him, but it settled for covering him with mildewed towels before rocking back into place.

John let loose a stream of curses that would do a teamster proud, then glared at Esther's cat.

It glared back from its perch on the bed, then executed a cut that would make a harridan proud, and settled in to wash one paw.

“Odious creature,” he muttered. He hated cats. Sly beings. If people had to keep pets, why not an amiable dog?

He stuffed the towels back in the cabinet and froze.

The top shelf held a rag dog so dilapidated that few would deign to touch it.

He gingerly lifted it out, a lump blocking his throat at he examined its worn ears and mended foot. Someone had cherished it once. And the duchess—

“She loved him.” His whisper echoed, as if the house again spoke.

Proof, if he needed it. This must be a favorite toy.

There had been no madness here. Grief, yes. For the duke, and especially for her son. She had rued his loss every day of her life.

So why had she sent him away?

The grief intensified. Pain stabbed through his stomach. Fear followed. And hope, fury, heartache—

“Stop it!” he growled, shoving the dog in the wardrobe. “You are here to fix leaks, not solve puzzles!”

Shaking his head, he slammed the door, then concentrated on walls, stone, and water.

* * * *

By the time John finished the east wing, breakfast was laid out. He found the colonel tackling a mountain of ham, eggs, kippered herring, pudding, tomatoes, and mushrooms. Toast heaped with preserves filled a second plate.

“Eat hearty,” the colonel advised. “It’s the only edible meal you’ll get today.”

John had never liked herring, but he helped himself to the rest. “How can Cook make good breakfasts yet mangle dinner?”

The colonel sighed. “Cook can’t manage a full day on her feet. Kitchen maid makes breakfast.”

“Why not pension off the cook and hire a new one?” he asked, keeping his tone one of mild curiosity.

“Impossible.” The colonel studied him a moment, then nodded briskly. “Have you agreed to renovate this place?”

“Not officially. My present contract covers inspecting the damage and devising solutions. Once the trustees decide which proposals they want to pursue, we will draw up a contract for the measured drawings the builder will need.”

“That is not how it will work.” He glared. “You need to understand the chain of command, Lascar. Chester wields more authority than the usual steward. The trustees know the title should be his, so they don’t question his decisions. He thus runs Westcourt, lock, stock, and barrel. Don’t argue with him, and never ignore him. If you bypass Chester and call on the trustees, your reputation will shatter. Chester makes a formidable foe.”

“As does any lord.”

“Not like Chester.” He waved a slice of toast. “Most lords are secure in their power. They know who is

above them and who below. But Chester doesn't. Everyone knows he's the duke, but he can't exercise a duke's power. Very touchy on the subject, he is. Especially here. Under law, he is no better than Catherine. The others hope the title remains in abeyance, for they think things will muddle along as they are if it eludes him. Never happen."

John raised his brows, for Miss Harper had uttered the same sentiments, including the colonel among the blind.

The colonel paused to swallow. "Three possibilities," he said at last. "If that investigator turns up a living duke, who knows what will happen?"

"Obviously." A stranger who had ignored his responsibilities since coming of age could do anything.

"I doubt he will, but a good soldier plans for all contingencies. The other outcomes will change our lives for the worse."

"Both possibilities?"

The colonel nodded. "Chester as duke is bad enough. But if this search leaves the title in abeyance, the trustees will remove all constraints on Chester."

"Giving him all the duke's authority." He frowned, not seeing the point.

"Except a seat in Lords. In the eyes of his peers, he will still be a commoner, which will make exerting authority here even more important. He won't let us stay, which is what the others refuse to see."

"But what has that to do with Cook?"

He sighed. "She is an example of what happens to those who annoy Chester. Except for one maid, all the current servants were hired by the seventh or eighth dukes. Both men were sticklers for detail, so their staff kept them apprised of everything that happened on the estate."

"Addressing small problems prevents large ones."

"Most of the time. But they reported on people as well as repair problems. I did not know Chester when he was a lad, but I've heard tales. Trouble abounded in his vicinity."

"Careless?"

"Tantrums. He demanded constant attention and resented anyone who favored his father or brother above him."

"But he wasn't the heir."

"No. Some people need be the center of all eyes. I

dealt with a few in the military. Chester is another. He might wear a mask of rectitude in town, but his nature is clear to anyone who looks closely. Younger sons are not treated like heirs. Yet Chester took offense at every difference, retaliating by playing pranks or spreading lies that blamed others for his own misdeeds. He never forgets a grievance, and he never forgives. Ponder that closely.”

“Why did the staff not leave, then?”

“Loyalty.” The colonel drained his ale. “After the eighth duke died, they protected his duchess. When the trustees tried to beat the truth from her, they interfered. If the trustees had been able to replace them... But they couldn’t, so they returned to town, and the duchess became a recluse.”

Colonel Parker again paused to eat. “That was how matters stood when I arrived – the duchess and staff against Chester and the trustees. After her death, the staff swore to guard Montrose’s inheritance until he returned. The trustees accepted the vow, assigning responsibility for the house to Baines, Mrs. Baines, and Cook. But they never forgot that earlier interference. Even after they sent several other relatives here, they refused to increase the household budget.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Of course not, but Chester had ingratiated himself with the trustees by then. He insisted that raises and pensions would reward the servants for fighting the men the duke had set in charge of his affairs. The staff should have left. They could have found other positions. But they trusted the duke to set things right when he finally returned.”

“But he never did.”

He nodded. “By the time they realized the truth, it was too late. They have no savings and nowhere to go. Chester has hated many of them since they reported his misdeeds in childhood. The moment the trustees release the last rein, he will toss everyone out without a second thought.”

“Even if he has no title?”

“Especially if he has no title. He believes that if the staff had not interfered thirty years ago, Montrose’s fate would be clear. If Chester can’t flaunt a title before the world, fury will overcome the last vestige of kindness. The staff will go. We will go. As for you, if

you can't follow his orders to the letter, then leave. If you displease him, he will see that you never work again. He's the most vindictive man I've ever met."

John stiffened. Should he leave?

But it was already too late. He could survive a public dispute over whether his work was acceptable or not. Most people would side with him, especially when they learned what Chester wanted. But walking away after he'd agreed to fix the roof would give Chester a genuine grievance. People would reject an architect known to have broken a contract. Besides, how could he betray the house?

And he had no reason to trust the colonel, either. Not only did the man openly dislike Chester, but his discourse ignored one of the basic rules governing the aristocracy. "What happened to the concept of preserving property for future generations? I thought it was a duty every aristocrat learned from birth."

"Heirs, certainly. But Lord Chester is only the heir presumptive. He was well past forty before anyone suspected he might be more and well past fifty before such suspicions seemed true. Some men cannot think beyond their own pleasure no matter what convention demands." He shrugged. "But perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps Chester has some reason beyond vengeance for allowing Westcourt to deteriorate." He bit into his last slice of toast.

Shaking his head, John changed the subject. "What can you tell me about the portico?"

"Local chap built it, according to Miss Harper. Long dead, of course. Put up in 1730. Never liked it much myself."

"It doesn't enhance the house," agreed John. "And its foundation is crumbling."

* * * *

Faith had no time for a leisurely breakfast – or so she told herself. Despite the presence of Chester and Mr. Lascar, which meant extra rooms to serve, she had to air the east wing. That was reason enough to keep her belowstairs. It had nothing to do with blue eyes or muscular physiques, though both had crept into her dreams, producing a very unsettled night.

Her stomach rolled twice as she stared at the list she was making. Her fingers were nothing like Mr. Lascar's elegantly tapered ones. His turned the prosaic chore of writing into a sensual exercise, something

she'd not thought herself susceptible to until yesterday.

How wrong she'd been...

She'd watched men caress women before, even listened to the sounds they made while doing so, but it had never evoked shivers of anticipation. Now wondering how such a touch might feel turned her mouth dry.

She wrenched her thoughts back to the larder. Her immediate problem was food. Cook had forgotten to order supplies again.

"Sorry, Miss Harper," said Polly, finishing her search for the spare salt box. "I shoulda checked when we heard Mr. Lascar was comin', but there was so much else to do—"

"It is not your fault, Polly. You do more than your share already. As soon as we finish this list, I will deliver it to the village."

"Of course, miss, but—"

"Breakfast was delicious, as usual," Faith continued. She could not promote Polly without turning off Mrs. Foley, who had worked fifty-four years at Westcourt, but she was lavish with praise and whatever bonuses she could wring from the budget.

Polly nodded. "I should like to have done kidneys, but there wasn't time."

"Ham was fine. Have you the makings of scones? Mr. Lascar should have tea before meeting Lord Chester this afternoon."

"I should say so!" She reddened, but offered no apology. "You know my thoughts on that head, miss. I won't stay once he's the duke."

"I know." Faith blinked away incipient tears. Polly didn't understand that none of them would stay.

"How is Mrs. Baines today?" asked Polly, reverting to her usual demeanor.

"Worse. She did not recognize me." She couldn't tell if the lapse was a temporary setback or a further slide into dementia. If the latter, then Faith would have something else to hide. Once Chester realized now ill Mrs. Baines was – or Cook, for that matter – he would toss them out in a trice. He was already irritated that rheumatism made Baines slow. If he learned that Ned shouldered half of Baines's duties...

Ned rapped hesitantly on the door. "Miss Harper?"

"Yes?"

“Mr. Lascar wants the key to the Tudor wing, but it isn’t on the hook.”

She nearly groaned. She could not in good conscience let him enter that wing. The floor was so rotten it would collapse, breaking his leg if not his neck. He could recommend that it be torn down without actually walking through it. But that wasn’t a message she could send with a servant. “Where is he?”

“I left him in the coal shed.”

Leaving Polly to complete the shopping list, she headed outside. She found Mr. Lascar in the doorway of the carpenter’s shed, shaking his head.

“More leaks?” she asked wearily, trying to ignore how his dark hair glinted in the shafts of sunlight that were breaking through the overcast.

“No, but these tools are rusting. Where is your carpenter?”

“He died four years ago.” She shrugged to hide embarrassment. It wasn’t *her* fault the estate was neglected.

“Lord Chester hasn’t found a replacement?”

“I doubt he’s looked. He sees no need to make a pack of leeches more comfortable.” She followed him inside. “Hortense does what she can, but too many jobs are beyond her.”

“Which outbuildings have problems?”

“The dairy. The pig sty. The brewhouse. Maybe others.”

“I’ll start with the dairy once I finish the house. Did you bring the key to the Tudor wing?”

“Baines mislaid it. I’ve no idea when or how – it’s not been opened for years. He’s looking for it now.” A lie, but Baines was too forgetful to expose her should Mr. Lascar mention it. She’d hidden the key a year earlier when Mrs. Baines had tried to clean the Tudor wing, thinking the seventh duke was planning a party. That was when Faith had assumed full control of the house.

Mr. Lascar nodded.

“We can check the dairy now,” she said, heading for the clump of trees that shaded the building. The morning milking was done, so it would be empty. “Part of the river diverts through there to keep the temperature down. But dampness is making the timbers soft.”

“Hardly a surprise.”

Chapter Six

*How can I love Richard more today than even
yesterday? I did not know a heart could hold so much.
One must pity those who don't believe in love. Without
it, life is not worth living...*

Duchess of Westfield, June 1774

John almost offered Miss Harper his arm, but caught himself in time. Touching her was too dangerous. Not that following her was much safer. Her swaying hips set his juices flowing.

He should have asked Baines for the key himself instead of sending a footman for it. Now he must endure the agony of another afternoon with a lady he couldn't have.

To deflect his thoughts, he studied the grounds. Even in this service area, Capability Brown had added charm. Walls trapped heat in the kitchen garden even as they anchored a dozen espaliered fruit trees. A statue of romping puppies rose above a fountain in the garden's center. It had to have been made for this spot. He'd never seen anything like it.

The various offices were in better shape than he'd expected. Coal shed, wood shed, carpenter's shop, chicken coop. All were in acceptable condition and positioned for efficient use, screened from the drive by a privet hedge. He hoped the rest of the offices were as good, for it would let him concentrate on the house.

The dairy was a charming stone structure surrounded by trees, as was usual for places that must remain cool. A stone aqueduct led water from the river into grooves cut in stone tables that acted as reservoirs of cold, keeping the building cool even on hot days. Covered pails stood in the corner next to the churn. Butter, cream, and cheese awaited transfer to the house. More cheese aged on racks against the far wall.

John dragged the churning stool into the center of the room, then mounted it so he could test the roof beams with his penknife. The first was fine, but the second...

"Beetles," he announced. "This beam need replacing."

"So I feared."

He made a note, then moved the stool to the next

pair of beams.

"Do be careful," Miss Harper admonished.

"You are the one who should beware," he countered when his knife loosed a cloud of dust. "Stand back to protect your eyes."

She moved half a step.

Before John could repeat the admonition, the stool tilted.

Miss Harper screamed as she leaped forward to catch him.

Cursing, he threw his arm across the beam. Didn't she understand what would happen if he landed on her? His hand hit an unnoticed crock atop the beam. He tried to catch it—

Thud! It knocked her flat.

"Miss Harper!" He swung down beside her. "Are you all right?"

"Of course." She struggled to her feet.

Furious, he tugged off her shawl so he could see her shoulder. The skin was red and angry, but unbroken. A brief probe convinced him the bone was intact, but even that little contact burned his hands, sending sizzling heat straight to his groin. To keep from pulling her into his arms, he gave rein to his temper.

"Next time I tell you move, do it!" he snapped. "You are lucky. A few inches to the left, and you might be dead."

"You exaggerate."

"No, I don't." He collected the shards, fitting them together to demonstrate the crock's size. "I saw a smaller pot than this kill a man last year."

She shuddered. "Then I am indeed lucky. As are you. If you had fallen, you would have smashed your head on the corner of the table."

"I am not so clumsy," he protested.

"Nor are you thinking. You are far heavier than the dairy maid. You should have checked the stool for sturdiness. You know everything at Westcourt is falling apart."

He held his breath until his temper cooled. "My apologies, Miss Harper. I will repair the stool before dinner." He turned away so he could no longer see her damaged shoulder. The urge to caress it was too strong. All he could do was pray that it was shock that made his heart race and not, as he feared, that he'd fallen top over tail in love with her.

It was impossible, he insisted as he vaulted onto the table to check the last two beams. He'd known her barely a day. No one could fall in love so quickly.

Yet he'd known the house barely a day as well.

Stupid! Very stupid. They had no future. Mésalliances never worked. One of his earliest commissions had been for a mill owner whose vast wealth had bought an impoverished lord for his daughter ten years earlier. By the time John met her, she'd been virtually alone, shunned by society for her low breeding, despised by her peers for raising her eyes above her station, and barely tolerated by a husband who found money a poor exchange for tainting his line.

The butcher in his old neighborhood had suffered a similar fate, though the man had wed for love. But his wife was the bastard daughter of an actress, which made her unacceptable to his family and friends. John's mother had been kind to the woman, but she'd warned John often of the perils inherent in such unions. *Save yourself grief, John*, she'd told him on his twelfth birthday. *Wait until you are firmly established in the world before seeking a suitable wife.*

Well, he was established. But even a seat at the Office of Works wouldn't raise him to Miss Harper's level. So loving her was not suitable.

It's only lust, he insisted, furious that he was losing control of his senses. If he couldn't master his libido, he must leave Westcourt and risk Lord Chester's retaliation.

"Are you finished?" she asked as he jumped lightly to the floor. At least she wasn't flying into a tizzy because he'd touched her. His fingers still burned.

"Yes. Where to next?" He added another note to his book, including an unnecessary sketch to keep his hands occupied.

"Pig sty. One of the grooms ties the fence together whenever a rail falls off, but he doesn't know what he's doing – his expertise is with horses. I think the posts are rotten."

"Show me." The words were out before he could stop them. It was dangerous to remain in her company, and she risked injury by staying with him. Not only was the estate falling to bits, but he had to crawl into its worst places if he was to identify all of its problems.

* * * *

An hour later, Faith gave up trying to explain Mr. Lascar's anger. Fury radiated from him waves, making it difficult to breathe. Yet it wasn't aimed at her. Was Westcourt so dilapidated that it was outside his experience? It didn't seem likely. He'd not been furious yesterday, even when he'd found the tower room afloat. Surely he couldn't still be upset over that pot.

Her own problem was that she couldn't think. Her mind had shut down the moment he'd touched her bruise.

Another blush made her glad he remained behind her. She should have avoided him today even if that meant asking Ned to lie for her. Yesterday's attraction remained, stronger than ever. Not only did he refrain from blaming her for Westcourt's problems – a nice change from Chester – but he'd done his best to distract her from the pain throbbing in her shoulder.

"I saw a print last week that showed the Regent dining in a sty," he'd said as they'd watched two hogs nose through slops. She'd been groping for a response when an odd gleam lit his eye. "I should lodge a protest with the artist. The depiction insults pigs. They are far more slender."

She'd laughed out loud, something that would draw frowns from Catherine if she heard.

It hadn't been his only attempt to amuse her. The line of ants marching relentlessly up the stable wall had reminded him of London, where drivers clogged every street, each bent on moving as fast as possible. Faith knew how terrifying that traffic could be, for she'd spent a fortnight there while the trustees decided what to do with her.

All in all, it had been an enjoyable day and a respite from her usual chores. But now she must return to work. Polly would have long since finished the shopping list. If Faith didn't hurry, dinner would be late.

They were approaching the terrace steps when Mr. Lascar again paused.

"This retaining wall is cracked," he announced, running his hand over the stone.

"Everything at Westcourt is cracked," she muttered, turning back to the wall. The cracks had first appeared six years earlier. Now the bracing the carpenter had

installed was rotting. One board had already fallen. Another hung loose. When she shoved it back in place, it fell off, exposing—

A dozen bees lurched groggily into the air.

“Damnation!” Mr. Lascar grabbed her arm, dragging her toward the house so fast her feet barely touched the ground. “Don’t you ever think?”

A bee landed on her shawl.

“Hurry,” he gasped, fumbling with the latch while she brushed the bee aside.

“Relax.” The cool air slowed bees. They were rarely aggressive anyway. She often saw them in the garden.

But these were angry. One landed on her arm.

Mr. Lascar lunged—

Too late. It had already struck.

“Inside.” Panic threaded his voice as he shoved her through the door and against the wall. “It got you, devil take it. It got you.” He jerked the stinger out, then nicked the skin with his penknife, squeezing until blood flowed. “My fault. I should have noticed—”

“I’m fine.”

But he didn’t hear her. “Baines!” he shouted. “Bring a poultice. Quickly!” He squeezed again. “Can you breathe?”

“Of course I can breathe!” She tried to tug her arm away, for his fingers hurt more than the sting.

“There’s no *of course* about it. Baines!” Panic flared in his eyes. And heat...

Hortense rushed from the entrance hall, followed by Reginald.

“Take your filthy hands off her.” Reginald slammed Mr. Lascar into the door. “How dare you touch a lady?”

“Stop this at once,” Faith ordered, sidestepping Reginald’s grab. “There is a bee hive on the terrace. He was removing the sting from my arm.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Go away,” she snapped. Reginald’s dismissal stood at sharp odds with Mr. Lascar’s concern. “You are no earthly good for anything.” She pulled out a handkerchief to mop up the blood.

“Where on the terrace?” demanded Hortense as Mr. Lascar shook out Faith’s shawl, checking for more bees.

“Behind the bracing by the steps.”

“I’ll take care of it.” She turned to the door

“Don’t risk a sting,” begged Mr. Lascar. “Can’t one of

the grooms deal with it?"

"They are busy. Come, Reginald. You can help me."

"Touch poison? Never!" He paled.

"Then go to your room." Faith shook out her skirts.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Mr. Lascar's hands shook as if he was torn between needing to verify her condition and keeping a respectful distance.

"Yes," she repeated. "It must be a recent hive. There weren't very many, and it's too cool for them to move quickly in any case."

"You were stung!" White ringed the blue in his eyes. Caring won, for he turned her to face him. "Can you see all right? Any shaking? Pain?"

"For heaven's sake, it's only a sting, and a small one at that." Exasperation was the only way to keep from throwing herself into those caring arms. When Reginald raised his fists, she stepped between them.

"Stings can kill!" Mr. Lascar glared. "I nearly died of one. Everyone agreed that if I was stung again, I *would* die. My throat swelled so badly, I couldn't breathe."

She froze. What a waste that would have been. "But most people do not suffer unduly," she reminded him, keeping her voice calm. "I have been stung three times with no effect beyond some itching."

"She be right, sir," said Baines, finally arriving. "I know some as must be careful like. Lad in the village died when I were a boy. Rumor had it he weren't the first. But not Miss Harper."

"I will be fine," she assured him again. "But what of you?"

"I felt nothing. I have learned to move very quickly when bees are in the vicinity. My father was the same – or so my mother reported." He shook his head. "He died when I was five."

"Stung?"

"Perhaps. His regiment was in India. We were told he died honorably in battle, but that's what they always say." He exhaled long and deep. "Pardon me for overreacting, Miss Harper."

"One cannot call it overreacting when the situation was deadly for you," she replied. "Stay indoors for the rest of the day. It may take some time for Hortense to find all the bees, and they could remain belligerent in the meantime."

"And stay away from Faith," growled Reginald.

"I told you to leave," she reminded him. "I've no time

for sulky boys today.”

“Sulky—”

“Exactly. If you cannot behave like a gentleman, then stay out of my way. I need no protection.”

Reginald opened and closed his mouth several times, then stomped off.

Baines coughed. “Lord Chester wished to see you in the morning room as soon as you returned, sir.” He gestured toward the door.

“Thank you.” He stood back so Faith could precede him, but she shook her head.

“I have errands that cannot be postponed if we are to have dinner.”

* * * *

John’s coat was peppered with cobwebs, but they proved he was hard at work. So he nodded to Baines and let the butler announce him.

Lord Chester’s eyes were even redder today, and he held his head stiffly as if to keep pain at bay. He’d also knotted his cravat into a loose coachman, hinting at a queasy stomach. John wondered how much of his dinner had been liquid.

The morning room was another time-worn space, though more comfortable than the office where they’d met yesterday. It had originally been painted a sunny yellow. Years of soot dulled the walls, but colorful ceramics kept informality alive. He was mentally shaking his head over an arrogant rooster when the light suddenly changed.

Dark. The sort of dark candles couldn’t penetrate. The crackle as Chester shifted in his chair disappeared into a hollow buzz. Before John could pull himself back, voices battered his ears.

Where is he?

I don’t know.

Of course you know. Where is he?

Slaps echoed, one after another, then the solid sound of fists hitting flesh. *Where is he, bitch?*

“Have you finished your inspection?” Chester demanded, breaking his trance.

John pulled himself together with an effort, for the phantom voice was Chester’s. Sitting prevented his knees from betraying their sudden weakness. “The roof is unsalvageable.” He described its condition in detail, then added, “I have mapped the worst damage. It will take a week of study to devise solutions, and I can

guarantee that additional damage will turn up when we remove plaster. There are too many leaks to assume that all the damage is visible.”

“Once the plaster is down, repairs cannot be postponed.”

“Exactly, which is why I cannot learn everything now. The contract will include contingency clauses to cover hidden damage. I won’t start demolition until we’ve agreed to terms.”

“While you are devising solutions, I want to study the contract.”

“Impossible. My contracts are unique to each job. We will draw it up after I devise solutions to Westcourt’s problems so it incorporates exactly what you want done.”

“Very well, but work fast. I want to start repairs as soon as possible.”

“I should have estimates in a week. But I can already tell that repairing the damage will take at least a year. Not only is Westcourt huge, but it’s been allowed to deteriorate for decades. That sort of abuse cannot be rectified overnight.”

Chester frowned. “I had hoped it could be finished faster.”

John said nothing.

“I must return to town on business. I will expect your report next week.” He started to rise.

John refused to budge. “Since you won’t be here, we must discuss the other renovations now. Which rooms should I address, etcetera?”

“Miss Harper has that information, and you can surely see Westcourt’s detriments for yourself,” snapped Lord Chester.

“I do not trust underlings to remember every detail. Exactly how much work do you want done?”

“Everything! The last four dukes were care-for-naughts who ignored their consequence. The house has nothing to recommend it. *Nothing!*” He launched a diatribe against his ancestors’ taste and the shocking way they wasted money on ungrateful peasants even as Westcourt decayed into a laughingstock. He seemed especially incensed that his brother had eschewed the pomp to which he was entitled, even as he replaced several tenant cottages.

Chester was determined to change that. But as he laid out his requirements for turning Westcourt into a

house that would dazzle visitors, John's heart sank. Miss Harper was right. The man had garish taste and no sense. If offered three alternatives, he would choose the most vulgar, then add features that made it worse. Even his most rational suggestions were awful. With him in charge, Westcourt would suffer. Badly.

John would not erect a monument to Chester's vulgarity, yet despite the colonel's warning, he couldn't abandon the house. Since his reputation would suffer no matter what course he chose, he might as well do what he could to save Westcourt. Perhaps some would applaud him for trying.

Chester finished describing the decoration he wanted in the duke's apartments. "I know it will come dear, but it is necessary. To keep expenditures under control, we must take care elsewhere. You are certain there is no way to repair the existing roof?"

"Positive. It is not just the joints between lead sheets that are broken, but the sheets themselves. And the design guarantees trouble. Starting over will save considerable money in the long run."

Chester nodded. "At least a new roof will let the house dry out. Most of the bedrooms will serve visitors of little consequence, so need nothing beyond paint to cover the water stains. And don't let Miss Harper twist your priorities. Servants cannot expect opulence."

John nearly protested. But the time to argue was when he presented his estimates. He must make sure that doing the job right looked cheaper than doing it wrong.

Lord Chester was a typical miser, squeezing pennies in ways that would cost more in the end. Installing a bathing pool without a system to collect and heat water demanded an army of footmen and placed a ridiculous burden on the kitchen staff.

Then there was the question of taste. Installing features society derided would reduce Chester's credit. And John would never compromise on quality. He would resign rather than accept substandard materials or shoddy workmanship.

"Cook has long complained about the kitchens," finished Lord Chester. "And rightly so. But she cannot expect to work in a palace. She may have her Rumsford stove and her smoke jack. But no more."

We'll see about that.

But John merely nodded. He had a week to craft a

proposal that would appear to meet the requirements, yet do the job right. And if, as he suspected, Lord Chester considered anyone from the lower classes stupid, Chester might be susceptible to manipulation. He wouldn't expect it.

Not until he left the morning room did John wonder if Chester was equally underhanded. Since no one else spoke with the trustees, John had only his word that they had authorized more than maintenance. Was cutting corners a way to stretch the budget to include what Chester wanted? Would the trustees really step aside if the duke's fate remained unknown? It wasn't legal for them to do so. A manipulative man might take the power he craved while convincing the trustees that they remained in charge. And if the trustees were too old to think clearly...

Miss Harper was right. He must send his report to the trustees. And his proposals must include both Chester's demands and his own assessment of how society would react to them.

He didn't like Lord Chester and resented being trapped in a battle. But he had no choice. Westcourt deserved his best efforts..

In the meantime, he headed for the roof. Working up there would keep him away from Miss Harper.

Chapter Seven

*Who would have thought marriage could be fun?
Certainly not Mother. But she knows only duty, and
Papa is cold while Richard is not. I love him so...*

Duchess of Westfield, July 1774

Three days later Polly stuck her head into the still room where Faith was working on a tonic for Lady Catherine. "Mr. Lascar has more questions."

Faith sighed. Every time she tried to stay away from him, he thwarted her plans. Cursing Chester for ordering her to cooperate, she set aside her dried herbs and wiped her hands. "Where is he?"

"State bedchamber."

Faith headed for the state apartments, as furious at herself as at Mr. Lascar. There was no excuse for a racing heart and fluttering stomach. It was past time to exert control over her body. If she wasn't careful, he would notice her infatuation.

He wouldn't welcome it. His own demeanor was entirely professional. He hadn't repeated that odd kissing of her hand or done anything else that might be considered personal. The last thing she wanted was his pity. If he ever suspected...

She would die of mortification.

She might anyway. How many times had she relived his every touch – soothing her bruises in the dairy, treating her sting, brushing her hip as he escorted her through a door or her shoulder as they bent over plans? Infatuations died from neglect. Instead of feeding this one with air dreams, she should be working to banish it. It was ridiculous to form an attachment for a man who would be gone in days.

Twisting his moments of kindness into personal interest proved only that she'd lost her mind. It would be better to heed the lesson she'd learned from studying the duchess. Passion eventually led to pain. Thus she could not afford to fan its flames.

A smart woman would have refused to assist him once Chester left for London. Chester would be furious, but her days at Westcourt were numbered anyway, so it no longer mattered. Yet she cited Chester's orders whenever Reginald complained that she was living in Mr. Lascar's pocket. And she dropped what she was doing whenever Mr. Lascar called.

Her feet flew up the stairs.

Reginald was becoming a serious problem. His pouting—

In truth, his behavior went well beyond pouting, she admitted, threading the maze of corridors on the second floor. Not only had he adopted a poetic case of jealousy, but he'd arranged at least one prank that could have had lethal consequences. She was still seething.

Two days ago Mr. Lascar had asked her to fetch his sketches of the north wing from his room. She'd found Reginald inside, an empty jar clutched in one hand. The other prodded a bee that was trying to escape out the closed window.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, smashing the bee with a book.

He flushed bright red. "It's time he left. He has no business monopolizing your time. I cannot write without my muse." He reached for her.

She stepped away. "Are you mad? A sting would kill

him.”

“Nonsense. He only said that to make himself interesting. Never saw anyone so namby-pamby. If he’s frightened of bees, he should stay in town.”

“You are behaving like a child.”

“Child!”

“I’ve seen boys of ten with more sense – and more control over their sensibilities. Shall I report this to Chester?”

“You’d peach on me?” He drew back his fist before mastering his temper. “Of course you would,” he snapped. “That filthy tradesman has bewitched you. How can you lower yourself to even speak with him? It’s time to remember your breeding, my dear. I’d meant to wait until my epic is published, but we’ll announce our betrothal at dinner. That should remind him not to forget his station.”

“He never— What betrothal?”

“Ours. You know I cannot write without you.”

“I’ve never heard such nonsense in my life.” Her outburst twisted his face into confusion. “I will not wed you, Reginald. We would never suit. And you cannot support a wife in any case.”

“Why? We’d have to move into larger rooms, of course, but this place has plenty.”

“No one can be this stupid,” she muttered, then shifted to keep a table between them. “It’s time you faced the truth, Reginald. Chester will toss all of us out the moment he gets the title. You know he hates us.”

“Never. He has a duty—”

“Chester cares nothing for duty. I know his plans – as would you, if you listened to what he says instead of walking around with your head in the clouds. Unless you want to starve most poetically, you will have to find a position.”

“Is that why you’re dangling after Lascar?”

“I’m not dangling, nor does Mr. Lascar consider me more than a source of information in Chester’s absence. He is a professional so immersed in work that he sees only walls and beams. His questions address maintenance issues.”

“Nonsense.” He crossed his arms. “I’ve seen how he looks at you.”

“You wouldn’t know truth if it bit you on the ankle – but we won’t argue further. Take yourself off. And no

more pranks. I'll see you transported or worse if you harm a guest in this house."

Reginald had stuttered and wailed, but in the end he'd left. She'd removed evidence of the bee, yet the incident added one more worry to her shoulders. Reginald's temper remained black.

He did not seriously want a wife. She doubted he would know what to do with one. But he *did* want an audience for his verse. If she had to listen to much more of it, she would go mad.

It wasn't his jealousy that bothered her – he would forget it the moment Mr. Lascar left. Her real fear was that he'd noted her infatuation. Reginald rarely paid attention to others, but he occasionally startled her with surprising insights. If she was transparent to Reginald, then Catherine must also suspect. It would give the woman a new grievance.

Catherine's spite had doubled in recent days, as had her vitriol. Faith almost wished the investigator would prove the duke dead so Chester could put Catherine in her place. If Faith wasn't honor-bound to protect the staff, she would leave today.

Yet Faith wasn't Catherine's only target. Fear of the future was stripping civility from everyone in the household. Catherine's sniping kept the colonel's nerves on edge. It drove Hortense out of the house for hours on end. Esther's eyes were permanently rimmed with red. Reginald grew more petulant by the hour.

Concentrate on your own problems. You owe them nothing, for they aren't your family.

Good advice, she admitted as she turned toward the state apartments. It was time to deal with her infatuation. It had started in an instant, reminding her too sharply of how the duchess had described her first meeting with the duke. But Faith had no hope of even a momentary happy ending. The duchess had been beautiful, desirable, well-born, accomplished, and perfect. Faith wasn't. There would be no marriage in *her* future. She'd accepted that truth years ago, so it was ridiculous to entertain dreams now.

Yet she couldn't control her emotions.

She wished she could blame Mr. Lascar, but it wasn't his fault that excitement stirred whenever they shared a room – some days she could barely breathe when he was nearby. He was a model of propriety, better behaved than most gentlemen. How frustrating

that a man from the lower orders could stir her senses so easily. Since the moment his eyes had first met hers, she'd been intensely aware of him. Touches he didn't even notice burned her skin. Her breath often froze in her throat, turning her voice into a startled squeak or a thick rumble. He was quite unlike Chester's rakish friends.

She had to admire his taste. Every day he described how he wanted to finish various rooms, then asked for suggestions on how to convince Chester. Flattered as she was, she couldn't help him. Nothing swayed Chester. All she could do was wish Mr. Lascar success. He loved the house as much as she did.

Which was why he asked about the Willowby family. Who was heir after Chester? How many others were in line for the title? What were their interests? Would Westcourt hold children soon or should he leave the nursery floor alone once necessary repairs were done, letting the parents of the next occupants address changes?

Faith knew that some of his questions had no bearing on the renovation, yet she never dampened his curiosity. Answering kept her at his side. And she enjoyed discussing those whose lives she knew so well. It was an opportunity that rarely arose, for the family didn't discuss private matters with people like her. And Lady Catherine refused to admit that any of her ancestors had been less than exemplary. To hear her talk, one would think every Willowby man had been a saint and every woman a goddess.

Mr. Lascar's questions grew less pertinent every day, though. Yesterday he'd asked how the unseasonal heat that had blown in overnight compared to her childhood home in Bombay. She understood his interest in the land where his father had died, but she should not have indulged either of them in private, for it fed dreams she had no business entertaining.

Yet it had been the most pleasurable hour of her life. His probing revived humorous memories she'd all but forgotten. The agonizing grief that had plagued her for so long had waned when she wasn't looking, so in a small way, he'd restored her family to her.

Her heart stumbled in gratitude, then galloped so fast she feared it would burst. She was in worse straits than she'd feared. And he was far more dangerous.

Another pleasurable interlude had occurred in the

drawing room where she'd unaccountably related a droll account of how the competition between the draper's son and a tenant's son over the blacksmith's daughter had erupted into fisticuffs in the confectioner's shop. A scandal they would not soon live down, though they at least had the excuse of being barely seventeen...

Today she would concentrate on business, then excuse herself to finish Catherine's tonic. And this must be the last time she helped him. Severing further contact was the only way to prevent pain when he left. For he would leave. And soon. She could not go with him. She was as unsuited to his world as to Lady Catherine's and could never make an acceptable wife in any case.

Wife?

Faith paused at the entrance of the state apartments. So *that* was where her heart was heading. *Preposterous!* Though on the surface her breeding might be acceptable to a tradesman, she was unmarriageable. Even those who didn't know her darkest secrets agreed. Her advanced age alone made her ineligible, as did her limp. No one liked deformity. A scar could be hidden, but her limp was there for anyone to see. She was only accepted at Westcourt because she worked as an upper servant rather than demanding recognition as a lady. She was never welcome in the drawing room when Catherine received callers. Nor did she sit with the family in church.

Then there was her vivid coloring, which was quite out of fashion, as it denoted a passionate nature that could not be trusted. How often had Catherine blamed the duchess's red hair for her madness? And Faith had no dowry. Her inheritance didn't count, for invested, it paid only twenty pounds a year.

Catherine had made sure Faith understood the truth when she'd arrived at Westcourt fifteen years earlier. She had been kind about it, but society set the rules, and neither of them could change them. Chester had been blunt to the point of pain four years later when he called after the duke first failed to appear. Faith was unmarriageable. Period. An object of pity who – outside of Westcourt – could expect no better than a position as a lady's companion. And she could only keep that if she learned to control her temper and remain demure.

Which was why working with Mr. Lascar was so special. She couldn't hope for friendship – men did not make friends of ladies – but he respected her intelligence. Memories of their conversations would warm her barren future.

* * * *

John's hand trembled when Miss Harper entered the state bedchamber, but he swiftly controlled it. He'd become an expert at hiding how she affected him.

He ought to avoid her. Even glimpsing her in the distance triggered waves of lust that nearly brought him to his knees. An intelligent man would stay as far away as possible.

But conversing with her was too enjoyable. He'd not spoken this easily with anyone in his life, certainly not with a female. Indulging the novelty was stupid. It interfered with his work and endangered his reputation, but he couldn't help himself. Their friendship was too precious.

To her, too. It had taken less than a day to discover that the family used her shamelessly. Lady Catherine insulted her at every turn, though Miss Harper's manners were better than anyone else's. He watched her cringe during the daily fights at dinner, then endure barb after barb aimed at imaginary faults in her own behavior.

There was nothing he could say that wouldn't make her position worse, but he could offer her a respite. So every morning he wracked his brains for questions that only she could answer, pointedly ignoring that the meetings served him more than her.

This need to keep her close made him a hopeless case, he admitted, smiling down from his perch on a ladder. It was disconcerting to discover this crack in his discipline, for he'd always put his career and reputation before personal pleasure. His associates would be shocked that he would exchange that career in a trice for touching her, exploring her softness, diving into—

No more.

Letting his mind wander was dangerous. Yes, he loved her. Madly. Deeply. Probably forever. Each meeting made it worse. But no one had ever promised that life would be fair. He could not aspire to a wife with her breeding, so he must cling to honor. Giving in could only disgust her, which would hurt far more

than keeping his hands to himself.

“Another problem?” she asked, frowning up at him.

“Must the state apartments remain in this location?”

It was a senseless question, for only Chester could answer it, but he could think of no other.

“What’s wrong with them?”

“What isn’t? Not only is the damage more extensive than I first thought, but they are tucked away on the top floor. That was common four hundred years ago, but it is not done today. To reach them one must either weave around the nursery and three attics or wander through the servants’ wing, hardly suitable for important guests.”

“But moving the state apartments would be very expensive. And there are few places they could go. They are too opulent for ordinary guests, so they cannot be positioned near the main stairs. If Chester doesn’t officially have a title...”

“Of course. But he must consider it. This chimney stack is cracked and has been for some time if the rot is any indication. He must either move the state apartments or tear the walls out and start over. Moving them will cost less.”

“Maybe he should tear the house down. There isn’t a sound section left.”

“The wages of neglect. But Westcourt is not yet derelict. How often are these rooms used?”

“These are actually the second set. The first duke replaced the earl’s fortified manor in 1555, keeping only the Tudor wing. This was one of the new sections. Elizabeth stayed here twice, then James once and Charles once. The rooms were refurbished for Charles II after the Restoration – he and the fifth duke were quite close, so he visited often. But he was the last monarch to see Westcourt. Many courtiers fell out of favor after George I took the throne, including the fifth duke. He was a staunch Tory with a Catholic wife – both anathema to the new Whig government. The sixth duke was his four-year-old grandson. Though the boy lived to adulthood, he never took his seat in Parliament so never drew the king’s eye. The seventh duke followed his lead. The eighth was very active in government, but George III did not often travel.”

“If Lord Chester wins the title, will he entertain royalty?”

“I doubt it. He has no interest in Parliament and

does not approve of the Regent's set. Not that his own is any better. He consorts mostly with fribbles and libertines. He also dislikes Princess Charlotte, so there will be no monarch in his lifetime who would visit him. While he wants the power and respect of the title – and the fortune, of course – I cannot see him shouldering responsibilities.”

“What about his heirs?”

“That's a question no one can answer. I've never met his current heir, so I've no idea what will happen if Westcourt goes to him. That branch of the family is too remote for the archives to contain more than a few letters.”

“I thought Chester was betrothed.”

“Not yet. And he may never be if he doesn't gain the title.”

“That would sway his choice?”

“Of course. Chester wants only the best, but the high-ranking lady he would demand would never accept a younger son with uncertain prospects who is older than her father.” She frowned. “What does this have to do with the restoration?”

“After being unused for more than a century, these rooms are in abysmal condition even without the leaks. But there is no reason to refurbish until they are needed. Tastes might well change by then.”

“True.” She stared at the hole in the ceiling. “That's new. How did the plaster come down?”

“It fell when I was inspecting the chimney. Stay by the door, for the whole place is rotten.” He jabbed his penknife into a beam, shaking his head. “The water spread from chimney to wall, then across the ceiling. You didn't notice it because the stains blend so well with the painting.” Verrio's riot of angels and goddesses remained bright, hiding stains unless one looked closely. “The substrate has separated from this beam”—he leaned to point—

The ladder tipped.

Miss Harper screamed.

Pain knifed up his leg as he landed, the ladder atop him.

Cursing under his breath, he shoved it aside and tried to rise, but his ankle collapsed. His head smashed against the hearth.

“How badly are you hurt?” she demanded.

Before he could gather his wits, new pain knifed up

his leg. "Don't."

She tugged harder on his boot. "If we don't pull it off immediately, we'll have to cut it. This is already swelling."

"Right," he managed through gritted teeth. He didn't know which was worse – the pain or the heat as her hands prodded his ankle.

"I don't think it's broken. But the sprain is bad. I'll call Ned to help you back to your room."

"No." He forced the leg out of reach before her touch shattered his control. "It's fine. The pain is receding. It will be right as rain in an hour or two."

"You can't mean to walk on it!"

"Of course. I've sprained it before, and likely will again." Determination kept his voice steady, for the pain still rolled through him in waves. He wasn't sure the bone was intact.

To keep her from touching him, he sat up – and immediately slumped sideways, overwhelmed by dizziness.

"You hit your head." She pulled it down to examine his scalp.

"No," he lied. "The fall knocked my breath out for a moment."

"Nonsense. Let me see." She moved closer, peering into his eyes from inches away.

"I'm fine." He tried to push her away, but his hands wouldn't work. Her scent engulfed him, weakening his resolve. She was practically in his lap, green eyes glowing, her forehead creased with anxiety.

He closed that last tiny gap and kissed her.

She smelled of spring, of freshness, of everything he'd ever wanted and couldn't have. And her taste...

Awareness coursed from head to toe, awakening every fiber of his being. This, *this* was what he needed to fill his soul and banish the loneliness that had stalked him for twenty years.

His hands stroked up her back, over her shoulders, and along her throat to frame her face, gently fingering the hair tumbling from its knot, savoring its silkiness against his skin. He kept his lips light, brushing softly lest he scare her away.

But she showed no fear. Passion stirred in her eyes, darkening the green to winter pine. Her hands clutched him, drawing him closer...

Control slipped, flashing heat into the kiss. His

tongue plunged deep, drinking her sweetness. Her mouth was a fever. The ache of it throbbed in his groin. Her heat scorched until he expected to burst into flames.

More. He needed more. Never had a kiss so excited his senses. Heat and light and sizzling fire—

Stop!

Reality blasted desire, jolting him back to awareness, though the room continued to swing in fast, dizzy circles. Her face reflected shock and the beginnings of fear.

What was he doing? This was not an accommodating widow serving up a night of passion. Miss Harper was a lady. An innocent lady. She did not deserve to be mauled about like a courtesan or terrified into—

She scrambled out of reach. “I never meant—“

“What the devil do you think you’re doing?” roared Reginald from the door.

Miss Harper jumped as if shot, then whirled to stand between them as Reginald charged. “Thank heaven you’re here,” she stammered. “I fear he broke a foot when the ladder fell. Help him to his room while I send for the surgeon.”

“It doesn’t feel broken,” insisted John, trying to stand.

“It will be if you touch her again,” snapped Reginald, grabbing Miss Harper’s arm. He dragged her toward the door.

“Take your hands off me!” She twisted away and slapped his face. “Either help Mr. Lascar to his room, or leave. I’ve no time for your megrims.”

“I wouldn’t touch him if he were dying.”

“Then get out. I’ll find Ned.”

“No need,” repeated John. “I’ll manage.”

Miss Harper seemed torn by indecision, but she made no further protest when Reginald shoved her into the hall. Her lips formed *forgive me*. Then she was gone.

Forgive *her*? He clenched his fists until he steadied his breathing. The fault was his, from first to last. Whisking her into compromising positions. Kissing her. Jeopardizing her place at Westcourt...

Never would he blame another for his own misdeeds. *The mark of a gentleman is his willingness to accept responsibility for his own actions*, his mother

had warned him whenever he'd tried to avoid punishment. Reminding her that he was no gentleman had only made her worse. *That doesn't give you leave to lie!* she'd snapped. *If you ever hope to pursue your dreams, you must behave like a gentleman.*

So he'd learned to think carefully and respect others, regardless of their breeding.

Until Miss Harper. If today didn't prove his stupidity, nothing would. He'd known that keeping her close tempted fate. Now his control lay in shreds, and her reputation was in danger.

Worse, she would never trust him again.

He hauled himself to his feet and limped to the window, using the pain to dampen desire. The only atonement was to avoid her entirely.

* * * *

Faith raced away, hoping to escape, but Reginald caught up with her at the stairs. When he again grabbed her arm, she stomped on his foot.

"How dare—"

"Leave me alone! Go write something."

"I can't without you."

"Then you're stupid." When he backed a pace in shock, she whirled and fled.

There was no point in returning to the still room, she decided, ducking onto a servant stair – Reginald would never lower himself to use it. She needed time to settle before she dared face anyone else. If Lady Catherine saw her, she would accuse Mr. Lascar of making advances, especially if Reginald...

Never could Faith allow his reputation to suffer from her own silliness.

How could she have been stupid enough to kiss him, to sway forward as if she were a damned cobra mesmerized by his tune? He would think her utterly depraved. Surely she could control her urges, no matter what the provocation. And there had been no provocation.

True, she'd been terrified that he'd broken a bone, which was why she'd forgot to stay away from him. But that should not have affected her sense. Not even a concussion should have precipitated that folly. Yet the moment she'd stared into his brilliant blue eyes – looking for signs of confusion – she'd succumbed to the touch she'd craved since the day he'd arrived.

It had been glorious. Far better than her most

wanton dreams. Her body still tingled, thrumming with heat. Her knees remained so weak she could barely walk. It had been the most exciting experience of her life, leaving her breathless, heart pounding, fingers curled as if they again drew him close. How had a simple kiss made her feel as if she were drowning, sliding down where the air was too thick to breathe?

Her cheeks blazed hotter than ever as she recalled stroking his tongue—

His tongue? Dear lord, it was worse than she'd thought. Bad enough to kiss the man when he barely had the strength to move. But to employ a technique she'd only read about once and considered disgusting...

Not that it was, now that she thought about it. Actually—

Enough!

What must he think of her? He was clearly shocked, and who could blame him? For all she knew, he had a wife waiting for him in London.

Her face burned.

How could she face him after abusing him so badly? He was here to work, not dally, especially with her. Yet she'd brazenly thrown herself at him. If Chester found out, he would toss Mr. Lascar out and destroy his reputation so thoroughly that he would never win another commission. All her fault. If this was an indication of her character...

She slammed the door of her room, then closed the shutters so no one could see in from the courtyard. It was far from the best room in the house, being on the ground floor by the housekeeper's room, but today she was glad to be away from the family. Splashing water on cheeks that still burned with mortification, she fought her emotions under control.

Reading Venette's *Tableau de l'amour Conjugal* had been a terrible mistake – her eyes shifted to where the seemingly innocuous volume lay on her dressing table. It was bad enough that she'd looked at it at age sixteen, but to have opened it last night...

She shoved it into her wardrobe.

The dukes had collected several such volumes, all lavishly illustrated. Curiosity had driven her to learn French and Latin and even some German so she could read them. And the contents had figured heavily in her dreams since Mr. Lascar's arrival.

Now she knew just how dangerous fantasies could be.

It was time to remember that she was a lady who must avoid Mr. Lascar. Truly avoid him. For now, it would be easy, for he would not wish to see her, either. And Reginald would watch every move even if he'd not seen that kiss – she prayed she'd pulled away in time. But Mr. Lascar would return to Westcourt often as the work progressed. The only way to keep her weakness from creating a scandal was to leave.

Despite her insistence that she was prepared, she was as guilty as the others of ignoring the future. Yes, she'd mentally planned to assume a post as a paid companion. But she'd relied on fate to prevent Chester from winning the title. That way she could stay here and protect her friends.

Such dreaming was as bad as doing nothing. Expecting Chester to write her a character reference was worse. He would throw her out rather than lift a finger to help her, but her heart didn't want to admit it. It still hoped that the duke would return, pension off the staff, then let her run the house as she'd done for so long.

That would not happen.

It was time to face facts. There was nothing she could do for the staff. She had no money. She could not support even one servant, let alone the half dozen who had raised her. So she must save herself. Which meant asking the vicar to find her a post.

The renovations made it urgent. Sooner or later, someone would note her infatuation. The last thing she wanted was to dwindle into a laughingstock like Miss Jones from the village. The poor lady spent all her time panting after the schoolmaster despite that he hardly knew she existed and couldn't support a wife if he did.

Hiding at Westcourt was cowardly, shaming her parents. Dreaming of a better tomorrow was a waste of time. If she had accepted facts when the duke failed to appear, she would not now be mooning after an architect.

* * * *

John debated eating in his room, but it would place an unnecessary burden on the staff. Even the prospect of facing Reginald couldn't justify it. John had hobbled into the next room the moment Miss Harper was gone

– which had been a lucky choice. Reginald had returned, then ranted when he discovered his quarry gone. When Reginald smashed the ladder into the wall, John had prudently slipped under the bed. He'd been in too much pain to manage calming an angry gentlemen. The only saving grace was that Reginald's diatribe did not include that kiss, so Miss Harper's reputation should survive.

As for tonight, he headed for the drawing room early, heart booming hollowly in his chest. If he was embroiled in conversation with the colonel when the others came down, no one else would feel obligated to speak with him.

Kissing Miss Harper had been a huge mistake, unleashing too much love and passion. How long before he could resume control? If only he could court her...

But he couldn't. Breeding was all important to the upper classes, and he didn't have it.

Stop this obsessive brooding.

Not until he turned onto the main staircase did he realize that the hammering in his ears came not from his heart, but from an actual hammer. Hortense crouched midway down the flight, driving a nail into a baluster. The next stroke slipped—

"Drat!" She grabbed one hand with the other.

"Are you all right?" He hurried to her side.

"Of course." But her voice held pain.

"What have you done to yourself?"

"Missed the nail." She shrugged. "It is nothing."

"Why were you trying to drive a nail anyway? You have footmen."

"They have other duties. I don't want Catherine to fall if this loose railing lets go."

"You could have asked me. Take advantage of my presence instead of doing everything yourself." Rage at Chester again built in his chest. No lady should have to engage in carpentry.

"Asked you what?" demanded Lady Catherine, appearing at the top of the stairs.

"If someone had mentioned the loose banister, I could have repaired it in a trice. Instead, Miss Hortense tried to fix it herself and smashed her hand." He held up her bleeding thumb.

"How many times must I remind you of your breeding," snapped Lady Catherine. "Ladies do not

assume servants' duties. Clean that at once, then leave the repairs to a footmen."

"If I did that, the house would tumble down around your ears!" Hortense glared at Lady Catherine. "It's all very well to put on airs when you've someone to pamper you, but we don't."

"Arrogant hoyden..." Lady Catherine sputtered incoherently.

John glared. "I respectfully disagree, my lady. It is neither arrogant nor hoydenish to address problems that no one else has time to handle, particularly when one knows how." He turned to Hortense. "However, it *is* arrogant to do so when other options exist. Use the tools at hand, Miss Hortense. I will finish this, and I expect to hear about any other problems that threaten your safety." Turning his back on a furious Lady Catherine, he examined Hortense's thumb. "I don't think it's broken, but you should see after it without further ado."

"Hortense!" gasped Miss Esther, joining them on the stairs. "What have you done?"

"Nothing." She shoved her hand behind her, but not before Esther had seen it.

"Blood!" Esther swayed. "You've killed yourself."

"Of course not. Hand her your salts," she ordered Lady Catherine. "She'll swoon else."

John sprinted up the stairs, catching Esther as she crumpled. Lady Catherine fumbled in a pocket, finally producing a vinaigrette to wave under Esther's nose. John's eyes watered from the fumes.

"What happened now?" demanded Miss Harper, finding the staircase blocked.

"She saw the cut on my hand," said Hortense.

"Not again." She, too, pulled Hortense's hand closer. "Come to the still room. We'll bind that up."

"I'll finish here," repeated John. He carried Esther downstairs and set her on a chair.

"Do that," said Lady Catherine. "I don't know what the world is coming to when ladies think they should engage in repairs." She glared at Hortense, who shrugged and took herself off.

John moved the nail to a more efficacious position and pounded it in with three strokes. He'd not noted the loose banister, but then he rarely touched the banisters when he used the stairs. It was something else to check on the morrow.

Reginald appeared as he was testing the other balusters. "Can't you work when decent folk are elsewhere?" he demanded petulantly. "One would think so *renowned* a tradesman would be more aware of propriety."

John said nothing, though he would love to plant a fist in that sneering face. He hated parasites. Reginald would never lift a finger to help Hortense. He did absolutely nothing that John could see, ignoring even gentlemanly pastimes like riding. Apart from writing, his only activity seemed to be annoying Miss Harper.

"Out of my way," growled Reginald, prodding him with a toe instead of walking around him. "And don't claim injuries. I can see yours are grossly exaggerated."

Hortense returned, her thumb bandaged. "Don't be ridiculous, Reginald. How dare you insult him when you refuse to fix anything yourself."

"Insult! It's his job."

"Hardly. He is an architect, not a footman. Stop annoying him. Your airs make you look ridiculous. Join the colonel in the drawing room before I lose my temper entirely."

Reginald sputtered, but went.

"Forgive us," said Hortense. "We should not let this unsettling period corrupt our manners."

"There is nothing to forgive. But let me handle this sort of thing while I'm here."

She smiled. "You're a good lad, Lascar. After dinner, perhaps you can look at Catherine's wardrobe. The door is loose."

Chapter Eight

*I didn't know Richard had a brother until today,
though I cannot blame Richard for hiding it. If even half
of his claims are true, Chester is Evil beyond imagining.*

Such Dishonor must sicken even the Stalwart. Yet

Richard never lies, so I must believe.

Duchess of Westfield, Sept 1784

John escaped from the church into full sunshine. Sunlight made the village picturesque, glinting from the blue shutters and window boxes of the inn, reflecting rainbows of color from the church windows, turning the village green into an inviting lawn.

But he found no pleasure in the sight. His folly in kissing Miss Harper weighed heavily on his soul. She'd avoided him ever since, her distrust obvious. The way Reginald positioned himself between them made it worse. Even if he'd seen nothing, Reginald's instincts were on the alert.

The service might have settled his turmoil if he'd been properly repentant, but his only regret was that he'd frightened Miss Harper. Well, not his only regret. The incident had intensified his love, turning it into a living, breathing entity that gave him no peace. Now that he'd tasted her, he wanted more. Needed more. Should they find themselves alone, he was bound to err again. He lacked the strength to resist.

So he must avoid her.

Yet he could not let her remain in fear. Unless she relaxed, Reginald was sure to note her sudden antagonism. Suspicion would draw censure onto her head. And John's, of course, though he no longer cared. No one could scold him more harshly than he did.

He must ease her mind. He'd planned to invite her into his carriage for the ten-minute ride back to Westcourt, sit on the rear-facing seat, knot his hands in his lap, and apologize, assuring her that she need not fear a repetition. Now that he'd completed his survey, he would concentrate on devising solutions. For that he could remain in the library where he would be out of her way.

But Miss Harper had foiled his intentions quite neatly. First, she'd avoided the family by sitting in the back of the church. Then she'd slipped away during the benediction. When John tried to follow, the vicar cornered him.

"I cannot believe that Lord Chester left without even paying me a call," the man complained.

"He will return shortly." John tried to turn away, but the hand on his elbow tightened.

"I must speak with him." The vicar frowned. "It is vital that he press the trustees harder. Look at that roof!" He gestured toward the ceiling. "One more violent storm will finish it."

"I will tell him."

"We share his fury that Parliament refuses him his title, but he must accept that he is far from helpless. As steward he can authorize necessary repairs. If the

trustees object, the courts can appoint new ones. They have a duty to preserve the estate. How—”

“I will pass on your message, but—”

The vicar ignored his interruption, clearly reveling in a new audience. “—anyone can justify letting it decay into rubble is beyond me. It is time to put an end to this madness. The ninth duke has been dead these thirty years. The tenth must be recognized.”

“Without proof, he cannot be. You know the rules as well as I. One title has been in abeyance for three hundred years because no one knows when or where the last lord died.”

“Yes, yes, but that is different. The lord was adult when he disappeared and could easily have fathered an heir. That is not the case here. Had the ninth duke reached adulthood, he would have stepped forward – no duke can ignore duty. He could not have legally wed before his majority, so there can be no heir. But those London gabblesnapes would love to deny Lord Chester his rights.”

“Why?”

“Jealousy. He is a finer man than any of them. Which is why I must speak to him. Only he can help, for the trustees don’t care. Not once in my fifteen years in this parish has any of them visited Westcourt. But I cannot sit by while a fine building collapses from neglect.”

John nodded, for the church was in obvious distress. “Why tell me?”

“They dismissed Lord Chester’s latest request, accusing him of exaggeration. Dismissed it out of hand without even sending a man to see for himself. But if you add your voice, they must accept the truth.”

John sighed. “I will tell Lord Chester you wish to see him.” Beyond that, he could promise nothing. His commission did not yet extend beyond Westcourt’s water troubles.

He finally escaped, blinking to adjust his eyes to the sunlight, then headed for his carriage. Progress was slow. The vicar was not alone in his distress. Villagers also charged him with messages.

The inn’s stable was derelict. Westcourt was six months in arrears paying the blacksmith. Two tenants wanted to start a pottery to make up for poor crop yields. A neighbor swore that Westcourt had confiscated sheep that had wandered onto its land.

Lord Chester sent all requests to the trustees, but accomplished nothing.

This time John did not look at the park as he approached the house. Listening to the villagers' complaints had revived his fears. Were the trustees doddering fools as everyone claimed, or was Chester lying? There was no reason to run a wealthy estate into the ground. But if they had truly put all responsibility onto Chester's shoulders, they'd made it easy for him to loot Westcourt's coffers.

His mother's voice again echoed. *A man who fails to address his responsibilities in a timely fashion is unworthy of respect and cannot be trusted.* John had worked hard to earn the respect of everyone he met, but not everyone could make that claim, and some of the worst cads were gentlemen born.

How much did Chester earn as steward? A selfish man might discard honor to serve his own interests. Once that happened, lying, cheating, and stealing became easy. Especially when everyone agreed that Westfield's fortune should be his anyway.

Lying to the trustees about how he spent estate funds could easily extend to other lies that would put more money in his hands. But sooner or later those lies would catch up.

One fact was glaringly obvious. No one but Chester had communicated with the trustees in years. Long before Chester had formally taken over as steward, he had established himself as the official liaison between Westcourt dependents and the trustees. No one dared bypass him. That, more than anything, set off alarms.

If the renovations went forward, would the workers be paid? How could John accept a commission that might put undue burdens on laborers?

Westcourt would soon deteriorate beyond rescue. Current maintenance was nonexistent – he discounted Hortense's efforts to hold rot at bay; she could easier hold back floodwaters. Chester might want the duke's authority, but he was addressing none of the duke's responsibilities.

John couldn't ignore the questions. Aside from his attachment to the house, he felt a growing interest in its occupants and dependents. So he would do what no one else dared and approach the trustees directly. If they refused to investigate, he would ask the court to appoint new ones.

But before he could return to town, he must set Miss Harper's mind at ease and finish his renovation plans.

She wasn't there. Ned confirmed that she had not yet returned from services, so he moved his notes and drawings to the library and set to work.

* * * *

Faith followed a circuitous path through the woods after leaving the church. She needed time to clear her head, away from the house. She couldn't think while sharing a roof with Mr. Lascar.

But she couldn't think here, either, she realized half an hour later. No matter how hard she tried, she could not regret that impetuous kiss. Nor could she summon shame. It had been the most exciting event of her life. All she *could* do was avoid him so her base behavior did not hurt him. For now, that meant staying in the kitchen. Cook could use her help.

But all thought fled the moment she reached the door. Cook had collapsed. Again.

"It's my fault," sobbed Polly. "I was talking to the gardener, so Cook started lunch without me. She's not done that in months and was shocked at how weak she's grown. When I came in, she snapped at me for being late, then clutched her chest, turned gray, and passed out."

Faith straightened Cook's arm, inhaling deeply to calm a heart that was flopping about like a landed fish. This spell was worse than the last one. Though Cook's breath hissed in and out in short pants, no color remained in her usually ruddy cheeks. "The floor is cold. We must move her to bed." She glanced at Ned. "Fetch Mr. Lascar." Much as she hated to ask him, no one else could help. Ned was reasonably strong, but he was nearly sixty, and Mrs. Foley weighed at least eighteen stone. None of the family would enter the kitchen. Besides, the colonel had only one hand, and Reginald used his weak chest to avoid even mild labor. He'd grouched just that morning that his pottery water jug was too heavy and demanded a porcelain one.

Ned hurried away. Polly collapsed in tears. The scullery maid held both hands over her mouth as if smothering screams.

As Faith slid a folded towel under Cook's head, Cook's breathing changed to a rasping choke.

"Help me turn her," she ordered Polly. "She's swallowing her tongue."

"Will she die?" demanded Polly as they rolled her onto her side.

"I don't know. This is the worst spell yet." Cook should have regained consciousness by now. The last spell had passed in a quarter hour but had caused lasting damage. Cook had never worked a full day again. Now she would have to retire. She needed nursing and rest. If Chester refused, Faith must approach the trustees directly.

Rolling helped. Cook's breathing returned to pants.

Faith held her hand near Cook's mouth and frowned. Her exhales were robust, so she was getting enough air. Yet she didn't recover consciousness. It did not bode well.

Ned returned with Mr. Lascar.

"Has anyone sent for the doctor?" Mr. Lascar demanded, kneeling on Cook's other side.

Faith shook her head. "The doctor is of little use to anyone, and he does not treat servants – they haven't the wherewithal to pay his fees. After her last spell, the apothecary made up a tonic that eased her troubles."

"Did she take it today?" He met Faith's gaze.

"I don't know. Fetch it," she told Polly. "If she can swallow, it may help." While Polly raced away, she turned back to Mr. Lascar. "We must put her to bed, but I've no idea how to manage it."

He glanced around, then nodded. "I do." He headed for the door. But instead of going out to fetch a gate, he grabbed a low bench and knocked off its legs.

"Wha—"

"I'll fix it when we're done." He pushed the bench top against Cook's back, then turned to Ned. "Roll her."

Faith held Cook's head so it didn't bump, but Cook again began choking. "She can't breathe on her back."

"Turn her head sideways. We'll lay her on her side when we reach her room." He grabbed the towel and tied Cook's hands together at her waist. "Careful not to tip her. The bench is narrow. Ready?"

Ned grabbed the foot and Mr. Lascar the head.

"I'll help," said Faith, taking her place next to Ned.

Mr. Lascar nodded. "On three. One ... two ... three!" They hoisted the bench.

Faith thought her arms would pull from their

sockets, but she gritted her teeth and took as much weight as she could. Sweat already decorated Ned's forehead. Mr. Lascar showed no sign of strain.

"I'll go first," he said. "Tell me where."

"Out the door and turn right – toward your left," she amended, for he was walking backwards. They lurched forward in half-steps. Somehow they negotiated two corners and rolled Cook onto the bed.

"If she is wearing a corset, take it off," Mr. Lascar ordered as Cook's breathing slowed. "Did you find the tonic?" he asked Polly.

"No, sir. I can't find the bottle." Her terrified gaze turned to Faith. "'Tain't nowhere, miss."

Faith's heart nearly stopped. Surely Cook understood that she must take the tonic every day...

Unless she couldn't afford more.

Cursing, Faith forced calm over her face. "Today's spell is not your fault, Polly. She must have run out of tonic. Even if you had started lunch, she would have collapsed."

"Shall I have it refilled?" asked Mr. Lascar.

"If you would." She hated to ask, but she couldn't leave Cook.

He was headed for the door, when Cook choked. The harsh sound raised every hair on Faith's neck.

Then silence.

"Mrs. Foley!" She sprang toward the bed. Polly leaped to the other side.

"She's d-dead," stammered Polly.

"She can't be," insisted Faith. But there was no sign of breath. And when she pressed her ear against Cook's back, she heard only silence.

Mr. Lascar checked Cook's eyes, then rolled her gently onto her back. "I'm sorry, Miss Harper." His hand rested comfortingly on her shoulder. "She's gone."

A sob escaped before Faith could contain it. Then darkness blinded her to all but the pain ripping through her chest.

She should have done more, should have gone to the trustees long ago. She'd vowed to care for those who'd served so long, vowed to arrange their well-deserved retirements. But she hadn't. Cook had died in pain, guilty over her slipping skills, hurt that the duke had abandoned them, furious that they had wasted so many years for nothing. Ned, Polly, and the

Baineses must fear similar fates.

Now Faith would deal them a worse blow by leaving them behind. It was dishonorable, breaking promises she'd repeated for years. To the Baineses in particular. She owed them so much...

She wished Buster remained alive. He had let her cry into his fur and cuddle close at night, easing the grief she'd expected to last forever. She needed that uncomplicated devotion now, for once again a prop had been jerked from under her feet.

Cook had been the first to draw her across the line separating servant from master. She'd offered a terrified child a soft bosom, a willing ear, and sound sense liberally laced with biscuits. Her warmth had made life bearable.

But now she was gone...

How much time passed, Faith didn't know. When she opened her eyes, Mr. Lascar was holding her against a very wet shoulder, his lips pressed lightly into her hair. Polly and Ned were gone.

"You loved her," he said softly.

"She— She and Mrs. Baines looked after me when I first arrived. Without them I would have been lost."

"They became your family." He set her carefully aside and paced to the narrow window. "It is always painful to lose someone close, but she lived a long life. It was her time."

"I know." She felt bereft without his warmth, but she could hardly blame him for moving away. It was surprising enough that he'd stayed this long. Pulling herself together, she rose. "Thank you for your assistance. I can manage from here, so we needn't disrupt your work any longer."

The words sounded stilted, but they were all she could manage.

He nodded brusquely and left.

Choking back another sob, Faith raised Cook's hand to her lips, then headed for the kitchen. Catherine would expect lunch. Upsets in the servants' hall could not be allowed to impinge on the family.

Once she made sure Polly had the meal in hand, she tracked down Baines.

* * * *

John returned to the library, his emotions in turmoil. If only he could help Miss Harper... But she'd pulled away.

He couldn't blame her. It must have grated to ask for aid from the man who had forced attentions on her. Losing composure was always embarrassing, but with him...

It was good she'd refused further assistance, he reminded himself. He couldn't risk another touch. He'd barely managed to hold her quietly while she wept. Her pain scored his soul. Walking away had been worse.

He forced his mind back to the new roof design. The drawings needn't be exact as long as Chester could see the concept. But even preliminary sketches would take several days. There were many rooms. And he needed a second copy for the trustees.

At least the library provided an excellent work space. Its large tables let him spread out his notes – far more than usual. Creating them had kept his hands away from Miss Harper. But going through them all would take time.

The packet for the trustees would contain more information than the one for Chester, including maintenance records and his justification for all the proposed changes. So he'd borrowed – with Miss Harper's permission – the estate books. Already he'd found entries more than ten years old documenting leaks.

He must also build a strong case for future maintenance. Unless Chester kept the place up, there was little point in expensive decorating.

Pulling the ledgers closer, he set to work.

Chapter Nine

Richard brought me to London for the opening of Parliament. It feels odd when men flirt with me, hoping I will press their causes with Richard. Even their wives toady. I can only relax with other duchesses, but they are few and mostly quite old. Thank God for Richard's love...

Duchess of Westfield, Nov. 1784

Monday afternoon Faith slipped into the courtyard, hoping for an hour alone. She'd not slept at all last night. Even after she'd crawled into bed, her brain had jumped about, futilely seeking something solid in a world that was crumbling around her.

Her problem had begun in the state apartments, of

course. Kissing Mr. Lascar had left her so mortified that she'd barely forced her feet to dinner that night. The meal had been even worse than expected. Not only had Hortense's accident unleashed everyone's tempers, resulting in the most strident arguments she'd ever witnessed, but Mr. Lascar had ignored her, and Reginald had interfered when she'd tried to apologize. She'd had to listen to his poetry for hours to keep him from causing a worse scene.

Losing Mr. Lascar's friendship felt like death.

But what had she expected? No man wanted an unattractive female hanging on his sleeve. He'd made that abundantly clear by shutting himself in the library ever since. Not one question. Not one comment. Other than offering his comfort over Cook's body, he'd ignored her very existence.

It was the best solution, of course. She'd proved that her control was inadequate, and that could only grow worse. Her lips still burned from his kiss. Her nerves still pulsed from his touch. He must recognize her infatuation.

Or was it infatuation?

Separating reality from fantasy grew harder every day. Was she exaggerating a mild attraction to hold grief at bay? Recalling his touch beat planning a funeral any day.

Mrs. Foley is gone.

She forced herself to repeat it, swallowing the tears each repetition raised.

Cook had acted as surrogate mother to the grieving child who'd landed on Westcourt's doorstep. The Baineses had ultimately become as dear, but they'd been slow to cross the gulf separating a baronet's granddaughter from the servants. So it had been Cook who'd dried her tears, Cook who'd welcomed her into the kitchen when her room grew too lonely, and Cook who'd stepped into the breach when it became obvious that there would be no governess, using the kitchen accounts to teach sums and how to manage money.

Faith had known for more than a year that Cook's health was failing, yet her passing had been so sudden that she'd had no time to prepare. Nor could she properly grieve, for she was surrounded by those who didn't care. The family was delighted that Chester must now hire a decent cook. She'd nearly slapped Reginald when he'd chastised her for mourning a

servant. Her grief widened the gulf between her and the family, reminding her yet again that she didn't belong here. Her father had done her a grave disservice by foisting her onto a household so far above her station.

Even the staff felt more relief than grief, for they had all suffered from Cook's declining abilities. Only Baines truly mourned, in part because it emphasized how frail his wife had become. She would be next and not too far off.

Faith's worst shock had come from Mrs. Baines. Despite that her mind was nearly gone, poor woman, she'd reacted with her first clear memory in days.

"Betty and I came to Westcourt the same day," she'd said weakly. "Hired at the mid-summer fair we were. Betty for the kitchen, me for the nursery."

"Richard was a babe then, wasn't he?" she'd prompted, knowing Mrs. Baines had helped raise the eighth duke.

"Aye, a bonny lad. The sweetest boy you'd ever want to meet. No trace of mean in him, unlike his brother. That Chester was bad through and through. All boys play pranks, but his were malicious. Enjoyed inflicting pain, he did. Had to always be the center of attention. If he wasn't, someone paid. Tossed a groom in with an unbroken colt because he'd brought Chester's horse around five minutes late. Lad was lucky to escape with a broken leg. But Richard..."

A smile tugged those ancient lips. "Richard never chastised us. Not even the day I tripped over a rug and spilled water 'cross a letter he was writing. He just says, *No harm done, Mabel*, and sends the footman for rags. 'Twas Richard who promoted us when Baines and I married. Newly wed himself that year. Installed Betty as Cook at the same time – she used to sneak him treats whenever he came through the kitchen. Never looked down on us. Not to say he ignored his place. We had our job and he had his, but he respected us. Can't bear to think of Chester taking over. No respect, even for his peers. At least Betty escaped that." Tears overflowed.

Faith had patted her hand while she cried. The moment of cogency had not lasted, of course. They rarely did these days. Faith wished this one had not happened, for to waste lucidity on grief seemed unfair.

But life was rarely fair.

Forcing her mind back to the courtyard, she pulled weeds from one of the planters. With Baines's approval, she'd promoted Polly to cook. Excitement was already mitigating Polly's grief. Faith would have to find a new kitchen maid, though. Maybe the vicar knew of someone.

Or maybe not. He'd proved singularly unhelpful yesterday.

She'd spoken with him before services, but the meeting had not gone well. His initial amiability had turned to shock when she'd announced her intention to find a post. Then the questions had started. Did Chester know her plans? What about the trustees? Did she understand what accepting a post would mean?

When she'd reminded him that she was well past the age of consent and that Chester had no authority over her in any case, he'd reluctantly agreed to inquire about positions. But he'd again urged her to reconsider. Chester would never approve.

In retrospect, she should have written to the trustees or to a London employment firm. The vicar would do nothing that might jeopardize Chester's regard. So he would speak to Chester before helping her.

A shiver trickled down her spine. Chester might refuse to supply a reference and prevent others from doing so. Or he might settle her with the most disagreeable dowager in England. Mrs. Baines was right. He enjoyed inflicting pain and did not tolerate being crossed. His word was law. No protests allowed. *He* could find her a post, but to leave on her own...

Why hadn't she considered that earlier?

She'd let fear and embarrassment push her into acting impulsively, which could only make her situation worse. And for what? Mr. Lascar did not hate her, despite that she'd behaved like a wanton. He might be more formal – and who could blame him? – but he remained courteous. Without his help, Cook's death would be unbearable. Who else would have comforted her through the first rush of grief and pain? Despite everything, he remained a friend.

She moved to the next planter, pondering how to extricate herself from this latest trouble.

* * * *

Chester strode into Westcourt without waiting for

Baines to open the door. Soon he could turn off the lot of them, and good riddance. They'd irritated him since the day he'd been born. It was time to install a staff loyal solely to *him*.

He kept his face bland, hiding curses at this latest delay in settling the succession. The damned investigator kept haring off instead of following the trail. By now, the title should be his, with all its attendant power. Instead...

Lord Bitstaff snorted as he shut the door behind him. "Place is worse than on my last visit."

"Not for long." Chester reined in his fury. If Bitstaff suspected the truth... "Brought a chap out to see after repairs. Architect fellow." And young enough to follow orders without question. "Left him hemming and hawing over details."

Bitstaff laughed. "Think too much of themselves, to be sure. Never met one yet who could give a straight answer. Chap that redid my town house last year nearly drove me to Bedlam."

"Should have reminded him of his place."

"I did. Often. But once they start tearing the house up, there's not much to do."

"Some brandy should help."

"I'd rather call at your bank."

"In the morning." Proud that his voice revealed none of his seething resentment at the reminder, he pushed open the study door and headed for the brandy. Last night's game should never have happened, but if he played his hand right, he could retrieve his marker and solve another problem in one fell swoop...

* * * *

The last planter sat beneath the study window. Fresh air and new growth had eased Faith's pain, making it easier to breathe. She'd been too busy in recent weeks to note seasonal changes. Now spring had fully arrived, lightening her heart with scents and sounds. Jonquils and ranunculus were in full bloom. The cherry tree espaliered in the corner rained petals with each passing breeze. Birds sang merrily from its branches.

A surprising number of birds, she decided, shaking her head. Perhaps they had come to the courtyard because she needed their songs. Or maybe she was turning fanciful. Whichever, it was working. Tension

seeped from her shoulders. More tension than she'd realized was there.

Running Westcourt was a huge responsibility. That she had no legitimate authority made the job harder. But even work shouldn't preclude enjoyment. Nor should her impending departure. She did not want her final memories of Westcourt to be black.

"Brandy?" Chester's voice cut through the air.

Faith whirled to stare through the study window.

"If you insist," a male voice snapped. "I'd rather complete our business, though."

Faith nearly groaned, for she recognized the second man all too well. Bitstaff was the sleaziest rakehell in England, a vicious degenerate who was bad enough when sober and downright dangerous when intoxicated, which was his usual condition. Whenever he visited, she made sure the maids worked in pairs with a footman nearby for their protection. Chester never objected when Bitstaff tried to make free of the staff.

Today his voice was only slightly muddled, but that wouldn't last. How could she escape the courtyard without drawing notice? If he saw her...

"The money, Chester," drawled Bitstaff, turning toward the window.

Faith shrank against the wall.

"I told you we would fetch it tomorrow." Chester sounded annoyed. "You can't expect me to keep a thousand pounds on hand."

"Then why are we here? You could have written a draft." His voice hardened. "I have an appointment with Yardley tonight that could net a small fortune. If you don't pay..."

"You'll have it in the morning," snapped Chester.

"No. We have time to fetch it now. Then I can return to town."

"Don't you trust me?" asked Chester ominously.

"Of course I do. You always pay, but if we leave now, hard riding will let me keep that appointment."

"Impossible. This isn't London, Bitstaff. The bank closes at three." The clock tolled a quarter of as he spoke.

"Why the devil do you bank in this godforsaken place?"

"Why not? As the bank's largest client, I receive superior service."

"Then demand the banker serve you today."

"It isn't worth it – you'll kill yourself trying to return by evening. If you were this anxious to keep an appointment, you should have mentioned the draft earlier – you know how far Westcourt is from town. I didn't suggest it because you never accept them."

"I should have made an exception," growled Bitstaff. "I've no love for the country, especially in spring mud."

"All the more reason to relax for the rest of the day. We'll breakfast at nine, then collect the cash."

Liquid splashed into glasses.

Bitstaff growled.

"Why so hipped?" asked Chester idly. "You know Yardley will meet you as eagerly tomorrow."

"French pox. Damn Madame Eugenia to hell!" Bitstaff exploded suddenly. "The bitch cheated me. Five hundred for a virgin, but I swear the girl was a goddamn actress. She screamed and bled just like you'd expect, but no effect! I hate cheats!"

"You should know better than to buy your virgins in town. Anyone with a fresh face gets passed off as one."

"I know, but Madame served me well in the past – for a fee. Who is paying her more?"

"It doesn't matter." Chester paused, but whether to think or shrug Faith didn't know. She sidled toward the door.

Chester's voice again froze her against the wall. He'd wandered closer to the window. "I can offer a guaranteed virgin — in exchange for the vowel you hold."

"If you mean one of your housemaids, forget it. Fifty if they're a day and not a virgin among them."

"I mean my ward. That limp makes her unmarriageable, but her breeding's good. You know a well-bred virgin works better than one from the lower classes."

"She won't agree."

"Does she have to?"

"A thousand is way too high."

"But think of her breeding. She'll not only cure you, she'll provide at least a year of grace. Maybe more. You could finish the business and be gone in time to meet Yardley."

"And I could wipe that sneer off her face." Faith could almost hear him rubbing his hands. "Bitch refused me a kiss. Can you believe it? She—"

Faith didn't wait for more. Chester was worse than she'd thought. She'd known he played deep from time to time, but he must be at *point non plus* to have dragged Bitstaff to Westcourt on so flimsy an excuse. He did not use the local bank. Even the estate kept most of its funds in town. So either he'd hoped to confiscate the estate's operating funds, or he'd planned to trade her for the vowel all along.

Had he helped himself to estate funds before?

It doesn't matter, she reminded herself, hurtling into the house. Bitstaff would love to despoil her. He knew she despised him, and he was another who never forgot a slight.

Her skin crawled at the thought of his hands, increasing her panic. Death would be preferable.

Chester was already gloating over her ruin. It would be the ultimate revenge for her frequent complaints. Far better than a demeaning post. It meant he could toss her out without a penny. Even the trustees would not condone housing a fallen woman.

There was no way to avoid Bitstaff. Not with Chester standing behind him. The staff could not protect her, and the price if they tried...

Unless...

She'd read extensively, so she knew exactly what Bitstaff needed and why. The French pox was a disease contracted from whores. There were as many remedies as victims, but the only guaranteed cure was to bed a virgin, the higher born the better.

If she were not virgin, Bitstaff would have no use for her. There was no way to avoid losing her virtue, but she might still control her fate.

She burst into the library, relieved to find Mr. Lascar working. Papers covered the table, with more piled on the floor.

"You have to help me," she panted, slamming the door, then leaning heavily against it as her knees wobbled.

"Of course." He rose. "Is Mrs. Baines worse?"

"No." Now that she faced him, her throat closed until she could barely force out words. "You have to bed me. Now."

He backed a pace, clasping his hands behind him. "Grief has upset you."

"No! Listen." She repeated Chester's pact with Bitstaff.

"He has no authority over you," he said calmly.

"Do you think that matters?" Panic raised her voice and increased her determination. She left the door to face him across the table. "They are dissipated lords. The only authority they need is their own desire."

"I will speak with them—"

"Fool!" She slammed her hands down and leaned closer. "They won't listen to you or anyone. Chester has no money and Bitstaff no honor. My only hope is to prove that I am not a virgin. So they must catch me with someone else."

"What about Mr. Simmons?"

"Absolutely not!" She couldn't imagine touching Reginald, either, though at least he didn't raise nausea. As a last resort she might consider it, but—

"There has to be another way," he said, shaking his head. "Forcing you to lie with him is obscene."

"I know, but that changes nothing. Bitstaff hates me. He will revel in defiling me. Chester also hates me, and he's desperate to cover that vowel. Sacrificing me is nothing compared to reneging on a debt of honor. No one else will lift a finger. They either owe their allegiance to the duke – which means Chester, since the title ought to be his – or they consider me an interloper who shouldn't be here in the first place." Catherine had always treated her as one.

"I can take you to the magistrate, Miss Harper. He will protect you."

"There is no time! Please! You said you would help. I can't avoid ruin, but I would much rather you did it. You won't hurt me. Bitstaff loves inflicting pain."

He exhaled sharply. "Very well."

* * * *

You won't hurt me.

John's head reeled as he moved around the table. If anyone had asked him to name the ten least likely situations he would ever face, this would have headed the list – assuming his imagination had stretched that far.

He ought to turn her down. There *had* to be a way to protect her without taking her virtue. But attacking Bitstaff would see him arrested for assaulting a lord. And she was right. It was too late to flee. Chester would catch them before they could harness his team.

Besides, he wanted her. He'd awakened half a dozen times last night, drenched in sweat, aching with the

need to touch her, to hold her, to make her world right again. Her taste still lingered from Saturday's kiss, shattering any hope that he could concentrate on work. Her dilemma was simply too tempting...

"Come," he said gently, holding out his hand.

She flew into his arms. "Hurry. They'll be here any minute."

"Relax. If I'm to avoid hurting you, I need time, but you needn't fear that it will remain undone."

She shuddered, tilting her head to meet his gaze, then inhaled deeply.

Someone had once put a Grecian couch in the library – an odd choice, he'd thought that first day. Now he was grateful. It was more comfortable than taking her on the floor, and he could use its back to protect her modesty. Turning it would make their liaison obvious from the door without exposing her to lecherous eyes. She couldn't think beyond her present terror, but being caught would embarrass her. He must minimize that.

"Easy." He backed her toward the couch, keeping half of his mind on the hallway so he wouldn't lose himself in her. "Had they left the study you before you fled the courtyard?"

"N-no. But they were agreed." Her hands clenched.

"How long did you look for me?" Rubbing her arms turned them supple.

"I knew you were working in here."

"Good. They won't expect you to be with me, and this is not a room you generally use. We have plenty of time. Relax, sweetheart. There's nothing to fear." He licked her lips, sliding his tongue inside as they parted, gently coaxing her past any uncertainty.

She responded immediately, pressing closer as her lips molded to his. The glory of it nearly drove thought from his head, but he fought against the oblivion he craved. He must stay alert so he would hear Chester coming. It was impossible to approach the library in silence. The squeaky floor was on his list of repairs.

But his mind kept slipping into a sensual haze. She tasted erotic, as if her mouth was a rare delicacy. Rich. Potent. Drugging...

"Touch me," he murmured. "Knowledge conquers fear."

"I could never fear you."

Her hands skimmed his shoulders, exploring his

throat, his arms, and his back, sampling and savoring until he trembled. Every stroke melted her further against him, quickening her breath until she was panting in anticipation.

Her surrender burned warmly in his belly, a gift greater than any other. Innocence softened her eyes with wonder, her trust banishing all trepidation.

He'd suspected she was passionate, and now he knew. Her heart pounded in rhythm with his own. Her tongue boldly fenced against his. Fingers dug into his sides. Heat flashed across her lovely skin as she turned to fire in his hands.

Easing them down to the couch, he deepened the kiss. *Pay attention*, he reminded himself when her moans pulsed through his stomach. If he didn't slow down, he would not only hurt her, but they would finish far too soon. He was more than ready, his shaft straining to be free, his breathing so fast—

"That feels good," she gasped, squirming closer in blatant invitation.

"So it does."

Chester wasn't his only consideration. This encounter would set the tone for a lifetime, for she was now his. He must be patient, thorough, and very gentle. He knew – as she did not – that there were myriad paths to fulfillment. This first time must be sweet and provoke a need for more. Much more.

Sliding one hand beneath her loosened gown, he cupped a breast. This wasn't the time to look or to suckle – never would he expose her to degenerate eyes – but he could pleasure her, slowly, sweetly, building her passion until she forgot all else.

She moved into his touch, her skin humming under the brush of his fingers. Her moans grew louder and longer.

"That's right. Let it out."

Her breast swelled as he teased the nipple, so responsive he could barely contain his need. At least passion would make life together easier. There was no way to avoid marriage, for which he rejoiced. Never again need he agonize over their different stations. Fate had decreed this course. He would do everything possible to atone for her reduced credit, but she was now his.

A creak sent curses crashing through his head. She wasn't ready. Had he miscalculated? Perhaps a

servant had seen her run this direction, betraying her in all innocence when Chester demanded her location...

But no one was there.

She pulled his head into a deeper kiss.

Her trust humbled him, for his attack on Saturday should have destroyed it. That it remained was a huge step toward attachment. He could not expect her love, but she would be contented. Always. He would see to it.

Her fingers dug into his back as she arched against his hand, panting harder.

"You are so soft," he whispered, trailing kisses over her face. "So warm. Feel the excitement build." Her nipple was as hard as his shaft, and probably as sensitive. He pinched it, catching her scream in his mouth, then rolled it between his fingers.

Faith couldn't believe the sensations. His mouth was even sweeter than before. Kissing him was like sipping nectar, unwinding her terror, muscle by muscle, until she doubted she could move.

Now he was building a new tension. Sparks bordering on pain shot from her breast, gathering in her womb to pulse and swell until she couldn't remain passive.

So this was intimacy. Terror faded, leaving only need.

She could finally answer some of the many questions her reading had raised, such as why her parents had eloped and how girls could be led astray even when they understood the consequences. She'd crossed a critical boundary today, leaving rules and manners behind. Only need remained, so powerful that she could not turn aside. She writhed, seeking more, needing more, wanting...

His hands stroked and fondled, now teasing, now urgent, building need higher until she could barely think. They raced over her skin like a storm. And his mouth! It ravaged hers, delving deep enough to taste her soul.

A cool breeze whispered across her legs, distracting her from the sea of pleasure she'd been riding. She tensed as his fingers stroked up her calf. But those magic fingers worked there, too, so she shifted, urging him higher, toward the core that needed him so badly. His soft murmurs exploded into a rainbow of colors in

her head, blocking all thought but of him. Each unsteady breath filled her with his scent. His taste. His very essence...

John carefully draped her skirt to preserve her modesty even as he bared her to his penetration. His hands tingled with bolts of pleasure from skimming those long, lovely legs. They trembled at her responsiveness. She was ready, already writhing in need and so wet he could barely contain himself.

Still no sound from the hall. He had time to do it right.

He released himself so he would be ready, but held back, much to his body's dismay. This time was for her. She must first know the joy. So he pleased her, sliding a finger inside as his thumb stroked her sensitive core, pouring love into every touch.

"Wha— Oh, my lord!" she gasped, surging upward as he stroked again and again.

"Let it build." He leaned in to kiss her. "Don't fight it." His other hand worked her breast.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders. "Mr. Lascar!"

"Call me John."

She arched, her hips bucking as he slid a second finger inside. "John!"

His name curled warmly around his heart even as she clamped down on his fingers. She was so tight, he nearly exploded just thinking about how she would feel. "That's right. Let it come. I'll keep you safe." His tempo increased, as did her moans. As she trembled on the edge, he plunged his tongue deep, mimicking his hand, then pinched her nipple.

Her scream burst into his lungs, vibrating to his toes as she jerked beneath him. Wave after wave washed over her. Not until she went boneless did he slide between her legs. Piercing her maidenhead would never be easier.

She blinked when he moved over her.

"Ready?" he asked.

"For what?"

"We're not done yet, sweetheart. That relaxed you, but you are still chaste. This is your last chance to change your mind."

Memory flooded back. Chester. Bitstaff. "Do it, John. Now."

He nodded, then slowly pushed inside. She was soft and slack as a misty dawn, yet tight enough to push

him nearer completion than he wanted.

Faith tensed, not believing how large he felt.

"Easy, my dear. I can't avoid all pain, but it won't last. Ready?"

Ah, yes. Pain was inevitable. "Yes." She steadied her hands on his shoulders, then bit back a scream as he thrust deep.

"That's the only bad part." His voice sounded strained. "Take a deep breath and I'll make it up to you. This time will be even better."

Her smile felt wobbly. But the pain was already receding. It no longer felt like he was ripping her apart. She caressed his cheek and nodded.

The books she'd read described the process of intimacy, but they said nothing about its sensations. Already she'd felt so much more than she'd thought possible. Earth-shattering pleasure. A closeness she'd never before experienced. How could there be more?

But there was. The heat returned, and the longing, stronger than before. Hotter. More exciting. There was no way to remain quiescent as he worked. Her body demanded that she clasp his hips with her legs, that she push against him whenever he thrust so he could reach deeper and deeper still. Intimacy was more than a physical joining, though. Her heart reached out, twining with his. Her mind. Her very soul...

Sparks built behind her eyes. The room went hazy until the only reality was John. She stared into blue eyes blurred with desire and felt one with him. If she lived to be a hundred, she would never forget this day. No matter what happened next, she would always be grateful, for he made her initiation a symphony.

She soared higher and higher, nearing the heaven she now knew awaited. Passion again drove thought from her mind. Release hovered...

"Now," he grunted, sliding a hand between them to touch the same spot as before.

Need exploded into a thousand shards, freeing her soul to dance among the stars even as her body plummeted toward earth.

John let her shout her glory, felt her clutch tighter around him, then he thrust again, deeply. He'd timed it perfectly. The door burst open as he shattered.

Chapter Ten

*A son for Richard! My darling Montrose, how I love
you. Is anyone more blessed than Richard and I?*
Duchess of Westfield, Apr. 1785

John leaped to his feet, feigning shock and chagrin even as a twinge of pride warmed his heart – Faith’s shocked scream sounded so natural she must have forgotten Chester was coming.

But now he must clear the fog from his head long enough to play his role. Dodging in front of her, he fumbled his clothes into place as he stammered, “Damnation, we forgot to lock the door. When did *he* return? He wasn’t due until Wednesday.” With luck Chester would assume he was trying to shield his partner’s identity rather than positioning himself to protect her modesty and repel any attack.

Chester surged forward. But he hadn’t gone two steps before Bitstaff whirled him around. “What kind of flat do you take me for?”

Chester paled.

“You knew she was a whore! You probably defiled her yourself.”

“Never! You can’t—”

Bitstaff’s fury deafened him to any protest. “No one cheats me, Chester. No one! My seconds will call on yours tomorrow, and if you don’t redeem your pledge by noon, I’ll see you barred from every club in England as a man who plays where he cannot pay. As for you”—he advanced toward Faith—“since you’re so free with your favors, I’ll take my share now.”

“You won’t.” John raised his fists. Something clattered behind him.

“Out of the way, oaf.”

“No.” He blocked Bitstaff’s blow, such as it was. The baron was bloated and out of shape. Gentleman Jackson would shake his head in disgust over so miserable a specimen.

“You dare to touch a gentleman?”

“Aristocrat you may be, but you are no gentleman, sir.” John caught Bitstaff’s arm on the next swing, twisting until it snapped.

Bitstaff screamed.

As Chester leaped to the attack, Faith slammed the poker into his side. He whirled to retaliate and tripped over the couch.

John shoved Bitstaff toward the door. “I’ll break the

neck of any man who touches her,” he snapped as Chester scrambled to his feet.

Bitstaff’s broken arm slammed into the doorknob. His scream distracted Chester, letting John move in front of Faith. She immediately stepped to his side, poker gripped firmly in both hands. Courageous, but not the smartest move she could make. But he could not afford to remove his attention from Chester long enough to argue with her.

Chester glared at Bitstaff. “Worthless lout. Have your valet tend that arm. I’ll handle this.”

“You’ll pay for *this*, too,” Bitstaff vowed. “Forget my seconds. You’ll never be welcome in London again.”

“I’ll have the title in a week.” Hauteur stiffened Chester’s spine. “Few will cross a duke. There isn’t a man in London who will call me a liar when I describe how you broke into my house and assaulted me. If you claim otherwise, you will regret it.”

Bitstaff’s look promised revenge, but he staggered away.

John tensed for a new attack.

Chester’s bluster wouldn’t hold Bitstaff for long. Once his pain lessened, the man would recognize Chester’s lies, so Chester faced ruin. His finances were in shambles – John had found a list of his debts tucked into the estate ledger. Expectations might hold merchants at bay, but gaming vowels were debts of honor that must be paid immediately. Chester couldn’t. With Faith’s virtue no longer available, stealing from the estate was his only choice.

It wouldn’t be the first time. John had stared at the ledgers much of the morning, cursing himself for falling into Chester’s trap. The man had meant to hide personal expenses under the umbrella of repair bills.

John’s gut burned at being used to feather Chester’s nest. But that problem could wait. The bank would never release a thousand pounds between quarter days without the trustees’ approval. Chester must know that. He would make Faith suffer for thwarting his plans.

“I’ve never seen such an ungrateful wretch in my life,” Chester snapped, glaring at the poker. “I housed you and clothed you despite your insignificance, yet you dare to repay me by turning prostitute.”

“You did nothing,” she countered. “It was the trustees who housed me, long before you had any

connection to Westcourt. You have resented their decision from the moment you arrived. But you are not my keeper, sir."

"I am when you bring dishonor to my family. It was a mistake to allow you into this house. But that is over," he swore over John's growl. "You will leave within the hour and never return. I don't tolerate whores under my roof."

"You cannot throw me out." Her voice wavered, but she steadied it. "Only the trustees have that power. And when I tell them about this ploy, Mr. Goodman will—"

"Goodman is dead, and those other fools retired long ago. The new trustees won't spare you a moment's pity when they learn the truth. Not that it matters. I'll have the title in a week, ending their authority."

"You delude yourself." She smiled. "That investigator will never find what you seek. Resign yourself to being forever a commoner."

"You know nothing. I'll have what's mine, and no one can stop me. Starting today. Everyone goes – incompetent servants, coddled tenants, greedy leeches. They don't deserve a farthing of my inheritance. And if you aren't gone within the hour, they will suffer worse than banishment. I'll charge them with larceny and ship them to Botany Bay." A cruel smile twisted his face. "As for you, Lascar"—he turned—"I don't employ cads. Be gone with you."

"As soon as I'm paid for my survey," he dared.

Chester's face purpled. "Be glad to leave under your own power. One more word, and you'll leave in chains, bound for jail. I witnessed your unprovoked attack on an innocent lord. Be grateful I'm allowing you to leave at all. If you're smart, you'll flee England before I change my mind. When I finish with you, no one will let you design so much as a pig sty." He headed for the hallway. "One hour. My valet will supervise your packing, Harper, so don't try to steal the silver."

The moment the door slammed shut, Faith sagged. John caught her.

"No, no-o-o," she moaned.

"Shhh." He held her close, stroking her hair. She hadn't expected that others might pay for her escape. But Chester really did avenge any insult ten times over. "It will be all right, sweetheart."

"I never meant to hurt you."

"You haven't."

"But—"

"There's no time to talk. You must pack, and so must I. My carriage will be at the door when you're ready."

"I can't leave with you!"

"You have no choice. Don't argue," he added, when she glared. "Time is too short. He would love to toss you out without even a change of clothing. Don't give him that chance." Releasing her, he swept up his papers. "This is not the time to think about the staff, either. Once we are away, we can decide how to help them, but now you must pack. Chester will destroy anything you leave behind, so be thorough."

"Y-yes. Of course." Shaking her head, she followed him out.

* * * *

By the time Faith finished stuffing her possessions into three trunks, fury banished any trace of weakness. Combes was nearly as hateful as his master. If it hadn't been for Polly's intervention – she hated to think how Chester would repay that – she would have to leave half of her belongings behind. Combes didn't believe her elephant had been her mother's. He didn't even accept that she had lived her first nine years in India.

Thank God John had broken Bitstaff's arm. Combes was no protection against rape. But injury wouldn't hold Bitstaff for long. At least he'd left the library before Chester had ordered her away. By the time he looked for her, she would be out of reach.

She hoped.

Ned arrived to help with the trunks. "Your wrap, miss. You left it in the kitchen when Cook collapsed." He held out a heavy traveling cloak she'd never seen before. The duchess's?

"Thank you, Ned." She folded it over one arm, then tugged a trunk toward the door.

Ned and Polly followed with the others, leaving Combes to trail behind unencumbered. Tears filled Polly's eyes. But Faith dared not speak lest she make their punishment worse.

John waited in the drive. His coachman stowed her trunks while he helped her inside.

"You can drop me at the vicarage," she said the moment the door was closed.

“Impossible.”

“You will leave me at the vicarage. I will never forgive myself for letting selfish panic harm you. I can’t add to the damage. Once we part company, Chester will forget about you.” Shame heated her face. She should have known he would retaliate. In one stroke she’d destroyed John’s career, the duke’s family, the staff, and half the tenants.

The injustice boiled in her stomach.

“Shock is clouding your mind, Faith. The vicar will not help you.”

“Of course he will. He is already looking for a companion’s post for me” She kept her face confident, hiding the knowledge that he was right. She must convince him otherwise for his own sake. If he didn’t distance himself from her, he would have to leave the country to escape Chester’s wrath. “I can stay at the vicarage until he finds one.”

“You know better than that. *I* know better after meeting him but once. Whether Chester wins the title or not, the vicar considers him the duke. Westfield owns his living and can dismiss him at any time. The moment you tell him Chester threw you out – and you cannot lie about it, for the news will be in the village within the hour, if it hasn’t arrived already – he will bar his door. You chose your path when you overheard Chester’s plot. It has but one destination. Marriage. To me.”

Her pain doubled even as her heart soared. Marriage! Two offers in a week? Not that either was real. Reginald had spoken out of selfishness and John from coercion. She could never accept.

For the first time she understood the duchess’s anguish after she’d sent Montrose away. Despite what she’d told John, Faith knew the duchess’s real motive. Her Grace had acted because it was in Montrose’s best interests to leave. Her love demanded that she put his needs before her own.

What a hellish way to discover that she loved John. Deeply and forever. But admitting that aloud would destroy him. She had but one choice. If the duchess could sacrifice everything in the name of love, then Faith could do no less. She must give John up to mitigate the scandal he would face. It was painful, but essential.

How had she got herself into this fix?

You didn't think beyond your own fear.

It was true. She'd succumbed to emotion, acting without a single thought for the consequences. She could not do that again.

John might not be a gentleman born, but he embraced a gentleman's honor, so of course he would accept marriage as his penalty for deflowering her. But she could not condemn him to a wife who must harm him. Surviving Chester's retaliation would be hard enough. She couldn't add her defects to the mix. And knowing she had destroyed his career...

Her guilt and his regret doomed them. She should never have confused the man who appeared in her dreams with the architect whose livelihood was at Chester's mercy.

"You do me great honor, but I cannot accept." Somehow she kept her voice level.

"I know my breeding is well below yours, but you have no choice."

"You think I refuse because of your breeding? Imbecile! I will never force you into marriage. I appreciate what you've done, but any obligation ends when we reach the village. You may drop me at the inn."

"To do what?" he demanded. "You can't stay there. It's Westcourt land. I doubt you've enough money to take the stage more than a few stops. Then what will you do?"

"I cannot leave while the staff and tenants are in danger. You heard him. He vowed to turn them off. Mrs. Baines is helpless and Baines nearly so. They would starve in a week without care. And Cook's funeral is tomorrow."

"Faith." He let out a long sigh. "Think, my dear. Chester will not allow you anywhere near that funeral. Nor can you stay in the village. The only way to help the servants is to call on the new trustees. Once they learn the truth, they must protect Westcourt's dependents. It is their duty."

"But will they feel that way? You saw that cat-in-the-creampot smirk on Chester's face. He has the trustees in his pocket. I've often wondered how he got the steward's post. Now I know. They consider him the duke and thus defer to his judgment. They will never take my word over his." Panic clawed at her throat, for she'd counted on Mr. Goodman if all else failed. He'd

been kind to a terrified nine-year-old alone in a strange country. "And in another week, they can't help anyway. He'll have the title."

"So he claims, but I don't believe him. If he had proof, Bitstaff would know. Can you see him keeping such news silent even for a day? He would have stood on a street corner shouting it to the world. It's all very well to claim that the investigator found the proof, but until he actually returns with it, I refuse to believe he has anything. As for the trustees, there are laws governing their conduct. You can be sure I will remind them of their duty."

"And how will you find them? Chester seems sure that their identity remains secret."

"The investigator will have their directions. We will call there in the morning."

"He's in France."

"His office will have the information. And they will know if he found anything. He would never report to Chester without sending copies to the office and the trustees."

She bit her lip as hope flickered to life. But he wasn't thinking clearly, either. "The investigator will tell us nothing. We have no standing in the case."

"Nonsense. As Westfield's ward you have every right to speak with his trustees. And Chester is wrong. I have a signed contract to survey the damage, with the fees clearly spelled out. So I, too, have a right to see them. The investigator will not be pleased at how Chester dismissed me, for it raises questions about his own fees, especially if he fails to find the proof Chester requires."

"He won't find it in France." The words were out before she could think.

"Why?"

"Nothing." She cursed under her breath, then rushed ahead to dampen his curiosity. "Very well. We will visit his office tomorrow, but that ends your obligation to me."

"Obligation! I *want* to marry you. I've wanted you to wife since we met, and you have no choice but to accept. I had your virginity, Faith. Not only does that prevent marriage to another, but you may be carrying my child."

"Impossible."

"I don't care when your last courses were, nothing is

impossible. I know you would never have chosen me under other circumstances, but the deed is done. We will wed as soon as I can procure a license."

"I will not wed you." Somehow she managed to sound firm. His honor was stronger than she'd thought. How could she keep him safe from Chester when he refused to back away?

Wedging herself into the corner, she fought down tears.

* * * *

John couldn't believe his ears. Was his breeding so low that she would starve in a ditch rather than marry him? She'd crammed herself into the corner as if she couldn't stand his touch.

It hurt, but he couldn't afford the distraction of pain if he was to convince her. So he shut it away and considered which approach might work.

Women from many stations come into the shop, his mother had said a few weeks before her death. I've learned much from observing them over the years. Ladies might hide behind a shield of propriety, and courtesans behind one of sensuality, but under the skin they are all the same. Remember that when you look for a wife, John. All women need respect. They need trust. And they need love.

So what did Faith need now?

She was clearly in shock, and who could blame her? Events had delivered blow after blow. But people in shock often clung to one thought, no matter how odd, as if letting go would shatter them. He'd happened upon a carriage accident two years earlier to find a man cradling his wife's body, urging her to wake up as they were late for dinner. Nothing John said could penetrate the man's shock. As long as he insisted they were merely late for dinner, he didn't have to address the reality of his wife's death.

So he must be patient with Faith. Once she recovered, she would accept the truth. If she tried to go it alone, she would either be killed or land in a brothel. Or perhaps the workhouse, though that was often a worse fate. Its few survivors usually regretted living. And if Chester or Bitstaff found her...

The first step was to escape Westcourt property before Chester came after them. By now he might have realized that turning Faith off was a mistake. Bitstaff would demand revenge and would not like being

thwarted a second time. So they had to move as fast as possible.

Faith suddenly sat up. "This isn't the road to London."

"I told my coachman to avoid the turnpike. Bitstaff will come after you as soon as his arm is set. I won't risk him overtaking us."

"Of course." She sagged. "Where do you plan to drop me?"

"My house."

"That would ruin your reputation."

He inhaled sharply to curb his temper. "I won't leave you alone where Chester or Bitstaff might find you. If the trustees prove feckless and you can't stomach marriage after considering the idea for a week, then we will track down your family. They must accept you now that your situation has changed."

"They won't. They can't afford another dependent."

"You don't know that. Nineteen years could have reversed their fortunes."

"Money was only one of their complaints. For now, I can stay at a hotel. Surely you know one Chester will not consider."

"Faith." He shook his head. "You are an intelligent woman, so think about what you just said. No hotel that keeps female guests safe will accept one traveling alone without a maid. You cannot afford a hotel in any case."

"We will meet the trustees tomorrow, so I need only one night."

"How much money do you have?"

Her shoulders sagged. "Five shillings, sixpence."

He pulled her gently against his side. "That is nothing when set against London prices, my dear. Don't squander it when alternatives exist. You've run Westcourt for years, so you know something about finances. How much was your inheritance?"

"Seven hundred pounds." That she answered at all proved how upset she was.

"In Funds?"

She nodded.

His heart broke for her, but he had to be honest. "Which means your income is twenty pounds a year. You cannot support *yourself* on that, let alone your friends. If you cash in your shares, you can manage for a time – maybe even a couple of years. But when it

is gone, you will all starve.”

“I’ll think of something.”

“I’m sure you will, but in the meantime, let me house you. If the trustees are fair, they will pension off the staff. And they will not punish tenants or the duke’s family without justification. That won’t help you, of course, for their obligation is limited now that you are of age and have left Westcourt.”

She shuddered.

“Which leaves your family.”

“Papa’s family disowned him. They will deny my existence, especially if they learn why I was turned off. Mama’s family hates scandal. Both families are too rigid to change their minds.”

He nodded. “So your only choice is marriage. Once we are wed, I’ll see that your friends are safe, no matter what the trustees decide.” He wished that didn’t sound like a bribe.

“I cannot accept your sacrifice. You’ve lost too much already.”

“I’ve lost nothing,” he insisted. It wasn’t true, but Faith was worth more than restoring Westcourt and far more than a seat at the Office of Works.

“Chester will destroy your career.”

“Impossible. Even with the title, he cannot seriously hurt me. Most of my patrons hail from the merchant class. They care only for quality work and would hire the devil himself if he could provide it. Chester’s ire would increase my standing with most of them, for they disdain boastful wastrels.”

Her eyes widened.

He exaggerated, but his choices were not her fault. He’d welcomed the chance to stake his claim. He’d enjoyed breaking Bitstaff’s arm. Whatever the price, he would pay it gladly as long as Faith was his.

Yet this was not the time to push harder. She obviously didn’t return his regard – his heart cracked with the admission – but she would eventually understand that the alternatives were worse. “Rest, sweetheart. We’ve a long ride ahead. We won’t reach town until well after dark. And you will think better after a good sleep.”

“I hate leaving like this.” Her voice broke.

“I know.” He rubbed her arm. “Is there a neighbor who might hire the younger servants or support your complaints to the trustees?”

She shook her head, unexpectedly embarrassed. "I know no one."

He wanted to ask how that had come about, but she was in too much distress. A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Don't cry, Faith. I know it's bad, but we'll sort it out."

"I c-can't help it." She broke.

He pulled her into his lap and cradled her while she wept. Once she started, she couldn't stop. It went on and on, seemingly forever.

Stroking her hair did nothing. Patting her back did nothing. He tried to recall how his mother had comforted him when he'd broken his arm at age nine, but that didn't help, either.

He hadn't intended to expose old wounds. He should have realized where his questions must lead. He knew her family had rejected her. He knew she had no friends outside the staff. He knew she'd suffered a sleepless night grieving for Mrs. Foley. That he'd pushed anyway revealed his own state of shock.

Half an hour passed before she finally hiccupped and sat up. "Forgive me."

"Of course. You have every reason to be upset. Rest, now. Your mind will work better tomorrow."

"Perhaps. And it seems I must accept your hospitality."

"Thank you. Just remember that marrying you is not an obligation. If I hadn't cared, we would not have lain together."

"Ever the gentleman. You must say that, of course. But I won't inflict myself on you longer than necessary." Raising her chin, she curled into the corner, and closed her eyes.

He sighed, but refused to despair. Fate had pushed them together. He must trust that Faith would accept that.

Chapter Eleven

Terror! Richard nearly died today. Without my dear Francine, he would be gone. She urged me to breathe for him when he could not draw air himself. Praise God, it worked! But it was my fault. The roses must go. I did not understand the danger...

Duchess of Westfield, Aug. 1785

Sleep was impossible, but feigning it gave Faith time to compose herself. If she spent another minute on John's lap, she would give in to temptation. How long could she cling to honor instead of following her heart?

Yet she must. She'd already harmed him enough. The upper classes might indulge in discreet affairs, but even they punished scandal. The professional and merchant classes were far harsher. Chester's exaggerations would make John's situation worse.

New tears stung her eyes, but she fought them down. Emotion made it difficult to think. Terror and pain increased until her head felt ready to explode. Never had she been so weak – or so uncertain. The future yawned, a gaping hole leading straight to hell.

Stop it! Despair solves nothing! She added every curse she'd ever heard – a lengthy list after spending years surrounded by the military.

This wasn't the first time she'd been brutally thrust out of her home. She'd survived before and would again. At least she was old enough by now to control her own fate. And she was worldly enough that she no longer expected miracles.

John's honor was forcing him to make the best of a bad situation. He accepted that fate was often cruel. If appeasing honor meant lying to her, he would do so in an instant – she'd never understood the way men twisted honor to justify blatantly dishonorable actions, but she'd seen too many examples to deny that the practice was common. So his words meant nothing.

What he must accept was that *her* honor refused to condone his sacrifice. He would *not* pay for her selfishness. She could manage without him.

Twenty years ago, losing her family had left her bewildered and too grief-stricken to think. Nine-year-old girls couldn't care for themselves, especially without money. So when the major had informed her that she would henceforth live with her guardian in England, she'd numbly nodded and followed orders.

This time was different. John's litany hadn't surprised her. She knew what dangers threatened a woman alone – especially in London. She knew her meager inheritance would not last. But she would find a position. It might not be the most desirable position, but she would satisfy her employer and eventually move on to something better. It was time to take

charge of her life.

Determination stiffened her spine, restoring her energy. It was time to leave that terrified nine-year-old behind. Despite faith in her own abilities, she still meekly followed orders, rarely protesting when other people arranged her life. She had let Catherine relegate her to a servant's post. She'd let Chester terrorize her with threats against her friends. Now John expected to take their place.

She couldn't let him. Once she convinced the trustees to care for the staff, she would address her own future.

Controlling fate was a seductive idea. Freeing. Exhilarating. And far better than wedding John.

You don't mean that.

Of course she did. Marriage would make them both miserable. Loving him made his offer tempting, but indulging her dreams at the cost of his would engender guilt that would ultimately destroy them both. And he would regret his offer soon enough. A wife whose deformity discomfited potential patrons would hamper his career. And when he discovered her other faults...

John was naïve to think that dukes influenced only the aristocracy, though he was right that not everyone would follow Chester's lead. He would eventually regain his reputation, but only if nothing else tarnished his image. His wife must be respected, scandal-free, and encompass all the attributes men looked for in their mates. Faith would never qualify. He might currently accept equal blame for their predicament, but that would not last. Every time he faced her he would remember that her demands had tumbled him into scandal.

She could not do that to him.

Yet for now, she was in his debt, with nowhere else to go. The best way to set him on the road to recovery was to divert Chester's attention, which meant revealing secrets she'd long hidden. John deserved her best efforts.

Her hands trembled, for this might hand Chester the title, increasing his power. Yet it might also tarnish Chester's reputation so badly that he would be ostracized despite that title.

She was the only one who knew that Montrose had not gone to France. Revealing the truth had never been in her interest, for uncertainty held Chester at bay,

but now...

What if Montrose lived?

The possibility was remote, she admitted, but it *did* exist. Why else did the crown refuse to give Chester the title? A missing commoner could be declared dead after seven years and his property distributed to his heirs, but that was not true for lords. Producing a living duke was the one thing that might drive John completely from Chester's mind. The duke could also find her a post, restore John's reputation, and pension off the staff. Chester might even have to leave England. Without the dukedom behind him, his creditors would demand immediate payment. And if her efforts endangered the duke's life...

John was more important.

Straightening, she met his gaze.

"There is only one way to prevent Chester from destroying us both," she announced. "We must find the duke. Only he can help us."

"You said he was dead."

"The odds favor that conclusion, but there are two explanations for why he might live, yet not step forward."

"A duke fail to meet his duty? You amaze me."

"It is possible that he doesn't know he's a duke." She shrugged. "That's unlikely, of course. Francine promised—"

"Francine?"

"The duchess's maid. She promised to train Montrose to assume his duties, so he could not be kept in ignorance for long."

"You can't know that."

"I do. I have the duchess's diary." She smiled as he pricked to attention. "She hid it shortly before her death, so Chester doesn't know it exists. But it explains everything – why she sent Montrose away, where he went, how to contact him in case of need. And that is why I think the second possibility is viable."

"What now?"

"That he is waiting until it is safe to step forward."

"Safe?"

"Safe." She sighed. "The colonel might mutter about family curses and premature deaths, but the family history is more sordid than even he admits."

"Are you sure you want to pursue this, Faith? If by

some miracle you find him alive, his first act will be to demand that you wed me.”

“I doubt it,” she lied. When he tried to interrupt, she laid her fingers across his lips. “Think, John. Only the duke can control Chester, for only he can prosecute Chester for his crimes.”

He frowned.

“If he is hiding, it is time that he faces his fear and deals with Chester.”

“That makes no sense. Chester was still in school when the ninth duke disappeared. His crimes are against Westcourt – something the duke can’t possibly know; if he’s been in touch with anyone on the staff, he would surely have stepped forward years ago.”

“Chester was not still in school. He came down from Cambridge two weeks before Richard’s death. At least listen to the duchess’s tale before you dismiss it.”

“Why did you say nothing earlier?”

“Everyone believed the duke would appear eleven years ago on his twenty-first birthday. When he didn’t, most accepted that he was dead, though there were those who hoped he was merely trapped in France. I was one of those, but that hope died with the end of the war. We all accepted that he was gone and got on with our lives. So when I found the diary last year, its information did not seem relevant. And it was not in *my* best interests, nor those of the staff, to prove the duke’s death, which is what revealing the diary might accomplish. Now it no longer matters, for Chester is already moving against the staff. If Montrose is alive, he can help them far better than trustees who may owe their allegiance to Chester.”

He nodded.

“In addition to explaining why she sent Montrose away, the duchess also recorded family secrets, many concerning Chester. Some stories she knew firsthand. Others she learned from her husband. All depict Chester in a very bad light. I’ve found evidence to support many of her claims and nothing to refute them, so I must assume they are all true. Revealing the tales will keep Chester busy defending himself, for some of his actions were illegal. Others will invite confrontations with several high-ranking gentlemen, any of whom might kill him.”

“What does she say?”

“Parts of it you already know. Hortense and the

servants confirm that Chester was selfish from the moment of birth. Richard believed that something was missing in Chester's heart. At times he wondered if the heart itself was missing, for Chester always needed to be the focus of all eyes and more important than anyone else. He punished anyone who eclipsed him. Richard told his duchess about many childhood incidents – Chester broke any gift Richard received, demolished a cherished figurine their nurse inherited from her mother, shredded Richard's new coat because it cost more than his own, tortured any animal that favored Richard..."

"Good God."

"He demanded the biggest, the best, the most desirable." She shook her head. "For example, Chester rejoiced when Richard moved out of the nursery, for it meant Chester received Nurse's entire attention – he hadn't yet learned that there was a larger world beyond the nursery. But then Thomas was born. Infants need constant care, so Chester was turned over to the nursery maid."

"Mrs. Baines."

"Yes. After I found the diary, I asked about those years, purely from curiosity, for I believed Montrose was dead. Her mind was still reasonably sharp then. I can't believe how rapidly she's faded." Her voice broke.

He covered her hand and squeezed. "Did you show Mrs. Baines the diary?"

"No. I'd been reading old correspondence, so she assumed I'd found references there."

"But she confirmed what the duchess reported?"

"Oh, yes. Chester disrupted the household time and time again. Nurse caught him smothering Thomas with a pillow one day. She scolded him, but thought no more of it, attributing the incident to the jealousy children often feel when they must share with a new child. Even the fire didn't change her view."

"Fire?"

He was poking about in the grate when a coal flipped into Thomas's bed, setting the sheet ablaze. Nurse snatched the boy up and smothered the flames, but she never admitted he'd done it deliberately."

"I hope she at least kept him away from Thomas after that."

"She did." Faith remembered to retrieve her hand

from John's grasp. "She wasn't stupid, merely unable to believe that he harbored true evil. Thomas was a sickly child in need of quiet, so she moved Chester out of the nursery and made sure Thomas was never alone. Chester had his own tutor from then on."

"So attacking Thomas earned him extra attention and a room and tutor like Richard."

She shuddered, for she'd not considered the incident in that light. "In part. But he also lost the attention of the nursery staff, and Nurse compared his behavior unfavorably to Richard's. His new tutor also had less precedence than Richard's."

"Chester was younger."

"And not the heir."

"Ah."

"Exactly. Heirs always get more. It was a truth Chester never accepted. He wanted respect and worship from everyone around him. If he didn't earn it, he coerced it through threats and attacks."

"You terrify me." His arm slid along the seat behind her.

"It gets worse. Richard knew Chester's purpose because he was the victim of most of his pranks. And if he wasn't the victim, Chester arranged matters so Richard got the blame."

"To undermine his credit?"

"Exactly. As time passed, he learned to hide his purpose. Others thought he'd outgrown his childish spite, but Richard knew better. Chester still punished every perceived slight, and as he understood more of the wider world, his goals looked further into the future. When a neighboring lord left everything not entailed to his second son, Chester took the lesson to heart. If their father hated Richard, then Chester would become the favorite."

"Diabolical."

She nodded. "He wouldn't accept that an heir draws more respect whether he deserves it or not, so every time Richard received preferential treatment – which happened daily – Chester punished him. It didn't help that Richard often accompanied their father on estate business – given the family history for premature death, the seventh duke believed that Richard should learn about his inheritance from an early age. Chester hated being left behind. And he hated that the duke often checked on Thomas – he was very protective of

the boy.”

John shook his head.

“Which brings us to the year Thomas turned seven. He was small for his age and remained in the nursery, for his health had never improved. Breathing was difficult outdoors, so he rarely left the house. Chester escaped his tutor one day and showed up in the nursery – at ten he was still fighting for Nurse’s affection. She chastised him and threatened to speak to the duke if he neglected his lessons again. She also called him a baby.”

“Ouch. What did he do?”

“This part is conjecture – Richard admitted that he had no proof, but he believed that Chester wanted Nurse turned off for dereliction of duty. However he managed it, Thomas escaped the nursery and fell to his death in the stable.”

“Dear lord!” His hand slipped onto her shoulder as he turned to meet her gaze.

Faith shivered, but she couldn’t bring herself to move out of reach. “Everyone accepted that Thomas had slipped away while Nurse was fixing his tea. Tragic accident. No blame to anyone. But Thomas never left the house, and not just because it was forbidden. He knew he couldn’t breathe outside. He knew horses made it worse. He was terrified of those choking attacks and avoided anything that might trigger one. Richard insisted that Thomas would never have gone to the stable alone, so someone must have taken him there. Only Chester was that cruel.”

“Did he plan to kill him, then?”

“I doubt it, at least not consciously. Maybe Thomas fell because he passed out, or maybe Chester gave in to impulse and pushed him. All that is certain is that Thomas fell from the loft and broke his neck. A groom swore he’d heard two boys quarreling shortly before the fall, but a search found Chester diligently working in the schoolroom. The tutor claimed he’d been there since breakfast, even though Nurse swore she’d kicked him out of the nursery two hours earlier.”

“No one believed her.” John shook his head.

“It’s hard to say. With the nursery empty, she left. But Richard swore that Chester changed that day. Thomas’s death taught him that an accident could promote him to heir. His pranks against Richard immediately grew harsher. When Richard escaped

serious injury for the third time in as many days, he complained to his father."

"But men don't believe thirteen-year-old boys."

"Not entirely." She shrugged. "He thought grief was responsible for Chester's tantrums. But he was a prudent man. Rather than take chances, he enrolled Chester at Harrow for the fall term instead of sending him to Eton with Richard."

"Why do I have a grim feeling about this?"

"Because the tale is grim. Chester was furious. Two days later, the duke's carriage broke an axle."

"He killed his father?"

"Not deliberately. If it had broken anywhere else, the occupants would have survived. Injured, probably, but the coachman was known as a careful driver, and they weren't moving very fast. But the accident occurred on that narrow strip of road approaching the park gates."

"Above the river? I meant to suggest that the road be moved. It's clearly dangerous."

"Exactly. The coach fell over the cliff. The duke drowned. The coachman also died – the same coachman who had chastised Chester only that morning for trying to ride the duke's stallion."

"So you think he wanted the coachman blamed for taking out a faulty carriage?"

She nodded. "That is what Richard thought, too, not that it matters. Richard became Westfield. Though control of the dukedom went to trustees, he convinced them to honor his father's last wishes by sending Chester to Harrow."

"So what happened when Chester returned on long break?"

"Chester spent breaks at a ducal estate north of London – or with friends, one of whom now holds the title Lord Bitstaff. Richard feared what Chester would do when next they met, so he barred him from Westcourt. And he took steps to secure the succession. Or tried. He wanted to wed the moment he finished at Eton, but the trustees refused."

"Said he was too young, I suppose."

"Exactly. They never believed Chester was evil. He was a gentleman born, and while he may have been wild – some of his school exploits raised brows – he was Lord Chester, and that was that. So Richard went to Oxford and bided his time. He fell in love at age nineteen but could do nothing about it until his

twenty-first birthday. They wed that day.” She paused to swallow the lump that suddenly blocked her throat. “Once they were settled, he told his wife everything so she would be prepared in case anything happened to him. Even before Montrose was born, Richard bought a small estate in Scotland, secretly and under another name. He set up accounts under that name, too, so the duchess would never be at Chester’s mercy. And he made her promise to go there immediately if anything happened to him. After Montrose’s birth, they renewed the vow.”

“Then why didn’t she?”

“She had no chance. Richard died in a carriage accident just outside London. The first to be notified was Mr. Goodman, who was Richard’s solicitor at the time and became one of the trustees after Richard’s death. It was he who carried the news to Westcourt, then stayed to see after the duke’s affairs. She couldn’t escape without Goodman following her. Which is why she concocted her own plans.”

He stroked her neck. “Couldn’t she confide her fears?”

“Her diary makes it clear that Goodman didn’t believe her when she swore Chester had killed Richard. Easier to think grief had addled her wits. Richard had entrusted Montrose’s safety to her. She knew Chester was evil. She knew the significance of the wounds on Richard’s head that the trustees dismissed.”

John turned her to face him. “What wounds?”

“Richard did not die because his carriage overturned. Chester ran him into the ditch, then bashed both Richard and his coachman on the head while they were too stunned to defend themselves. His own driver also died. But no trace was ever found of the passenger people had noted when they passed his carriage just before the accident. Unfortunately, they couldn’t identify the passenger, and Chester swore he’d not authorized his coachman to use his carriage that day.”

“So she feared Montrose was next.”

“Chester wanted the title. With Richard gone, only a two-year child stood between him and his desire. He’d come down from Cambridge only two weeks earlier, so he wasted no time going after it. Would you trust him to leave Montrose alone?”

"No." He sighed, drawing her against his side. "How did she smuggle Montrose out of the house?"

"She and Richard often kept Montrose in their suite, sometimes for days at a time. The staff considered it eccentric, if not downright scandalous, but their graces were young enough to be excused, and it set a precedent. She kept Montrose with her from the moment of Richard's death and barred the nursery staff from her rooms. Mr. Goodman was appalled, but the staff knew Montrose eased her grief. Several people saw him over the next week. After she helped her maid slip out in the dead of night, she maintained the pretense that he was with her for another three days before admitting that he was gone."

"To put off pursuit."

She nodded. "The duke's secretary, Bernard, was her only ally – a temporary one, for the trustees had their own staff. Bernard left within the month. It was he who had purchased the Scotland property. She let him reveal that purchase, which focused the pursuit in that direction. The French maid naturally focused attention on France."

"Where did she really go?"

"London."

"Why? If the maid had allies in town, they would have stepped forward long ago."

She shook her head. "I don't know what Francine told people about Montrose, not that it matters. The investigator can trace her once I show him the diary."

"It is very likely the duke is dead," he reminded her quietly. "London is not very healthy."

"Perhaps, but it might also explain why she hasn't told him who he is. Chester had never met her, so she could have watched him without fear of recognition. If she saw his evil growing worse, she might have concluded that bringing Montrose forward would jeopardize his life, betraying the duchess's trust. Chester has no son who will feel dispossessed when Montrose claims the title, so there is little urgency in settling matters."

"That doesn't seem likely."

"Perhaps not, but the investigator will find the truth once he knows where to start."

He drew her head down on his shoulder as her lids drooped shut. "Sleep," he murmured. "You need it."

She ought to move, but she was too comfortable.

And now that she had a plan, she could finally relax. She slept.

Chapter Twelve

Richard is frustrated because the deputy minister is perpetually busy – or so the man claims. I think he’s avoiding Richard so he can ignore the problem. Government grinds so slowly one wonders how anything moves ahead. But Richard will persevere.
Duchess of Westfield, June 1786

John pushed aside his breakfast and skimmed the accumulated mail. Or tried. Fog shrouded his mind, making yesterday’s revelations sound like a Radcliffe novel. Murder. Mayhem. Missing heirs. His head felt ready to burst.

Eight hours in a carriage with the lady who’d refused his offer had been painful. He still couldn’t believe she’d said no. Didn’t Faith understand how much she would suffer if she tried to live alone? The law offered few respectable choices for spinsters, and custom reduced those even further. Wedding a social inferior was better than life as a companion, which was her only real alternative. Loss of virtue made a governess post impossible. And if she was right about her family, living with them as a poor relation would keep her miserable.

Other positions would bar her from society, assuming she could find one. No one would hire her as a servant, or even a housekeeper, unless she lied about her breeding. She lacked the skills to assist a dressmaker. Shopkeepers rarely looked outside their families for help. The stage. Prostitution...

It didn’t bear thinking of.

He must convince her that marriage was her best choice. Granted, it would weaken her ties to her class. A low-bred female could wed an aristocrat and have her children accepted even if she wasn’t. But a male could never do so. He would remain forever in his own station, as would his wife and children.

The more John considered her refusal, the less he understood it. Shock might explain her first reaction, but she’d moved beyond shock long before they’d reached town, accepting her change of fortune and

planning how best to help the staff survive Chester's wrath. She'd shown remarkable resilience and a steely spine that could weather any storm. Her intelligence was acute. She had enjoyed their lovemaking as much as he, which should have reconciled her to the match.

Sweep my dearest Faith into matrimony...

Reginald had implied that the duke might do so. Was that Faith's dream, too? Was *that* why she'd suddenly decided the duke might be alive?

It was a ridiculous notion on all counts. Despite her feeble attempts to explain why a duke of thirty-two might shirk his duty, she must know that no aristocrat would hide from responsibility. Duty was bred into lords, especially high ones. If it turned out that she was right, then the ninth Westfield was a coward. Such a man would never step forward to help an unknown and unexpected ward who had already ruined herself. Faith was too sheltered to understand aristocratic thinking.

John steeped his hands under his chin and frowned. If she was *that* sheltered, then he must be patient, for she would accept the truth only through bitter experience. All he could do in the meantime was protect her while they chased the ghost of the ninth duke.

The duchess's diary raised puzzling questions. Why had Richard appointed Goodman to a trustee post when he knew Goodman didn't believe that Chester was evil? Shouldn't he have chosen men dedicated to protecting his family at all cost?

John knew Chester was a cad, and not just because the man had sold Faith to Bitstaff. Chester had broken every rule gentlemen supposedly lived by. And he was no stranger to crime. Even a quick glance through the estate ledger raised questions about his honesty. John had been pondering what to do when Faith had diverted him. It was another reason he must call on the trustees without delay.

He'd known from the moment he'd spotted those inconsistencies that rescuing Westcourt was a dream he would never realize. Chester did not intend to renovate the house. He would use John's reports to extract money from the trustees, then spend that money on himself, telling Lady Catherine and the others that the trustees had decided repairs were too costly. Faith would be furious when she found out.

On the thought, she appeared in the doorway.

"Good morning." He nodded toward the sideboard. "Shall I have Treburn fix you a plate, or would you prefer to help yourself?"

"Don't bother your butler." She scooped up eggs and ham, then poured coffee. "The house is larger than I expected." They'd been too tired for a tour last night.

"It was originally two houses that I combined into one."

"Is that usual in town?"

"No, though it does happen occasionally. My office had outgrown the ground floor, so when the neighboring house became available, I bought it. The first and second floors are for personal use. My students live upstairs."

"You have students?"

"Four. All architects teach. They won't bother you, though. They have their own entrance and staircase, and they never venture into my private quarters."

"They wouldn't bother me anyway." She shrugged, studying his dining room. It was the first room he'd redone after expanding his office. He'd covered three walls with deep red silk, then enlarged the windows overlooking Hanover Square until they filled the fourth. Using slender iron glazing bars instead of the usual wood made the entire wall appear to be glass.

"Breathtaking," she said, shaking her head. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Because it is unique – until next month. I'm incorporating the system into Mr. Fairview's house."

"You must love light."

"Of course. The worst house I ever worked on was an early Palladian manor whose designer had carried the philosophy of blank wall space to extremes. Its tiny windows made even the drawing room look like a dungeon, and the rest of the place was worse. The owner was burning a fortune in candles."

"What did you do?"

"Enlarged the existing windows, installed new windows, then added a dome to bring light into the interior." He shook his head. "I will never understand why people embrace impractical ideas in the name of fashion. If you can't see your surroundings, what is the point in having them?"

"Fashion is rarely practical," she pointed out,

spreading honey on a piece of toast. "It must change often and cannot repeat itself. How else can we know who is fashionable and who is not?"

"I prefer comfort over fashion any day."

"But you would make a poor living if everyone followed suit. No one would refurbish their homes."

"You have a point, though the refurbishing I do is usually part of a larger project, such as adding modern conveniences or correcting structural defects. Without regular maintenance, a building will fail. Witness Westcourt."

She nodded, then changed the subject. "We must find the investigator's direction today so we can speak to his staff before Chester turns them against us—"

"Why would he? He told us the search was over, so he can hardly expect us to check on its progress. Besides, Bow Street considers truth before rank. They won't toss us out without a hearing, no matter what Chester claims."

"Bow Street has nothing to do with this. Chester hired a private investigator, not a runner."

John frowned. Very few men engaged in such work. Most were either incompetent or venal, which was why nearly everyone hired runners if they needed such services. He knew of only one investigator who could be trusted. Was Chester stupid enough to hire him when his own behavior was suspect? "Which one?"

"Lord Portland. He has a reputation for discretion as well as tenaciousness."

"I know." Relieved, yet oddly disturbed, he summoned a footman and requested pen and paper.

Faith's brows shot up as he scribbled a request for a meeting at Alex Portland's earliest convenience. "You've heard of him?"

"We've been friends since I redesigned his country house three years ago. He despises dishonesty, which makes one wonder why Chester hired him. Even if he knows the duke is dead, he should never give Alex an excuse to pry into his affairs. Not if the duchess was right about his crimes." Alex was very, very thorough. And he never failed.

The footman left with John's message.

"Why does a lord with a country estate work as an investigator?" asked Faith, frowning.

"He loves puzzles." John shrugged. "He's an earl's younger son who earned his title tracking down

French spies and English traitors during the war. The estate and fortune came from his grandmother. But he prefers investigations to agriculture. He's very good."

"Then he will likely still be in France."

"I doubt it. Alex would never go to France without proof that Montrose actually went there. Chester's orders don't constitute proof." And since he'd seen Alex only last week...

Faith swallowed a bite of ham. "That sounds encouraging."

"Very. His mind remains open until he amasses all the facts. And he hates dishonor, greed, and selfishness. That's what motivated nearly everyone he hunted for the government."

"You know him well."

"As well as anyone can – he won't discuss large chunks of his life, so no one truly knows him." They'd grown close before Alex received his title, so John had never felt wary of him. Alex was one of the few gentlemen he knew who cared more about character than breeding. Their friendship belied Soane's strictures about remembering his place, but his mother would have approved. She had tried to instill in him the best traits of all classes, which made him comfortable with a variety of people. Alex had the same outlook, perhaps because he'd so often lived as a member of the lower classes while pursuing his investigations.

John finished his coffee, then regaled Faith with tales of Lord and Lady Portland. By the time Treburn appeared with Alex's reply, Faith's mouth hung open.

Treburn extended his salver. "For you, sir."

"Thank you." Alex was home, as expected. "He will see us immediately. Are you finished?"

She nodded. "That was fast."

"He lives two streets over. We'll walk."

* * * *

"John!" Alex clapped him on the shoulder before ushering him into his study. He was a tall man with dark hair. Pale blue eyes gleamed in a scarred face capable of scaring dogs, children, and timid maidens. "Good to see you, but what the devil is so urgent?"

"We have information about one of your cases." John introduced Faith, adding, "She's the Duke of Westfield's ward."

Alex raised one brow. "No one mentioned a ward."

“Hardly a surprise,” said Faith. “It has no bearing on finding him.”

A maid arrived with a tea tray.

“What can you tell me about the duke’s fate?” asked John when they were again alone.

“You know my investigations are confidential.”

John frowned. “All right. Let’s try this. Have you spoken to the trustees?”

“Why?”

“I have urgent business with them, but I don’t have their names. Lord Chester claims the original trustees retired some time ago. Since he refuses to identify their replacements, no one at Westcourt can apprise them of trouble without going through Chester.”

“That isn’t proper.”

“I know. Your quest is legitimate, as is Westcourt’s need for my own services. But I’ve discovered that Lord Chester filters all requests, passing on only what he wants the trustees to know. I suspect he filters their responses as well. And he is prone to exaggeration if not outright distortion.”

“A grave charge.” Alex pursed his lips.

“But true.” He shook his head. “I found proof that he has embezzled thousands from the estate”—Faith gasped—“and lied to the family and Westcourt dependents. His misconduct began the moment he assumed the steward’s post.” As fury exploded through Faith’s eyes, he laid a hand over hers and squeezed. This wasn’t the place for questions.

“Lord Chester approached me as spokesman for the trustees,” said Alex slowly. “I thought nothing of it as he is intimately involved in my commission. He charged me with proving the duke’s fate.”

“A legitimate quest, as I said. Miss Harper also seeks that information, since the man is her guardian.”

Faith nodded. “I believe he may be alive, in which case he will need protection until Chester can be prosecuted. Embezzlement?” she added, turning to John.

“We will discuss that later.” He turned to Alex. “It is obvious that the trustees are lax. Neither they nor any representative has visited the estate or examined the books since Goodman was there—” He glanced at Faith.

“—nineteen years ago.”

“Chester already claims the title when doing business with underlings. I did not discover his true standing until after I arrived to do a preliminary survey.”

“He probably is the duke,” Alex reminded him.

“But not yet, which is why we are here. Who are the current trustees?”

“Meeks, Donaldson, and MacPherson. Meeks is a solicitor with offices at Lincoln’s Inn. The others are with Cray’s Bank on the Strand.”

John again turned to Faith, raising his brow.

She shook her head. “I’ve never heard of them. Even the bank has changed. Westfield always used Child’s.”

“Odd,” said Alex. “Why would the bank change?”

“Perhaps Child’s asked questions Lord Chester didn’t wish to answer,” said John. “I will pursue that later. How goes your search for the duke?”

“Slow.” Alex relaxed. “Francine DuBois covered her tracks very well. No one by that name took the packet to France.”

“She may have used a false name.”

“Which would have required getting papers in that name. Prying out the names of women who obtained travel passes in July 1788 is arduous, but I have a man working on it. He will then have to verify their identities, which will take time. Until I have some idea where she went, there is little point in traveling there myself.”

Faith snorted. “Chester claims that you have been in France for two months, found the information you seek, and are due back next week.”

Alex scowled. “He knows better. France is much larger than England. Until I know which district to search, there is no point in travel. At the moment I’m seeking her earlier employers. One of them might recall her background.”

“Any luck?” asked John. When Alex hesitated, he added, “Miss Harper has as much right to know as Lord Chester does. More, to my thinking. Yesterday Chester tried to sell her to Lord Bitstaff, and not for marriage.”

Portland cursed. “My contract is with the trustees, but I will tell you what I’ve found so far. The original trustees are no help. Only Goodman was at Westcourt when Montrose disappeared, but he died two years ago. The other two have grown forgetful and know only

what Goodman told them in any case. Asking them questions usually elicits only diatribes against the duke and duchess. They think both should have been locked in Bedlam.”

Faith glared.

“They searched for nearly a year after his disappearance, without luck, and finally concluded that he’d died shortly after leaving Westcourt. But without proof, the title could not be passed on.”

“They didn’t know where to look,” said Faith. “They dismissed everything the eighth duke told them before his death, and they refused to credit the duchess with even basic intelligence.”

“A mistake,” added John.

“On that point we agree.” Alex shook his head. “I next sought Bernard, the eighth duke’s secretary. He was there, which is more than Chester can claim. Or the surviving trustees, for that matter.”

“Where is he?” asked Faith.

Temper flashed across Alex’s face. “Slaving for a pittance in Cornwall. Or was. When he left Westcourt, the only position he could find was as tutor to a merchant family.”

“A duke’s secretary?”

Portland nodded. “Even people he’d known all his life turned their backs after rumors swept town charging him with bedding the duchess.”

Faith sputtered incoherently.

“Did they hint that he’d fathered Montrose?” asked John.

“Of course, not that it would matter since the duke acknowledged the boy.”

“There was no affair,” snapped Faith.

“I believe you. My father recalls the Westfields quite well. Scandalous the way they publicly doted on each other, even for those days. Bernard denies it, too, of course, and all evidence I’ve found repudiates those rumors.”

“Chester,” growled Faith.

“Revenge.” John nodded. “He must have known the duke would tell his secretary everything and that Bernard had helped Montrose escape.”

“You know something.”

“Later. What did Bernard say?”

“Far too much, and little of it to the point – he returned to town with me. We will call on the old

trustees today. Perhaps their explanation of why they treated him so shabbily will jar further memories loose – as long as he doesn't attack them for calling the duchess mad."

"She was perfectly sane," said Faith. "If you doubt her, you will never discover the truth."

"She showed no signs of madness in later years, but do you honestly believe she acted logically and sensibly?"

"What did Bernard say about Montrose?" John asked before Faith could respond. He wanted as many facts as possible before revealing the diary.

Alex glared. "He's lied so often I can't believe anything he says. At first, he repeated what he told Goodman thirty years ago – that Francine had either gone to Scotland or France. After I pressed – something in his eyes bothered me – he decided that *serving the duke* now means changing his story. His current claim is that Francine remained in England, though he doesn't know where. Reasonable if she was the daughter of émigrés – there were plenty even before the revolution. But when I told him that Lord Chester thinks she came from Provence, Bernard refused to say another word."

"I thought you had no idea where she came from."

"I don't. What I have are two men telling me very different stories, and neither can produce any evidence in support of his claims. How can I believe either of them?" He shook his head. "So I am tracking down Francine's earliest employers."

"How does Chester explain so specific a piece of information when no one else has come up with anything in thirty years?" murmured John. The obvious answer was that Chester wanted Alex in Provence, but that made no sense.

"It doesn't matter." Faith produced the diary. "Francine is not French, nor are her ancestors. She was born in London, though she never revealed where."

"What?" Alex pinned her with a look that should have set her quaking – scowls made his scars stand out, turning him into a very dangerous pirate – but she seemed unfazed.

"The duchess knew that much – had known since age twelve, shortly after her father hired Francine – but no one else guessed. It was Francine's acting

ability that convinced the duchess that she could protect Montrose.”

“From what?”

“Chester. He wants the title and will do anything to get it.”

“Today, yes. But he was barely out of school when Montrose disappeared.”

John shook his head. “He was working toward that goal by age ten, when he killed his father, then went after Richard.”

“How—”

“Read.” Faith handed him the book. “The duchess’s diary. She wrote down everything Richard told her and described the plans he’d made in case of his death – that Scottish estate. And she explains why she abandoned his plan and how she communicated with Francine.”

“She stayed in touch?”

“Of course. She would never let Montrose go without keeping track of him. They used notices in the *Morning Post*. Their code is in the diary.”

“Where did Francine go?”

“London. If the duchess knew more, she didn’t trust the information even to her most private diary, though. Nor does she reveal the name Francine took when she left Westcourt.”

“How far back have you traced her?” asked John.

“Bernard remembers that Francine worked for Mrs. Dearborn before being hired by the duchess’s father. Dearborn is a cotton merchant. Francine stayed only a few months – her skills were not up to Mrs. Dearborn’s standards, though the woman allowed in her reference that Francine would likely do well with a younger charge. After forty years, Mrs. Dearborn’s memory is faded, but Francine was her first lady’s maid. She recalls that Francine knew London very well.”

John shrugged. “Hardly a surprise for someone born here.”

“Beyond that, she didn’t help much. Her husband hired the girl, so she never saw her references. Francine mentioned her previous employer once, but Mrs. Dearborn discouraged personal remarks and paid little attention to that one. She does recall that Francine’s English was tolerable, but her accent sometimes interfered with understanding.”

Faith nodded. “The duchess reports that Francine

grew up near a French family, which is how she learned the accent and gestures. She sometimes fell out of character, though, which is how the duchess recognized the imposture. The duchess thought it great fun to help Francine perfect her act – she was a bit of a hoyden in those days.”

“Does she mention anything about Francine’s real past?” asked Alex.

“Not here – she started this volume at age fifteen after Francine had been with her three years. But she did mention that Francine recommended an unusual snuff mix for the duke when he became bored with his own. He was delighted with her suggestion.”

“Unless an early employer used snuff, she must have learned that at home,” said John.

“Bernard thinks her earliest employers were elderly, so they will be long dead.” Alex sighed. “They might have taken snuff. Many dowagers did back then. But those mixes wouldn’t suit a duke, so I will check tobacco shops. There can’t be that many. One might recall a daughter or cousin who went into service fifty years ago.”

“You can also check the *Post*,” suggested Faith. “The duchess copied all Francine’s messages. They are dated, so perhaps there will be records telling who placed them. A name could help.”

“And I will insert an ad for Francine, in case she’s alive.”

“One of the code phrases asks her to produce Montrose, and another vows no one will blame her. The duchess also includes details about the secret account Richard established. She gave Francine the identification necessary to withdraw funds and told her to use the money for Montrose’s expenses and education.”

Chapter Thirteen

Dead! My God, why could it not be me? Richard is too young...

Duchess of Westfield, upon the duke’s death July 1,
1787

When they returned home, Faith headed upstairs while John went to his office. She was glad it had its own entrance, for it meant none of his employees saw

her. The servants knew she was there, of course, but it was in their best interests to be discreet – if others discovered that he was hosting an unchaperoned lady, the blemish on his reputation would diminish his staff's standing as well.

That would not suffice for long, of course. The neighbors might spot her at any time. A man in John's position could not afford a rakish reputation, so she must find other quarters. And she must do it soon. Chester's slander should sweep society by tomorrow at the latest. People would then watch John closely, hoping to catch him in some scandal. With Bernard's example staring him in the face, John could hardly insist it wouldn't hurt. Bernard had already spent thirty years paying for Chester's pique.

John was still being stubborn about it, though. On the walk back from Portland House, she'd pointed out his danger, but he'd dismissed her fears. Again. How could a man who kept myriad details at the forefront of his mind be so ignorant about the world in which he lived?

"Chester's influence is not as widespread as he claims," John had insisted. "Yes, he tarnished Bernard, but few people knew the man."

"Few people know you, either. Not well. And Bernard's father was an earl, so he had plenty of connections. But society is quick to condemn and slow to forgive. They turned their backs on Bernard, despite that he was one of them. Chester will make it seem that you are using me to better your position. That is something society won't tolerate. I've always known that any attempt to use the duke's family would see me ostracized, for they are well above me."

"Who is Bernard's father?" he'd asked.

"The Earl of Wallingham."

John nodded. "That explains it. The man is an insufferable prig who likely refused to let Bernard say a word in his own defense. And you exaggerate the gap between you and the duke. Do not assume that Lady Catherine represents London society, my dear. Her arrogance has little to do with her rank. Many rational people exist, even in the aristocracy."

"What has that to do with anything?"

"You might be gentry-born, Faith. But the only aristocrats you know are the duke's poor relations. Every one of them is an outcast for one reason or

another. None of them are typical of the aristocracy.”

She’d protested, of course. She’d read hundreds of letters to and from lords and ladies. Many referred to scandals and passed judgment on various misdeeds. If she didn’t know what society thought, no one did.

But no argument would sway him.

“You will come to a bad end,” she’d finally snapped. “I swear you are more arrogant than the most pompous duke.”

“I am *not* arrogant.”

“Of course you are. You are as stubbornly blind as Reginald, believing everything will turn out as you desire. You wouldn’t admit a mistake if your life depended on it.”

“A base canard.” He sounded furious. “What I *am* is confident. An arrogant man believes he knows everything and is above the rules that apply to lesser beings, but a confident man understands his limitations. I can confidently declare that the only way to eliminate Westcourt’s leaks is to replace the roof and repoint the walls. But I would never venture an opinion of its crop plan, for I know nothing about agriculture.”

“You know nothing of Chester, either.”

“Not as much as I’d like,” he’d agreed. “And what I do know, I despise. But I know myself, and I understand the world better than you, Faith, despite your extensive reading. I am neither arrogant nor reckless, so cease fretting. Chester has more pressing problems than you and me.”

“Did you understand nothing the duchess wrote? Chester never forgets or forgives, no matter how petty the insult.”

“This is not the place to discuss it,” he’d countered, nodding toward the growing throng of shoppers.

Yet he’d ducked into his office on their return instead of resuming the discussion.

Pig-headed man!

The mantel clock struck twelve, increasing her tension. Chester was back in London – if he hadn’t paid Bitstaff by now, he faced social ruin. So rumors would already be flying.

Damnation!

At least her room faced the garden so walkers in the square wouldn’t note that it was occupied. She needed to check her trunks – she’d been too rushed yesterday

to pack properly. Once she assessed any damage, she could decide what to sell if she needed funds.

"*When*, not *if*," she murmured, closing her door. Finding a post would take time. First she had to produce a reference, which meant conjuring a previous employer – she daren't forge one from her vicar, or anyone at Westcourt, for that matter. Debrett's *Peerage* and his *Baronetage* made it too easy to verify people's existence, so the supposed employer had to be a real person who had recently died without close family who might be familiar with her household. And it had to be someone who seldom received callers. A tall order.

In the meantime, she couldn't remain here. It would be the first place Chester looked.

Now that Portland had a starting point, he would discover the duke's fate very soon. She must have her own plans in place before he did. Dreaming of a living duke who would give her a reference was a nice little fantasy, but truth would be harsher. Even if by some miracle the duke lived, he might not help her. If he was hiding, he would be furious at her for betraying him. If he was ignorant of his birth, he would have no gentlemanly training – the trustees had searched schools for twenty years without success. So Westfield might be worse than Chester.

But there was nothing she could do about that, so she opened the first trunk and set about repacking.

* * * *

John spent an hour in his office checking that nothing had gone wrong in his absence. He was rising to leave when his assistant Fogel poked his head through the doorway.

"A Mr. Simmons to see you, sir. He claims it is urgent."

Reginald? John hadn't believed Chester would really turn everyone off, but— "Show him in."

Simmons exploded into the office, slammed the door in Fogel's face, then slapped both hands onto John's desk and glared. "Where is she?"

"Where is who?" asked John calmly.

Simmons swelled in fury.

John gestured to a chair. "Have a seat, Mr. Simmons."

"Never! You abducted Faith. If you don't return her, I'll see you prosecuted."

"And make a fool of yourself in the process." He sighed.

Simmons's face purpled. "Hardly. No one will believe you over me. The blood of dukes runs in my veins. You will return Faith, then resign the Westcourt commission and never set foot there again."

"You have no say in how Westcourt is run, Simmons."

"You dare to banter words with me?" he snarled. "You are beneath contempt, sir. I tolerated your insults at Westcourt, but no more. Return my betrothed immediately."

John had had enough of the popinjay. "You make yourself more absurd with every word you speak. No"—he held up his hand when Simmons sputtered—"you've had your say. Now it's my turn. I did not abduct Miss Harper. I merely offered her a ride to town after Lord Chester turned her off. Since her choice lay between riding with me or walking, she accepted."

"He would never—"

"He did. And since his parting words were a vow to rid Westcourt of everyone, you might find it difficult to return."

"It's my home."

"At Chester's sufferance." There was no need to mention doubts over Chester's authority. "Miss Harper wished to speak with the trustees, so I brought her to town."

"You lie!"

When John rose to lean across the desk, Simmons flinched back a step. "The world does not arrange itself for your benefit, Simmons. If you expect to live in it, you had best learn to adapt. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"Where is she?"

"She asked that I keep her direction secret. Chester has never liked her and might attack if he thinks the trustees are helping her."

"But she can't have meant me. We are betrothed."

"Odd that she didn't mention it. Until she rescinds her request, I must adhere to it. I will tell her you are in town. Where are you staying?"

"I don't know. I just arrived." He seemed disconcerted, as if he hadn't thought beyond finding Faith. Surely he hadn't expected to grab her and immediately return to Westcourt. Boys in leading

strings had more sense.

John pursed his lips. There was no way he would keep Simmons here, but he knew the fellow had little money. "Try Ibbetson's." He added the direction. It was clean, but not terribly expensive, serving mostly country clergy and students. "Miss Harper will let you know if she wishes to see you."

"If she doesn't see me today, I will know that you are keeping her locked up."

"Is that a threat?" asked John softly.

Simmons adopted his haughtiest stare.

"I have work to do," John repeated, shuffling papers. "I will send a note to Miss Harper. How she responds is her business." He resumed his seat, then turned his attention to his report on Westcourt.

Simmons finally took the hint and departed.

John sighed. Another complication, not that he believed Faith was actually betrothed. Not only had she refused to ask Simmons's help in deflecting Bitstaff, but she would surely have cited an existing engagement when refusing his own offer.

Simmons would cause trouble, though, so he must discuss the problem with Faith. But not yet. He'd requested an appointment with the trustees, citing urgent business that required the attention of all three men. They should be waiting for him at Cray's.

He'd not told Faith. His immediate goal was to deflect Chester. She was right that he could cause considerable trouble. Once John charged him with fraud, society would postpone judging Faith until they sorted out Chester's motives.

John had never visited Cray's, but the building was a typical bank – sturdy, with no windows. This one was dimmer inside than most. If his business were less urgent, he might mention the domes and skylights Soane was incorporating into the Bank of England that let light into its core. But this wasn't the time to discuss architecture.

Men bustled about, speaking in the hushed tones one used in banks and cathedrals. The doorman asked his business, then referred him to a receptionist, who consulted a sheaf of papers. At least he was expected. A page escorted him to MacPherson's office.

"What could possibly be urgent about your business, Lascar?" demanded MacPherson the moment John entered. Eyes like black ice declared

that he wasn't welcome.

John leaned his portfolio against his chair and abandoned the exchange of civilities that generally opened these meetings.

"As per my contract, I spent the past week surveying Westcourt," he said bluntly. "It is in deplorable condition."

"We know the roof leaks," said Donaldson, interrupting. "That's why we sent you there."

"The problem extends far beyond leaks," snapped John. "My usual practice when I encounter serious trouble is to check the history of repairs to better ascertain the cause."

"We are aware that the previous steward allowed the estate to deteriorate," said Meeks soothingly. "The original trustees were in ill health. They ceased active oversight some time ago. We have taken many steps to rectify the situation, of which hiring you is merely the latest."

"And I appreciate the chance to work on a fine building. But I must question why none of you examined it for yourselves."

"We are busy men." MacPherson's tone could have frozen fire. "It is customary to send representatives into the country."

"If we are speaking of custom, it is customary to choose representatives who have no personal interest in the property."

MacPherson glared daggers.

Donaldson looked ready to attack.

"Suppose you come to the point, Mr. Lascar." Meeks's oily solicitor's voice tried to calm tempers.

"Very well." From his portfolio, John produced the Westcourt ledgers for the two years Chester had been steward. He flipped from marked page to marked page as he spoke. "As you can see, these entries show repairs to the village church, substantial work to the village inn and Westcourt outbuildings, a new dairy, and more," he said, pointing to the sums in each case.

"We know that little maintenance was done during the previous steward's tenure. That's why Lord Chester had to address so many problems at once." Donaldson's stuffy retort raised John's hackles.

"I agree." John fought for calm. "You mentioned that the previous trustees were lax, but do you have any idea how lax? They last checked Westcourt

nineteen years ago. As near as I can tell, little maintenance was done after the duchess died, and none at all after the estate carpenter expired."

"When did that happen?" demanded MacPherson.

"Four years ago."

"But—"

John raised a hand. "That is why I am here. Not one of these repairs was actually made."

"What?" Meeks croaked.

"Not one," repeated John. "Lord Chester has repaired nothing! The vicar spoke with me after services Sunday, begging me to intercede, for the church roof is in danger of collapse. Lord Chester claimed only last month that you had again turned down his request for repairs."

"But—"

"I saw the roof," continued John, allowing no interruption. "A patch was applied above the altar last spring. You can check with the builder who did it, but I would be surprised if it cost five pounds. Westcourt's church is small. This two hundred pounds"—he pointed to the ledger—"is at least double what replacing the entire roof should cost."

MacPherson swallowed. Hard.

"The innkeeper has only two usable stalls since the rear wall collapsed on the stable. The Westcourt dairy has occupied the same building for two hundred years. It is a sturdy stone structure whose only problem is a pair of rotted beams that will be easy to replace. The house, on the other hand, has numerous problems we can discuss later."

"For a price, I suppose," growled Meeks.

"I have no contract for designing repairs," John reminded them. "Nor do I expect you to take my word without investigating. I strongly urge you to do just that. And not just the house. My cursory examination turned up embezzlement on a grand scale. The staff you are funding doesn't exist. Lord Chester refused to pension off servants who should have retired years ago. None of them has received an increase in wages for thirty years. Nor has the household budget increased in that time despite that half a dozen family members plus their personal servants joined the household during that period. When the war pushed prices higher, the residents had to adjust by keeping staff positions vacant as servants died or left. The cook

dropped dead in the kitchen two days ago. She was seventy-seven, with serious health problems. Miss Hortense and Miss Esther have not received their quarterly allowance since last summer, despite that the dispersals are listed in the ledger. Lord Chester is not yet the duke,” he added, seeing the comment trembling on MacPherson’s lips. “And despite his claims, he may never hold that title. I spoke with Lord Portland, which is how I got your names – Lord Chester refuses to tell anyone who the current trustees are. Portland has discovered that every claim Lord Chester made about the duke’s flight from Westcourt is a lie. The man’s fate may never be proved, and in the meantime, you are responsible for Westcourt and its finances. Thus any problems must be laid at your door.”

“You exaggerate,” snapped MacPherson.

“No, I don’t. Lord Chester keeps the estate books – these books. No one else is allowed to touch them. I would not have seen them myself if he had been at home – Miss Harper gave me permission to borrow them. She had no reason to think anything was wrong. I suggest you match the entries in this ledger to the housekeeper’s account book, the kitchen account, and the butler’s salary records. That alone should prove that these entries are very suspicious.”

Meeks sighed. “He is right. I warned you not to leave everything in the heir’s hands. If he *did* divert money to his own use, you could be held liable, especially if this latest search proves inconclusive.”

MacPherson paged through the current ledger, shuddering at several entries. But Donaldson wasn’t convinced. “Is this how you deflect interest from your own misdeeds, Lascar?”

“What misdeeds?” Only will kept his face placid.

“Lord Chester informed us that he’d turned you off for trifling with his ward.”

John shook his head, radiating disgust. “I presume you mean the duke’s ward. Lord Chester twists facts, as usual. Miss Harper accepted my suit two days ago – you might recall that she is of age and thus need not consult you before considering marriage.”

“He said nothing of a betrothal.” Meeks frowned.

“He gave us no chance to mention it.” John sighed. “I had already discovered his defalcations and was ready to leave – to consult you,” he added. “Lord

Chester returned from London with Lord Bitstaff, to whom he owes a large gaming debt. Since he is unable to cover it, he'd bargained Miss Harper's virginity for it. I barely rescued her from Bitstaff's attack. We left immediately, of course."

"Of course." MacPherson paled.

"Grave charges," said Meeks.

"But true. The staff will bear witness. I am not surprised that he is reviling me, though. The family warned me that Lord Chester seeks revenge whenever anyone thwarts him, so smearing my reputation fits his character."

"Something else to check." MacPherson grimaced. "I'll drive out tomorrow."

"We will all go," said Donaldson, reaching for the second ledger.

John handed him a sheaf of papers. "My preliminary report on Westcourt's condition, gentlemen. You can compare it to your own observations." He rose. "Polly and Ned are the staff members most capable of answering questions. The housekeeper no longer recognizes anyone, and the butler has trouble remembering what day it is. Both should have been pensioned off years ago." When they nodded, he excused himself and left. He would like to wring MacPherson's neck, and Donaldson wasn't much better. But their shock seemed genuine. He could not accuse them of conspiring with Chester. Now that they understood the problem, they would address it. Their own reputations depended on it. Faith's friends would finally receive the treatment they deserved.

But he had to wonder how many others would receive letters from Chester today...

* * * *

Faith wandered the house, bored nearly to tears. The sun had set. Treburn had lighted lamps but said nothing about dinner. How late did John work?

Her stomach growled as the clock struck six. Westcourt was eating by now.

Her possessions had survived the dash to London intact, but several items had been left behind. A reasonable trade perhaps for the trinkets Ned had slipped her, though she still felt guilty about those. If she hadn't been in shock...

She'd discovered only this morning that the cloak's pockets were filled with miniatures, snuff boxes, and

watch fobs. Lady Catherine would not know they were gone – or Chester, for that matter. Baines had locked them in the vault after the duchess's death. That the staff would risk transportation to help her brought a lump to her throat. They had always cared more for her welfare than their own and clearly meant to provide support until she found a post.

Yet how could she accept these treasures? No matter how much she disliked Chester, she couldn't condone stealing from Westcourt. But returning them would endanger her friends and give Chester a new grievance.

The dilemma ate at her mind, making her too restless to sit. To escape thought for a time, she studied John's house.

His possessions were surprisingly eclectic, many adding warmth to his rooms. Like the vase in the drawing room. Made of nearly transparent glass, its stunning colors reminded her of the bright hues popular in India. But it was not Indian. Nor was it English or French. A similar bowl graced his study.

At Westcourt, John had often speculated on how he would decorate each room if given free rein, impressing her with his imagination. Now that she saw his house, she was even more impressed. His taste was impeccable, from the gold and blue lushness of the drawing room, to the delicate comfort of her bedroom, to the cozy warmth of his study. Splashes of color drew the eye to his collection of sculpture or the curve of a table or a heavily carved chair. Yet everything fit into a harmonious whole. Even that brilliantly colored glass.

Still puzzling over its origins, she wandered to the drawing room window, careful to stay far enough back that no one would see her. Despite the waning light, Hanover Square remained busy, filled with rattling carriages and bustling people. Lamps spaced at intervals around the edges illuminated a dozen nurses giving their charges a last turn about the central park. Three dandies on horseback nearly trampled a dog that had escaped its lead. A high-perch phaeton rounded the corner so fast it tipped up onto two wheels. Only a rapid lean by the driver kept it upright.

Apparently all of London worked late. The city was different from Buckinghamshire in other ways, too. Thousands of chimneys kept it shrouded in smoke. Its noise made her ears ring – hooves clattering over

cobblestone, venders shouting their wares, people, horses, and a host of conveyances. It was terrifying, yet exhilarating, and incredibly vibrant.

All day she'd wanted to rush outside and explore. But she couldn't. Leaving the safety of John's house could only hurt his reputation.

Turning her back on the window, she pondered how to fill the time until John returned. She'd run Westcourt for so long that she'd forgotten how ladies amused themselves – if she'd ever known. Already the day stretched longer than any in memory and it wasn't even time for dinner. How did others stand it?

The only ladies she knew were those at Westcourt. Lady Catherine maintained a strict schedule, devoting an hour each morning to correspondence and another to walking in the garden or the long gallery. She worked on her tapestry, sewed, paid or received calls, played the harpsichord, and so on.

But Faith had never indulged in those activities. She had no friends outside the staff, few acquaintances, and no training in genteel accomplishments.

But neither did Hortense, though the woman filled her time without complaint. She made minor repairs to the house, worked in the garden, and discussed problems with the tenants. She'd shouldered half the work of the old steward and did even more now that Chester was in charge. He preferred London.

Esther dedicated her time to the church. If she wasn't arranging flowers or collecting donations, she was embroidering altar cloths or seeking support for the village school.

Reginald wrote. Or thought about writing. Or talked about writing. He had no other pastime that she could see.

And the colonel? Faith frowned. He was the only one who had been there when she'd arrived. She had no idea what he did other than maintain a prodigious correspondence. Aside from joining the family at dinner and staying afterward for cards, he remained alone.

Odd, that.

But it was too late to learn how he spent his time. She would be better served filling her own. Tomorrow she must plan her future. But tonight she was hungry.

Her irritation increased when she realized she was pacing. This inability to sit quietly boded ill, for

companions passed many hours in near idleness. She'd never actually considered a companion's duties, but now—

Before alarm could set in, she heard John on the stairs.

"Do you always work this late?" she demanded when he reached the door. The moment the words were out, she blushed. Where had she misplaced her manners?

"Not usually, though this is hardly late by London standards. The upper classes rarely eat before eight." John joined Faith in the drawing room. He knew he should change into evening clothes, but he *was* later than he'd intended. He'd returned from Cray's to find that one of his students had botched an assignment, so he'd had to review the formulas for calculating stress. When he'd finally turned to his own work, he'd lost track of time.

"Is anything wrong?" She took a seat, allowing him to join her.

"Nothing serious, but more work piled up than I'd expected. I won the commission to design a gentleman's club, so I made a start on that."

"At least Chester can't spoil that one for you."

"He won't spoil anything. He'll be too busy saving his own skin." He recounted his visit to the trustees, detailing everything he knew about Chester's defalcations.

"Pensions?" she gasped when he finished.

"He's been collecting the payments for two years. The trustees thought Westcourt had a full staff in addition to pensions for a dozen old servants. And they increased the budget to cover rising prices when they took over after Goodman's death."

Faith angrily paced to the door and back. Her clenched fists told him she wanted to pound something – probably Chester's face.

"The trustees will leave for Westcourt in the morning," he added. "No matter what Chester did after we left yesterday, they will make it right."

Tears filled her eyes as she turned to face him. "Thank you, John. I can't believe—"

"I promised they would be safe, Faith. I take my vows seriously." He paused until she'd regain control of her face. "A visitor arrived just after we returned from seeing Alex."

"Chester?" Panic fluttered in her voice.

"No. Mr. Simmons."

"Reginald!"

Her obvious shock let him relax. "He accused me of abducting his betrothed."

"He what?"

"You heard me. He swears that you are betrothed and that he will see me arrested for abduction."

"He lies." She frowned. "What did you tell him?"

"That Chester had turned you off and vowed to turn the others off as well – that was news, so we can conclude that Chester did nothing before Simmons left this morning. I said you were in town to see the trustees, but that you wanted your direction kept secret to protect you from Chester."

She muttered something under her breath.

"If you wish to speak with him – which might be a good idea, as you can debunk some of his more fanciful notions – I will ask him to call at my office tomorrow. We'd best make it early to avoid too many spectators. His voice carries."

"I suppose that would be best. Drat the man! When will he learn that air dreams are not real?"

"Not until reality beats him over the head much harder than it has done to date. Why does he consider you betrothed?"

"Who knows?" She resumed her seat next to him. "He doesn't want a wife. What he does want is someone who will listen to his poetry and encourage his efforts. His mother considered him brilliant and hung on his every word, so he fell into a serious decline after her death."

"When was that?"

"Three years ago. His other relatives refused to put up with him, so the trustees took pity and sent him to Westcourt. He was tolerable until recently – in the last month alone, his verse has pushed me to the brink of madness more than once."

"Have you mentioned that to him?"

"Often, but he is oblivious to anything he doesn't wish to hear. I usually avoided him except at dinner, but lately he's taken to tracking me down during the day. Escorting you around Westcourt made me unavailable, which is when he decided marriage was the answer. I turned him down, of course. I've no idea what he's up to now. But I suppose I have to see him. He'll make trouble otherwise."

The last tension seeped from John's shoulders. "Shall I invite him to call at eight?"

"Wonderful idea." Faith laughed. "Maybe that will discourage him. He's never risen that early in his life. His mother was so concerned for his health that he never even attended public school."

Treburn announced dinner, so John held out his arm. "Ready?"

He kept conversation light while they ate, avoiding further mention of Reginald or Chester's plans. Though he hadn't sought justice for the servants to impress Faith, doing so had lessened her antagonism. He wasn't about to complain.

* * * *

By the time they reached the sweet course, Faith was as relaxed as she'd ever been. John had said nothing about the future, giving her a respite she hadn't realized she needed. Now he surprised her again, for as she rose to leave him to his port, he shook his head.

"May I join you? I dislike drinking alone."

"Of course." It was his house.

"I should have asked earlier," he said, offering his arm. "Have you a means to occupy your time?"

She opened her mouth to deny any boredom – he was her host, after all – but she couldn't face another day with nothing to do. "Not really. How can people do nothing all day?"

"I should have known. You've never had the luxury of leisure." His face twisted into guilt. "Do you enjoy reading?"

"Of course. Is there a circulating library nearby? I've read everything from ours, but London will surely have books I've not seen."

"We can check tomorrow – I subscribe to three. In the meantime, my own library is downstairs. I should have introduced you to it earlier." He headed for the hall.

Faith eagerly accompanied him. Even if his library contained only books on architecture, she could entertain herself for a time with those.

She expected him to lead her outside to the door serving his office. Instead, he surprised her by stopping at the foot of the stairs. She'd paid little attention to the entrance hall until now. John had blocked off the back portion when he turned the

ground floor into office space. But one door remained. He unlocked it, then motioned her into his private office.

Faith stopped, her mouth hanging open. Three walls were covered with bookcases, and an open door led to a library crammed with more books than Westcourt boasted. She hadn't thought so many existed. Yet he still subscribed to three circulating libraries.

"Amazing!" she breathed, reveling in the smell of well-oiled leather.

"I've always treasured learning. What would you like to read?"

"Have you anything about other countries?"

He moved to the library and pointed to a section by the fireplace. Three shelves held books describing nearly every country on earth. She pulled out title after title, awed that every volume had its pages cut. They weren't here for show, but for study.

"How about inventions?"

"What sort?"

"The newspaper once mentioned a carriage propelled by a steam engine that runs on rails, but it explained the concept so poorly I cannot envision it."

"That was probably the Catch-Me-Who-Can. Trevithick set it up in town several years ago. There are better ones now, especially those devised by Stevenson. Already several are being used in mines. One day tracks will replace canals for moving grain and coal about the country. Steam engines can move faster than canal boats and cross hills more easily."

She chose a book on Italy and another on Spain. John stacked them on a table, then led her to a section containing volumes on inventions and discoveries.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, studying titles. "I had no idea..."

He added a treatise on railroads to her stack. "Will this be enough for tomorrow?"

"It should be. And I doubt your library runs to novels."

"You wrong me." He pointed to the shelves beyond the window. "I read everything, and now that I have the means to indulge myself..."

Another who loved books. Her heart warmed. To control her baser instincts, she focused on the titles. "What's this? A third canto of *Childe Harold*? I

thought Byron wrote only two.”

“He published the first two cantos several years ago. This one came out last fall. I’ve heard he plans a fourth.”

“The lending library near Westcourt has a woefully small collection,” she said sadly, adding Byron’s epic and a new novel by Jane Austen to the pile.

“Is there anything else you want tonight?”

“Everything.” Her eyes swept the room. “But this will do for now.”

“Feel free to come down any time. I’ll leave the private door unlocked.”

This time when they passed through his office, she looked at the room instead of the books. The space was comfortable yet ruthlessly organized. Desk, table, easel, chairs. Four piles of sketches sat on the desk. A half-finished picture of a country house rested on the easel. An open sketchpad contained rapid drawings, presumably ideas for that gentleman’s club. A closed door in the corner must lead to the rest of the ground floor.

“I’m surprised you avoided the books on India,” he said as they returned upstairs. “Or do you recall it so clearly you don’t need to read about it?”

“Neither. I do recall it, of course – I was nearly ten when I left. But I doubt I know much about the country. English children rarely leave the compound, thus the only natives I met were servants.”

“So I missed nothing.” He sighed. “I’ve sometimes wondered how my life would have differed had Mother and I gone with Da on that last posting.”

“You might have died as my family did,” she said bluntly. “Fevers carry off far more English than fighting, many of them wives and children. Disease does not distinguish between soldier and civilian. And tropical fevers take great delight in attacking those who do not belong there.”

“True. Perhaps he did me a good turn by leaving us behind. I wish I’d known him, though. Aunt Frobisher spoke of him often, but rarely with substance. Mother discussed only his bravery and devotion to duty. But I couldn’t help wonder what he was really like. Did he regret leaving us or did he prefer the company of men? What did he think of India?”

“He probably enjoyed it. I know you would,” she admitted. “What I remember most, apart from the

heat, are the pungent smells and brilliant colors. That vase reminds me of it.” She nodded toward the mantel as they entered the drawing room.

“I bought that in Italy. The Mediterranean countries also use striking colors. Perhaps it is characteristic of warm climates.” He traced the curve of the vase – much as he’d traced her face in the Westcourt library.

Heat flared. To hide it, she sat, her hands gripping the book on Italy. “You’ve traveled, then?”

“Some. I won a scholarship from the Royal Academy to study in Italy for two years. The glass artisans there seem almost magical.”

“I thought Italy was closed to the English after Naples fell.”

“True, but I arrived during the Peace of Amiens. The peace collapsed after my first year, but by then I spoke Italian well enough to pass as one, so I stayed to finish my training.”

She shook her head, for surely he was far taller than any Italian. And his eyes were blue rather than black. “That was either incredibly foolish or daringly brave.”

“A little of both, but the architect I was studying with had no love for the French. His friends felt the same, and since I rarely ventured out...” He shrugged. “I was never in danger. It is not something I would counsel anyone else to try, but it worked. And winning one of Italy’s more prestigious awards gave me an advantage when I returned. Without it, I would not have established my office so quickly.”

She had no business chastising him for decisions he had made as a young man. But the thought of what the French would have done had they caught him tumbled chills down her spine. If he had died – or even been incarcerated, as Lord Elgin had been – Chester would have sold her to Bitstaff without interference.

It was time to change the subject. She put down the book and poured coffee. “So how did the son of a soldier win a scholarship from the Royal Academy?”

“I have my mother to thank for that.” Grief flared briefly in his eyes. “After Da died, we moved in with Aunt Frobisher – she was also my godmother, so she welcomed us. Mother’s income as a dressmaker’s assistant kept us comfortable, but she was determined that I do better than Da, so she also took in piecework, setting aside those funds to buy me an apprenticeship.”

"She loved you dearly."

"I know, and I'm grateful, though I wish there had been another way. In the end, that second job killed her."

Faith paused with her cup halfway to her lips. "How?"

"She was returning late one night with a basket of piecework. Tired, as she too often was. Her knees had grown stiff that last year, making it difficult to move quickly. I'll never know exactly what happened, whether it was stiffness or weariness or something else—he inhaled deeply—"but as she crossed the street, a carriage struck her. Aunt Frobisher had died barely a month earlier."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen. Architects rarely accept students younger than fifteen. I might have landed in the workhouse if I hadn't taken a chance and approached Soane – he is the best."

"He accepted you?"

"After I proved that I already had some skill at drawing and had mastered basic structural and design concepts. Mother's one indulgence was subscriptions to several lending libraries, which gave me a broader education than most boys. I stayed with Soane for five years, then won that scholarship from the Royal Academy. The Italian prize helped me win the commission to design Portsmouth's records hall, which brought further contracts. I'd been frugal with Mother's savings, so was able to set up my own office. Not here," he added when she glanced around. "I started with two rooms near Lincoln's Inn."

"You've done well," she concluded. "Your mother would have been proud. Let's pray that Chester will be too busy to ruin it for you."

"He'll forget me in a week."

She started to protest, but he turned the conversation to the lands he'd seen in his travels. She countered with memories of her voyage from India, particularly the odd creatures she'd seen when her ship had paused at Cape Town. By the time she finished her coffee, she was again relaxed.

"Go to bed, Faith," he suggested at last, helping her rise. "If I know Alex, he will have a report for us by tomorrow. And we're expecting Simmons at eight."

Again he prevented any response, this time by

kissing her. Softly. It should have had less impact than his earlier kisses, yet it was more potent than ever, tingling clear to her toes as every nerve jumped to the alert. How could he make her want him with but a touch?

A dangerous man, and one who would not accept her refusal without a fight. Though his lips barely brushed her own, their mere touch evoked memories of his taste, of hot thrusts, of shattering pleasure.

Deliberately.

This wasn't the kiss of a man taking advantage of a female's presence. This was a man bent on seduction. He still believed that honor required marriage.

But she couldn't. His mother had sacrificed everything to give him a better future. He had worked hard in turn, rising to a position of prominence in his profession. She could not damage his credit by saddling him with a wife others would disdain. Nor could she allow Chester to ruin him.

Pulling out of his arms, she bade him goodnight and forced her feet upstairs. Staying another minute would let desire overwhelm her good sense.

He still didn't understand his danger. Charging Chester with embezzlement handed him a new grievance. A far more powerful grievance. Chester would strike out harder than ever. John would soon realize just how far Chester would go. Rumors must already be sweeping society. By tomorrow they would reach the merchant classes.

They had to find the duke. Only he could counter the attack.

* * * *

The moment Faith's door closed, John stalked to his study. She was the most stubborn woman he'd ever encountered. Also the most honest.

Faith had never learned to mask her thoughts, so they paraded across her face. Thus he knew that one kiss had aroused her to the point of pain. She'd nearly melted against him. It had taken all his will to keep his touch light and not crush her closer. But he'd done it. Until she accepted him, he had no right to enjoy her favors. A man didn't treat a potential wife like a courtesan.

If only he could crack her stubbornness. But so far he'd made no progress. She had enjoyed their discourse and displayed interest in his childhood, but

nothing else had changed. She was still determined to avoid marriage. Somehow he had to prove that it was her only option.

Was she carrying his child?

He hoped so, though he knew it would complicate matters. Coercion would put her back up even more. If she came to hate him, she would never accept his love.

At least she still responded to his touch. Knowing that her passion flared whenever he was near would sustain him until he could win her cooperation.

Excitement surged as he considered how he could use that passion. Sooner or later, reality would make her will falter, prodding her to consider his suit. Only then would he seduce her. Yesterday's lovemaking had been better than he'd dreamed. Their next encounter must surpass it. She would never resist him again...

Chapter Fourteen

How can I continue, my love? I fear your plans will fail, for I lack your courage and am nothing without you at my side. And with Goodman here... Yet somehow I must try.

Duchess of Westfield, July 2, 1787

After an early breakfast, John established Faith in the library, then settled behind his desk. Unfortunately, he couldn't concentrate.

Simmons was the most useless man John had ever met, a judgment intensified by yesterday's meeting. Despite having reached the age of thirty-five, his behavior was more suited to an adolescent. How would a spoiled boy react when thwarted? If he joined forces with Chester, surviving Chester's rumors would be harder.

As expected, Simmons was late. It was nearly half past eight before Fogel showed him in. John in turn ushered him into the library, then returned to his office, leaving the door open.

"Are you all right?" Simmons demanded, grabbing Faith's hand.

"Of course!"

John grinned at her obvious irritation.

Faith glared at Reginald. She hadn't thought it necessary for John to stay nearby, but now she was glad he'd insisted. Reginald had clearly lost touch with

reality since she'd left Westcourt. He gripped her hand as if it were the holy grail.

She fought free, then snapped, "Sit down, Reginald. I can't imagine anything more annoying than to have you looming over me like some dreary gargoyle."

He gasped, perching on the arm of her chair.

"Not here. For heaven's sake, behave yourself. Your idiotic accusations are bad enough. I won't tolerate gauche manners."

"You accuse *me* of gauche manners?" But he moved to the nearest chair. "Who was it who ran off without a word?"

"I had no choice. Chester ordered me out and set Combes to watch while I packed. Not that it matters. What was there to say, after all?"

"Imbecile. You should not have let him bluff you into leaving. He often says things in a pique that he doesn't mean. And he has no authority in any case."

Faith shook her head at this further evidence that he lived in a fantasy world. Chester never made a threat he didn't mean. Nor did he change his mind after issuing an order. "Forget it. I was planning to leave anyway. It is past time to make a life for myself. Chester will soon have the title. I will not tolerate him as my guardian."

"Which is why we must wed immediately. That will cut—"

"No."

"You don't know what you're saying." He slid his chair close enough to grab her hand. "It's the only way, Faith. You know that."

"Absolutely not. You have rocks in your head to even consider it."

As usual, he ignored her protest. "I know you wanted to wait until I sell my epic, but that is no longer a problem. I'm seeing the publisher today. I'll be rich by tonight."

"Reginald!" She jerked her hand clear, then put the library table between them. "Even you cannot be that stupid. The chances of selling your epic are negligible, and the chances that your proceeds will cover even your own living expenses are nil. Not that it matters. I will not wed you. Even if you had a fortune, I would not wed you. I am washing my hands of your entire family."

"You can't! How can I write without you?"

“Easily. You don’t need me. What you need is a job where you can meet people and learn more about the world. It will give you fodder for your poetry.”

“I didn’t believe it when Chester told us the damned tradesman forced himself on you. I’ll kill the bastard before I’ll let you sacrifice our happiness because you think yourself ruined.”

She laughed, surprising him so much his mouth hung open. “You truly are stupid, aren’t you? Haven’t you figured out that Chester lied? He needed an excuse to toss me out.”

“Don’t try to hide it. You’ve been standing up to Chester for years. You would never have left unless the fellow forced you.”

“Your imagination grows wilder every day.” She shook her head, then raised a hand as he started toward her. Never again would she abase herself to stay in the family’s good graces. Her glare sent him back a pace. “Go away, Reginald. Now that I’m free, I want nothing to do with any of you. I’ll finish my business with the trustees, then move on. If you have any sense, you will look for a post. And warn Catherine and the others to rally their friends. They will need all the help they can get when the dukedom is settled. If you think Chester will let any you stay, then you are mad.”

He stared, silent, for a full minute, then slammed out of the room, vowing to force Chester to bring her to her senses.

Faith moved to the window, grateful that John had remained at his desk – though he’d started to rise more than once. The last thing John’s reputation needed was a brawl.

Wooden blinds let her watch Reginald’s departure without being seen. But he didn’t leave...

“What’s wrong?” asked John. His hand gripped her shoulders, preventing her from rushing outside.

“He vaulted the fence and is lurking in the park, probably to accost me as I leave. Or perhaps he will follow so I am unguarded when he next approaches. He rarely accepts anything that conflict with his desires.”

“Abduction?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s never been this disturbed.” She turned to face him. “I’ve no idea what he’ll do if he thinks I’m staying here. Tell Chester at

the very least.”

“Then we must convince him otherwise.”

“How?”

“You will leave now – temporarily.” He set a finger on her lips. “Mentioning business with the trustees was a stroke of genius. One of them has offices at Lincoln’s Inn. My carriage will drive you there, then remain outside as if awaiting your return.”

“Which I will have to do eventually.”

He shook his head. “I will escort you to the carriage, then watch until you exit the square so Reginald can’t jump on the back. He will follow, of course—”

“He hasn’t the wherewithal to hire a carriage or even a hackney.”

“But he might have a horse. However he travels, my coachman will spot him long before you reach Lincoln’s Inn. He’ll delay Reginald while you lose yourself.”

“Since I’ve never seen the place, I undoubtedly *will* lose myself.”

“Never. Go in the nearest door, then turn left, take the first hallway to the right, then the second right and finally the first left. That leads to the back door. My groom will be waiting outside with another carriage.”

“Sounds confusing.”

“It won’t be. First left, first right, second right, first left. Very simple.” He smiled. “Trust me. I used to have an office there.”

She nodded, resting her head against his shoulder..

He nibbled on her ear, sending shivers down her spine. She would rather stay in his arms for an hour or two than dash all over town trying to lose Reginald.

But John gave her no choice. He dropped a kiss on the end of her nose and released her. “The carriage will collect you in a quarter hour. You’d best fetch your cloak.”

* * * *

“A message, sir.” Treburn interrupted lunch, salver extended.

John accepted the note, ignoring the sudden trepidation in Faith’s eyes. She’d lost Reginald easily enough, but there was no telling what he would try next.

“It’s from Alex,” he explained, cracking the seal. “He wants us to call as soon as possible.”

Faith’s brows rose.

“Send word that we will join him in half an hour,” he instructed Treburn, cursing her reaction. In her world, investigators would call on her, but John’s lower breeding didn’t warrant that courtesy, even from a friend. She didn’t yet accept the reduced standing that wedding him would produce.

“Are you ready, my dear?” he asked, pushing his unfinished coffee aside.

“As soon as I fetch my bonnet.” She rose. “Can he have found Francine so quickly?”

“It’s possible. He cultivated informants in every part of London during the war. One of them probably knows her, so once he discovers the name she’s using...”

She collected a cloak and bonnet, then accepted his arm for the walk to Portland House.

They were hardly out the door before second thoughts assailed John. Breeding aside, he should have summoned his carriage despite the delay that would cause. Faith was a lady. That had mattered less yesterday, for few from the upper classes were abroad before noon, but today...

In town, ladies walked only in the parks, and not just because streets were filthy and too often dangerous. It was a mark of rank. One more way to set them apart from those, like his mother, who worked for a living. Faith would soon realize that expecting her to walk to Alex’s was a social insult.

Marriage would require adjustments, he admitted. And not just from Faith. Regardless of his own standing, she deserved to be treated like a lady.

He was opening his mouth to apologize when she turned her face into the sun, and laughed. “How wonderful to be outdoors when I needn’t fear being accosted.”

“Really? London air is hardly fresh. Too many kitchen fires, even on warm days.” Light-colored clothing had to be cleaned daily, which was another way to announce social position. Those who couldn’t afford an army of servants wore only dark colors.

“The soot doesn’t bother me, but I hate being cooped up in the house. Watching others enjoy the park makes it worse.”

“So join them. As my guest, you are entitled to make use of the space. Treburn can give you a key.”

She goggled as if he were an especially dim student.

“And what do I say when people ask where I’m staying? Your reputation will suffer for housing a female without a chaperon.”

“I can get you a chaperon easily enough. And any suspicion will dissipate once we’re wed.”

“Which won’t happen. It would be better if I left. You heard Reginald. Chester is claiming that you forced me.”

“You aren’t going anywhere. No one will believe Chester once they discover that you came to town to expose his thefts.” He turned onto Alex’s street, cursing her stubbornness. But she was right about the chaperon. He’d expected to have a license by now, but convincing her to accept him would take longer than he’d imagined. To protect her, he must consider it. Not that he wanted some disapproving harridan holding him at bay. How was he to make progress without touches or kisses or—

Mr. Mitchell clattered down his steps and turned in their direction. Mitchell was a jovial man who befriended everyone he met. But not this time. Before John could introduce Faith, Mitchell’s eyes bugged out. Skidding to a halt, he strode off in the opposite direction.

A forgotten appointment?

It wasn’t likely, and the fingers suddenly digging into his arm proved that Faith knew a cut when she saw one. Chester had been busy. Perhaps it was time to start some tales of his own. He’d counted on news of Chester’s defalcations leaking out by now, but the trustees were being discreet. He should have realized that with their own reputations on the line, they would keep their staffs in check.

Alex could help, he decided, rapping on the door. If Alex dismissed Chester’s rumors, people must question them.

The moment they entered the library, Alex handed Faith the duchess’s diary. “Your information was very helpful, Miss Harper.”

“Did you find the duke, then?”

“Not yet, though I’ve made considerable progress. Francine’s newspaper posts indicate that Montrose was alive and well when the duchess died in 1792.”

Faith nodded. “I know that much. She would have no reason to lie once she escaped Westcourt. Did the messages continue after the duchess’s death? If

Francine moved to the country, she might not have heard right away.”

“She knew. She had to read the paper herself in case the duchess sent her a message. Francine posted hers every six months on Montrose’s natal days and half-natal days. No one at the newspaper office recalls the ads, of course, but records indicate that each was placed in person rather than through the post.”

“By whom?”

“No name was given. Payment was in cash, so there is no account information that might help us. Deliberate, of course. Francine would not have left so clear a trail. Frankly, I am surprised to learn this much. I checked the papers between the last posted message and the next scheduled one in case Francine used one of the other codes, but nothing appears. There was no need to continue the practice once the duchess was gone. And once she no longer needed to insert advertisements, she could have left town.”

“How do you know she lived here at all?” asked John. “She couldn’t be sure Chester didn’t force a confession from the duchess – even men reveal secrets when pressed hard enough.” He knew just how hard Chester had pressed. “Granted, London is a large city, but caution should have pushed her to settle elsewhere. It is not difficult to travel up to town twice a year on business.”

“But doing so would draw attention from her neighbors. Few from her class can afford travel. Even if she established herself as a gentry widow or a French émigré, people would question regular journeys. There are few business matters ladies can attend to themselves. Thus she probably lived either in town or very close to it.”

“But this only tells us that Montrose was alive in 1792. If he died later, she might have suppressed that knowledge so Chester could not claim the title.”

“True. Fourteen more years passed before anyone expected his return. Anything might have happened. But since he survived infancy, there is a good chance he lived to adulthood. The problem is figuring out what Francine did after the duchess’s death. If it had been me, I would have left town to escape disease, if nothing else. And establishing herself as a gentry widow would make it easier to educate Montrose without raising suspicion. She had enough money to live quite

comfortably.”

“How much?” asked Faith.

“Twenty thousand. She emptied that secret account within days of leaving Westcourt. I’ve not found where she moved it.”

“Is it likely you will?” John asked.

Alex shook his head. “There are too many banks, and we’ve no idea what name she adopted. I suspect she deposited the draft under the same false name, then transferred the funds in cash to yet another account in a different name. But there is no chance to trace those transactions without knowing which bank she used.”

John nodded. “She hid herself well. So where does that leave us?”

“Closer.” Alex smiled. “I found her family.”

“What?” Faith straightened. “John said you would, but I didn’t believe anyone could work so fast. How did you manage it?”

“Your tobacco clue. The first tobacconist I spoke with sent me to Dingle’s, a tobacco shop on Haymarket.”

John knew it. Fogel liked their special snuff. John often collected his orders when in the neighborhood.

Alex grinned. “The current proprietor is Francine’s nephew – or so I believe. Francine was born Molly Dingle. When she went into service, she borrowed Henri DuBois’s family name – he lived next door.”

“Did her family know that?” asked Faith.

“No. Molly’s father was a footman before he wed the tobacconist’s daughter. He often regaled his children with stories of the great houses he’d seen and the baron he’d served. Molly drank in tales of fabulous parties and elegant gowns, then vowed that she would one day live in a great house, too.”

“Did she expect to wed a gentleman?” asked John.

“Hardly. She knew her place well enough. Her dream was to be a lady’s maid. She learned about clothing care from her father and studied hair care with another neighbor – a hairdresser and wigmaker. When she thought her skills would pass, she forged a reference, added three years to her actual age, and took her first job, abandoning her family without a backward glance. French maids were all the rage, so she adopted the speech and gestures of Henri’s wife and became Francine DuBois.”

John shook his head, but in admiration. He knew how difficult it was to rise above one's station and could only admire someone who had successfully managed it. *Upstarts* his mother had called such girls, though a hint of envy usually warmed her voice.

"Did her family know where she went?" asked Faith.

"No. She left a note saying that she was taking a post, but included no specifics. They heard nothing more until she appeared on the doorstep twenty years later, accompanied by a child she claimed was hers."

"The duke."

"Yes. The current Mr. Dingle recalls her return, though he was but ten at the time. She told them her son's father had been a visiting coachman who had forced her. Her mistress had kept her on despite the child, but the lady's son was less tolerant. When his mother died, he cast Molly off without a reference. So she returned home. Since her brother's wife had recently died, she took charge of his household."

"I'm amazed that she dared return to her family," said Faith.

"It was a reasonable risk – different name, ready-made position, four other children so Montrose was lost in the crowd. She stayed two years. When her brother remarried, she disappeared."

"I suppose his new wife objected to sharing the house," said John.

"Mr. Dingle claims not. They were hurt by her defection, but not unduly surprised given her history. She'd always put her own wishes ahead of theirs and had always dreamed of a better place than the one to which she was born. I will interview neighbors today. One might recall something, though it is not likely. It's been twenty-eight years, and Molly is obviously good at keeping secrets..."

"The duchess was still alive," said John slowly. "If you're right that she remained in London, why would she abandon so perfect a situation?"

Faith shrugged. "I assume the family lives above the shop. Does Haymarket draw custom from the upper classes?"

Portland nodded.

"Then perhaps she spotted someone she recognized. Someone who might know her as Francine DuBois. Or someone asking Henri DuBois if he knew a Francine. She couldn't protect Montrose if anyone suspected

where he was." Her voice cracked.

John covered her hand. "Chester?"

"It is possible, for he has lived in London since leaving school. He would not have recognized her, though, as they had never met. But seeing him in the shop might have terrified her into flight."

"She never worked in the shop," said Portland.

"Fear is not rational. If she saw *anyone* who knew the duke or duchess, she might have run to a place no aristocrat would go."

"So you think her brother's marriage had nothing to do with it?"

"I doubt it, and perhaps I'm wrong about her reason. The eighth duke's friends had likely been in Haymarket many times in the two years she stayed there. But Montrose was four by then, an age when boys ask questions. The duchess would not want her to lie more than necessary, but she couldn't tell him anything that contradicted what she'd told her family. Not while they lived there. Montrose also needed to learn skills a merchant does not use. Such training would have raised questions. Inciting any suspicions was dangerous."

"But where could she go that would avoid aristocrats, be close to London, and be safe?" demanded John. "She must have known how dangerous London is. There are places where even the hardiest soul dares not tread."

"How can I answer when I don't know the area?" She shrugged. "Maybe she had friends unknown to her family. Or maybe she found a cottage nearby. That is what I would have done. There must be a dozen villages within a mile or two of town," she finished. "Montrose was still young enough that she could adopt a new surname without raising his suspicions – she probably addressed him by a pet name anyway. But that was her last chance to do so – the duchess wanted him to live in ignorance until he was twelve."

"Good point," said Portland. "I can only hope a neighbor might know something. Otherwise, I've little chance of finding her. Hundreds of widows with young children appear in London every year. No one will recall an unremarkable pair from so long in the past."

"What did she look like?" asked John. "I grew up in Spitalfields, which would be well-suited to her needs – a dozen widows with children lived on our street alone."

I could ask questions without drawing attention. That would let you concentrate on the countryside, which is more likely in any case. Hampstead, perhaps, or Kensington."

"I wish I *did* have a decent description," said Portland with a sigh. "Bernard remembers her fondly, but his powers of observation are limited, and his ability to describe what he sees is worse. He claims she was about five-two and slender, with brown hair and eyes. Much of that could have changed by now, though. She was skilled with hair and may have dyed hers. She may have gained weight or developed a dowager's hump. Even the eye color doesn't help much. It's too common."

John sagged. "His description fits half of England. How old is she?"

"Seventeen when she took her first post, so she would be sixty-seven now. But she gave various ages to her employers, so she might claim anything from sixty to eighty. Assuming she lives at all. She may well have passed on."

John turned to Faith. "You described Montrose as sickly. What did *he* look like?"

She shrugged. "Small for his age, according to the servants. And according to the duchess." She opened the diary and showed him a passage bemoaning the boy's poor health and seeming clumsiness. "But he was barely two, so that might mean nothing. His hair was light, but both the duke and duchess were dark, so I would guess at least medium brown by now. As for eyes, I've no idea. She only mentioned his eyes when he was born, but true color comes out later. They could be anything. The eighth duke had brown eyes, but his father's were blue. The duchess had grayish green eyes. Other Willowbys display every possible color."

"This is getting us nowhere," said Portland. "Thank you for offering, John, but there is nothing you can do at the moment. I'll let you know if that changes."

"I don't suppose Bernard can draw," muttered John, helping Faith to her feet.

"Afraid not."

"We are grateful for your efforts," said Faith. "If Montrose is alive, I am sure you will find him."

* * * *

Faith left John at his office door and headed

upstairs. At least she had books to keep her occupied for the remainder of the afternoon.

It was hard to believe how much progress Portland had made – and in only one day. The duke might actually live. If Francine had moved to the country after the duchess's death, there was no reason to think he'd died. And if she'd kept him in ignorance to protect him from Chester...

Portland's newspaper notice should draw her out.

Fretting accomplished nothing, so Faith turned her attention to *Childe Harold*.

An hour later she tossed the last of the books down in disgust. The words swam drunkenly before her eyes. Not because of the duke, but because John had taken up permanent residence in her head.

He was still determined to wed her, convinced that he must sacrifice himself to salvage her reputation.

Stubborn man.

Unfortunately, she was weak. If he pressed her long enough, she would succumb to temptation, despite the harm marriage would do to him. If only he'd accepted her refusal! Fabricating a reference would be far easier with his assistance. He might even know of a suitable employer.

He wouldn't help, though. The little she'd gleaned about his childhood proved his determination. He'd been left in a worse position than she, for he'd had no guardian to care for him after his mother died. Yet he'd convinced a top architect to take him on years before custom dictated. He'd then won scholarships and commissions enough to build a viable practice at an astonishingly early age.

Such a man would not abandon her, even if pursuing marriage was not in his own best interests. So the only way she could protect him was to disappear without a trace. Francine had proved that it could be done.

But she would need a few days to prepare. Fleeing with no money and no destination was stupid. If Portland found the duke before she left, she would re-evaluate her plans. But she couldn't waste time on dreams. There was no reason to believe the man could help her even if he wanted to. No one knew him.

As for where she would go—

Voices penetrated the closed door, disrupting her thoughts.

"She's out, I tell you. I can guess where. Up to no good, that one." The speaker sounded young – probably the brown-haired maid she'd glimpsed before breakfast. The girl looked barely sixteen.

"It's not your place to judge," replied Rose, the maid who'd delivered hot water to Faith's room that morning.

"It certainly is. I'm a good girl, I am. I won't work in a house with such goings on."

"What goings on?" demanded Rose. "You won't find a better employer."

"Hah! Me mum didn't want me in a bachelor's house, and she was right. Immoral monsters, every one."

"Not this one," insisted Rose stoutly. "I've been here six years and seen nothing I couldn't tell my youngest sister. And even if the master *was* in the petticoat way – which he ain't – you can't believe he'd choose *her*. Not with that limp. Only the best could satisfy him."

"You'd approve?" The girl's shock was so obvious that Faith could almost see her recoil.

"Tis his business, not mine. You can't deny he's a handsome bloke. Bed him myself if he'd ask. But he won't."

"Mum was right," gasped the maid. "Yer all headed to perdition. I can't stay here."

"Leave if you must, but Mr. Treburn won't give you a character if you go before quarter day. You won't find another post without one."

"I'll find work quick enough when people hear why I left. Fleeing depravity will stand as my character."

"Rot! You know nothing of the world, Mary," snapped Rose as they moved away. "No one will hire a maid who criticizes her betters."

"Yer the one who'll be sorry! Out on yer ear in a fortnight. Yer precious master will lose his business and his credit fast enough. Cook said the butcher wouldn't send 'round a joint this morning without cash money in advance. You know what that means. He..."

Faith's knees gave out. She'd counted on the staff's self-interest to keep them quiet, but she hadn't counted on Mary. There was no way to avoid trouble now. Self-righteous, intolerant servants eagerly spread sordid tales to prove they were above such behavior. She had fired one such girl from Westcourt despite

needing the help. But the dissension the girl had sown among the staff could not be tolerated.

Rose was right that Mary would never find another post. But her claims would hurt John. If people thought he kept a mistress in his own house, his reputation would suffer, especially after Chester's claims that he'd seduced a well-born maiden while working in her home. That tale was already making the rounds if today's cut was any indication. John would be lucky to find any work at all.

So she must leave. Without evidence to support such charges, he might survive.

Thinking about it hurt, but she thrust the pain aside. Loving him didn't matter. Leaving was right, so she must do it. No one died of grief, as the duchess had proved. The duke's death had left his wife with unbearable emptiness. Sending Montrose away had made it worse. But the duchess had borne the pain without complaint. Faith could do no more.

It would be best to make the break quickly, which made it imperative to complete her plans. The more she thought about it, the more obvious it became that finding a post would be next to impossible. Even Rose disparaged her limp. What made her think prospective employers might overlook it?

Then there was the bedamned reference. The annual register was the best place to learn about deaths, but last year's was not yet available, which meant the best she could do was find a lady who had died nearly a year and a half ago. How was she to explain where she'd been in the meantime?

She could always make up an employer, but lies would eventually be found out. And two days of leisure proved that she would be miserable as a companion anyway. A governess post was likewise impossible, for she lacked the accomplishments ladies must learn. And she could never support herself sewing. Nor could she tolerate a brothel, where she would meet too many men like Bitstaff.

Yet in bitter truth, her only hope of supporting herself was to sell her body.

John would wed—

No!

She couldn't destroy him, no matter what she faced by leaving.

Discussing her journey from India had revived more

than the pleasant memories she'd shared with John. During that five months, her indifferent chaperon had let her run wild. There wasn't a cranny aboard ship she hadn't explored or a hidey-hole she hadn't used. Few had paid attention to her, so she'd overheard frank discussions between sailors and more than one lustful encounter involving her chaperon. She'd also barely escaped being assaulted by one of the other passengers. If not for the captain's timely arrival...

Thus she had no interest in brothels. Yet she had greatly enjoyed her encounter with John. Intimacy was not unpleasant with the right partner. Her defects made marriage impossible, but could she find a protector she could enjoy?

She slipped upstairs and unearthed the *Tableau* – in her haste to pack, she'd scooped it unnoticed into one of the trunks. Now that she'd experienced such acts for herself, the illustrations were even more powerful, invoking the feel of John's hands and body and...

Desire soared until she throbbed from head to toe. Such need made life as a courtesan seem acceptable – as long as it wasn't John who kept her.

Her skin turned to ice at the very thought. Already she loved him too much for comfort. Every day the attachment deepened until the thought of parting nearly destroyed her. Courtesans were never a permanent part of any man's life. Could she survive the inevitable break after months of enjoying his touches?

Besides, even an official liaison with her installed elsewhere would cause him the very damage she was trying to avoid.

The illustrations left her too restless to sit, so she tucked the book away and prowled the house. The one room she'd avoided yesterday had been John's bedchamber, but now she stepped inside.

It was surprisingly Spartan. Bed. Shaving stand. Chair. Lamp. All utilitarian. The only color came from three watercolors, probably his own, for the two largest depicted Roman ruins in exquisite detail. The third showed rugged mountains with dense forests tumbling down their flanks and an odd house with an impossibly steep roof in the foreground. Switzerland, perhaps? He was very good. Unlike the few lackluster landscapes gracing Westcourt, his work evoked a need to see these sights in person.

Not until she turned to leave did she spot the pencil sketch half behind the door. A woman with sad eyes, dated 1797. It must be his mother.

Faith stared hard, comparing the face to John's. Broad cheeks, small mole, surprisingly straight teeth. John had inherited her teeth, but he took after his father in other respects. Except perhaps the eyes. They were so alive, so...

Guilty over intruding, she left, but Mrs. Lascar's eyes followed her, begging her to keep John from wasting the sacrifices she'd made. So Faith would leave as soon as she settled her plans. Her inheritance would support her until she found an acceptable protector. If she remained in London, she risked seeing John or Chester. But York would do. It was far away, yet large enough to offer choices.

Assuming she could figure out how one attracted a protector...

Desire returned. And a longing for John's touch. With her new goal in mind, she need no longer ignore it. She would be gone soon. Lovemaking would not change the servants' minds in the few days she had left. And honing her skill would prepare her for her new role. John could teach her so much...

Chapter Fifteen

Duty is often unpleasant, but honor demands that I fulfill my vow to keep Montrose safe. Never mind that my heart breaks at the very thought...

Duchess of Westfield, July 4, 1787

John made sure he had time to change before dinner that evening. As they waited in the drawing room for the summons to dine, he avoided any mention of Chester, marriage, Simmons, or Alex's investigation, despite that Simmons had returned an hour earlier to demand yet another meeting. John had put him off with a promise that Faith would send him a note if she wished to see him again, but it was obvious the fellow was determined to cause trouble.

For once, he'd chosen the right approach. By the time he seated Faith at the table, their social chatter left her more relaxed than he'd ever seen her.

"Is the design for the gentlemen's club going well?" she asked over the first course.

"I had no time to work on it today." He shrugged, unwilling to admit that he'd spent half the day reading the duchess's diary. *That* topic was sure to stifle her friendliness. "Worthington is still not satisfied with the plans for his town house. Not an easy challenge. He wants an elegant space so he can claim more consequence than he actually has, but his house is second rate."

"Should that mean something to me?" She stabbed a bit of asparagus.

"Probably not. You've never lived in London." The term was so integral to his business that he'd forgotten the upper classes rarely used it. "The rates were established after the Great Fire and define the size of a town house. Most of the houses around Hanover square are second rate."

"Did combining two of them produce a first rate house, then?"

He nodded. "Worthington needs more space, but neither of his neighbors wants to sell, so I must reconfigure his interior to make it more efficient."

"While making it seem bigger and more luxurious."

"Right."

Half an hour passed as he explained how to accomplish that feat. He hadn't planned to regale her with information most ladies found boring, but she asked intelligent questions and stretched his mind by raising possibilities he hadn't considered. Not until Treburn removed the covers and set out the sweet course did John pull himself up short.

"I should not monopolize the conversation. Forgive me."

"There is no need. It's fascinating."

"Nonetheless." He sighed. "Did you finish *Childe Harold* today?"

"About half of it. Those glass pieces you acquired in Italy are more interesting. The longer I look at them, the more beautiful they seem. The colors are so pure. And the glow!"

"I know. They still entrance me after a dozen years. The Italians produce a glass that is clearer than ours, allowing light deep into the piece. It is a remarkable effect."

"Very. I also noted your watercolors. You painted them, I presume?"

He nodded, hiding his pleasure that she'd invaded

his room. It hinted that she was less opposed to marriage than she claimed. "The ruins are spectacular – far more than my poor work can convey."

"I would hardly call it poor."

"It is if one wishes to be a painter. That was a boyhood dream, though I knew it was impossible even before Mother died. Others confirmed my judgment. While I can paint well enough to produce the studies potential patrons expect, I am no artist."

"Perhaps not, but you capture the essence of a subject. That sketch of your mother – I assume it is she."

He nodded. "I did that about a year before she died."

"It conveys more than her features. She is weary from unrelenting work, yet she remains at peace with herself and her life. Devotion burns in her eyes – probably for you, as she was looking at you while you sketched her."

"It's true that she worked hard and was usually weary because of it. I was so accustomed to her face that I never analyzed it."

"Then you are more gifted than you believe. Your fingers unerringly reproduce what your eye sees, not what you wish to see."

"Anyone can do the same."

"No. The portraits in the Westcourt gallery were painted by two dozen artists over three centuries and display a vast difference in ability. Some images – like the eighth duke and duchess – seem alive, poised to leap from the wall. One would swear they are breathing."

"Who did them?"

"Reynolds. The older ones lack individual character, conveying nothing beyond eye color and nose shape. It is impossible to tell whether the subjects were honorable or rogues, pleasant or venal. They all seem insufferably dull, though in many cases lusty is a better description."

John frowned. He, too, had seen lifeless portraits, but he'd not considered why they seemed so. "Not everyone wants their character exposed to future generations," he reminded her. "And many demand that their likenesses be idealized. I know one gentleman who made his portraitist remove a birthmark from his forehead. And no painter would dare depict the Regent with aught but a pleasing

physique, despite that he grows larger every year.”

“You have a point. Yet a good likeness can bring comfort to one’s survivors.”

He offered his arm to escort her to the drawing room for coffee. “I take it you have no portraits of your parents?”

She shook her head, looking away as if to hide tears. “Mother filled several sketch books with family images, but when my trunks arrived at Westcourt, two were missing. I don’t know if her sketch books disappeared en route or were left in India. I was with a neighbor when the house was closed. No one asked which possessions I wanted to keep.”

“You were in shock.”

“I was too young to be consulted – and I suspect many items found their way into other households without compensation. But I wish I had even one of those books,” she admitted, moving away to stare into the fire. “I can no longer recall their faces.”

“Perhaps not every detail, but you undoubtedly remember much. Your mother’s hair, for example.”

“Red. A little lighter than mine, but not much.” She smiled. “Thank you. She was nearing fifty when she died, so it was going gray. Not all over, but in streaks around her face. She used to laugh at the gray spot above her left temple – it had turned fully ten years before anything else. A perfectly round spot about the size of a tuppence.”

“What about your father?”

“His hair was dark. Very dark. It never lightened, though he spent as much time outdoors as the other officers. He was a big man – at least he seemed big to a child. In truth, I doubt he was as tall as you, though sturdier. Mother was small, enhancing the contrast. George took after him in looks, and probably in size, though he was barely twelve when that fever hit. We will never know if that promise would have held.” Her voice caught.

“Let’s see how much you recall,” he said, picking up a pad. “What shape was your mother’s face?”

She stared, then backed away. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Why? You already know the memories are fading. You probably locked them away to escape the pain. Why not record what is left?” He wasn’t as certain as he sounded, but he’d done this once before with a

fellow student who'd lost his father. It had seemed to help. And if just this once he could tap into that strange dream world for some useful purpose...

"Very well. Her face was oval and rather ordinary, with deepening lines from age and the climate."

"And grief? She can't have enjoyed losing her family any more than you did."

"I never considered..." She closed her eyes. "Yes, there was a hint of sadness about her even when she smiled. But her teeth were the envy of everyone – white, straight, and sturdy despite her age."

"She must have smiled often for people to notice."

"True."

His fingers worked as he kept her talking, drawing out more memories of the family she'd lost. Good ones. Bad ones. Everything in between. They laughed over features gone astray – a misshapen nose, a too-high ear.

And as she grasped his arm to peer closer at the page, it happened. Barely a moment, but the image came to life, imprinting on his mind. So when he finally held up the sketch for her approval, she gasped.

"It's a marvel." Her eyes glittered.

He pulled her against his side.

"I don't need comfort," she insisted, drawing back. "It is ridiculous to shed tears over someone who has been dead for nearly twenty years, but the likeness took me by surprise. You're very good."

"She may have passed long ago, but her death left a lasting sorrow."

"As did their families' antagonism," she admitted. "Poor Mama. And poor Papa, for that matter. Why must parents insist on ordering their children about?"

"Often duty supercedes desire. That is particularly true in the upper classes, as you know quite well. But any parent dislikes seeing his offspring make mistakes."

"What mistake? Falling in love?"

"With someone from a lower class."

"You give them too much credit." She sighed, wandering to the window. "It wasn't their different stations that infuriated their parents. Not even their disparate ages, though I didn't learn the whole story until Mama was sick with that last fever."

"You needn't reveal family secrets, Faith." He followed her, sliding his hands down her arms to pull

her back against him.

She turned to face him. "But you need to understand why they will never accept me. Grandfather Harper lost a good deal of money through poor investments. Nothing fraudulent. Just bad judgment. The estate did not produce enough to recoup his losses, and he had a seventeen-year-old daughter expecting to make her bows in London – Mama was her governess. With his eldest son already wed, his only hope of recovery was to find an heiress for his younger son. So he arranged a betrothal with the daughter of a nearby mine owner. Half her dowry would go to Grandfather and the rest to Papa."

"He was the intended husband?"

"Exactly. Papa knew nothing about it, though. Before the summons could reach him, he was injured and sent back to England, arriving in a delirium. Grandfather was frantic to save his life. He assigned the housekeeper and governess to tend him by turns, and even went so far as to summon the local wise woman to supply tonics and poultices. It worked. Papa recovered, but by the time his father broached the subject of his betrothal, he was in love with the governess."

"Is that when he eloped?"

"Not quite. He refused the betrothal, very firmly. He was of age and could not be forced to honor a contract he had not signed. Grandfather was furious, and not just because he believed that the aristocracy should have been excluded from the Marriage Act provision requiring full consent from both parties, stripping fathers of the power to contract alliances. He needed the money badly. Papa offered to sell out and take over as estate steward. His commission could have financed his sister's Season. Frugal management would have eventually recouped the losses. But Grandfather refused. Mama suspected that he'd already spent some of the dowry."

"It is dangerous to spend money before you actually have it."

She nodded. "When Grandfather called Mama a whore and tossed her off the estate, Father attacked. Leaving Grandfather unconscious, he and Mama fled to Scotland, then rejoined his regiment. Mama never forgave Grandfather for driving Papa back to India, which exposed us to fevers and plagues."

"Be fair. Your father could have sold out and found other work," he reminded her. "Staying in the military was a conscious choice. Did his talents extend to other occupations – a clerk or a vicar, perhaps?"

She sighed. "I doubt it. Neither would have suited him, and in retrospect, he displayed no knowledge of agriculture, either, so refusing him a steward's post may have been less a matter of fury than of consideration for the estate's future. But it is hard. Mama lost three infants to disease before their first birthdays."

"Do you recall them?"

"No, thank heaven. Two were gone before I was born and the third a year later. One other survived infancy. Angela was six when that last fever hit." Her head shook slowly.

"No wonder you were in shock."

"And no wonder I was relieved when Papa's family refused to take me in," she admitted. "Papa had fewer choices than you imply. When Grandfather disowned him, he took steps to see that Papa never set foot on English soil again. After his brother died, Papa tried to transfer to a regiment based in England, but his father blocked the transfer, insisting he remain as far away as possible despite that he was then the heir, for his brother had died childless. The family wanted no more embarrassment – his return would revive memories of his scandalous behavior. His grudge condemned four more souls to death, including the grandson who should have succeeded him." She met his eyes. "That is why Chester terrifies me. He, too, holds grudges. He will not consider the consequences of retaliation. He will lash out until we are destroyed."

"But he will fail." He turned her to face him. "Yes, he is trying to cause trouble – he wrote to the trustees and probably to others. But few will believe his charges. Even now the trustees are at Westcourt proving that he lied, cheated, and stole from the estate. He will be ostracized by every respectable Englishman and will likely flee the country to escape his creditors."

"Never." She glared. "Doing so would admit defeat. But he will not abandon the prize he's sought for so long. You know as well as I do that the duke is likely dead. Francine would never have kept him hidden after Chester was installed as steward. She might have

kept his parentage secret beyond age twelve, but not without keeping a close eye on his inheritance so it wouldn't suffer. That she didn't points strongly toward death. And once Chester has the title, there will be no prosecution for embezzlement. In the meantime, threatening him with arrest gives him a grievance so heinous he will not settle for ruining your reputation. He can only repay you by arranging a fatal accident."

"I doubt it."

Faith glared as her temper shattered. "You don't understand him even now," she snapped. "First he will torture you—"

"How?"

"He's already started that phase. His tales include accusations so harsh that merchants are refusing you credit and gentlemen cut you in the street. How long will your staff remain once you are a social pariah? And his charges will get worse. Watching the house will prove I'm staying here. Making that information public will destroy your reputation."

"It won't—"

"It will. Do you honestly think your servants will protect me? Already your staff is splintering. One of the maids vowed to quit rather than remain in this den of iniquity an hour longer. She will never remain silent."

"No one will consider us immoral once we are wed," he said calmly.

"I won't let you sacrifice yourself," she countered. "It is better that I leave. Your reputation can recover if I am no longer here."

"Sacrifice myself?" he demanded, grabbing her wrist before she could pull away. "It is no sacrifice. I want you as my wife. I love you, Faith."

Impossible. But she knew better than to argue. Men readily lied if that was the only way to achieve honor's dictates. Honor too often led to despicable behavior. How many men had shot each other over some trifling disagreement? How many innocents had been left homeless and destitute in the name of honor? How many officers had ordered their men to certain death because someone's honor demanded retaliation?

John's honor demanded marriage, so he would swear that black was white if it would convince her to wed him. But she would not let him throw away his career because she'd discarded her virtue. She'd

known the consequences and accepted them, but that didn't mean she could spread the damage to others.

For the first time in years she thanked Catherine's brutal assessment of her faults. Knowing she was unworthy of marriage held temptation at bay. Accepting John's offer would produce tragic results. Regret would soon override honor, leaving them both miserable. Making the best of a bad deal was not a good basis for marriage.

John's questions about her family had revived more memories than she'd expected. Her parents had loved each other and their children with a fierce devotion. Their love still wrapped her in warmth. They had defied their families and defied custom in the name of love, and they had not once regretted it. Together they had faced an uncertain future, gaining strength from each other and using that strength to defeat each new adversity.

But she and John lacked that core of caring. Without it, life's vicissitudes would shatter them. She could not put either of them through such pain.

As tears tickled the backs of her eyes, John pulled her against him. She blinked, fighting off the need to weep.

His hand caressed her back, diverting her from the pain of her impending departure. Heat spread as he murmured seductively into her ear. If she wanted to learn more of passion, now was as good a time as any. So she lifted her face and met his eyes.

He kissed her, much as he'd done last night. But this time she pressed closer, opening her mouth in a plea for more. He responded instantly.

Need exploded, filling every pore of her body. She pulled him closer, desperate to find the excitement he offered.

"Upstairs," he groaned, sweeping her into his arms.
"Yes."

* * * *

John hadn't intended to take Faith to bed, but her passion engulfed him, shattering his control beyond repair. This time there was no fear, no danger, no need to remain alert for approaching footsteps. How could any man ignore his love's surrender?

He had intended to move slowly, giving her time to grow accustomed to his touch and to realize how wretched life would be if she refused him. Now those

plans lay in ruins. He had to have her. Tonight.

But she must enjoy this encounter even more than their first. Which meant slowing down and savoring the experience.

Rather than fall into bed with her, he set her by the bedroom fire, sliding her sensuously down his body. Her eyes blurred, their color deepening as desire increased. Pulling the pins from her hair let it flow over his hands. Thick, luxurious, fiery silk.

"Beautiful," he breathed, scattering kisses across her face until her taste seared into his soul, confirming that she was his, had to be his, now and forever.

Not until she slid his coat and waistcoat off, trapping his arms, did he realize she'd unbuttoned his waistcoat. When he tried to pull free, she tightened her grip, murmuring, "I need to catch up," as she tasted the underside of his chin.

The top nearly blew off his head. She nipped his jaw, then moved on to nibble his ear. But when she shifted to tug his shirt loose, he freed his arms.

"Easy." He caught her hands before she could drive him over the edge. "Take time to savor."

"Gladly." Her smile raised his temperature several notches.

His control was teetering on the verge of collapse. If they didn't slow down, he would plunge into her and finish before they had barely begun.

"Let me teach you what savoring means," he murmured, reaching for her ties. "Don't move."

He took his time, touching and stroking, kissing each inch of flesh as he bared it. She gasped as her gown slithered to the floor. Slowly the rest of her clothing followed. Very slowly. His hands skimmed over her skin, raising need, building desire until she stood naked in the lamplight, quivering.

His mouth watered.

"Let's see if I understand," she managed, voice husky. She reached for his shirt, drawing it off, then caressing his exposed skin. He grabbed the bedpost as his pantaloons followed. His smalls. His shoes. His stockings. Never had he endured such exquisite torture. Her hands were everywhere, warm and tender.

"My turn," he croaked when he could stand it no longer.

He set her gently on the bed, refusing to give in to the need. She was as aroused as he, but it wasn't yet

time. So he kissed her from head to toe, following the trail his hands had laid out.

Faith shuddered as John's mouth closed over one breast. She'd thought she knew what to expect. Anticipation had built all afternoon, driving her need so high that she'd nearly shattered just from touching him. But this was so much better than before. More powerful than the most extravagant fantasy.

She'd expected passion to be explosive, energetic, furious. But passion could also be subtle, gentle, slow. Not that her heart was slow. It hammered against her chest, sending ripples across skin so sensitive that even a breath made her tremble.

She jerked, trying to free her arms, but he locked them over her head, holding her so that every shudder drove her deeper into his mouth. Spasms of pleasure shook her from head to toe, yet he held her, quaking, on the precipice, and refused to let her fall.

"Please, John," she begged as he moved to the other breast. "I need to touch you."

He said nothing, but nipped lightly with his teeth. Desire swelled in her womb.

John kept her trembling on the edge, reveling in her response as he traced her form with hands and lips, filling his senses with the essence of Faith. Always Faith. Only Faith. She writhed beneath him, her fingers clutching his hand, nails biting deep as he sent her higher.

"John!"

"I thought you would like that." He smiled, nudging her nearer the precipice until she stiffened, screaming. Not until her muscles went lax and her limbs limp did he release her so he could drive her up again.

Faith gasped. Heat and light and more urgency than ever washed over her as John caressed her thighs. Only a moment ago she'd been too replete to think, but now...

Passion engulfed her, bursting through her faster than she'd believed possible. She could no longer lie still. Rolling, she pinned John beneath her. Passion was stronger this time. Much stronger. She ought to be embarrassed to find herself naked, with lamps lit so he could see every inch of her. But she wasn't. He, too, was naked. She explored his muscular shoulders, savoring memories of undressing him – the dark triangle of hair arrowing toward his groin, muscular

legs whose scars and blemishes emphasized his power, his jutting manhood...

If she'd seen that the first time, terror would have pushed her into flight, for it seemed impossible that she could accommodate him. But she had, and with little discomfort. She reached down to grasp...

It jerked.

"Easy. Don't rush me." He rolled, trapped her hands, and kissed her thoroughly.

"Why?"

"I want to enjoy you first." His hand slid between her legs, teasing her most private place. She waited with bated breath for him to do more.

In moments he'd driven every coherent thought from her head. Not until she whimpered with need did he finally let her shudder to completion.

"You haven't—" She couldn't find the words she wanted.

"I will. You have the advantage of me, for you can climax more than once. Men need time to recuperate."

"Oh." She needed to read the *Tableau* again, for she recalled nothing about this difference. Was it universal, or did it apply only to John?

But that was for later. Thought failed as she wallowed in sensation. John was amazingly talented, finding sensitive spots she had not known she possessed. All she could do was explore as much of him as he let her reach and hope to return the favor.

He, too, had nipples, though smaller than hers. But they seemed as sensitive, puckering at her touch. Nipping them drew eager groans. His ears were oddly sensitive, eliciting a similar reaction. His manhood, of course.

She found many scars – apparently those two falls at Westcourt weren't unusual. He even sported an old burn. But nothing detracted from his devastating maleness. The hair so much coarser than hers. Hardness where she was soft. Softness when she expected hard. By the time he positioned her beneath him, they were both panting, both wild with need, both long past thought.

She cried in relief when he entered her. Nothing had ever felt so good. By the time they shattered together, temptation prodded her to stay with him always.

She thrust it aside. Yes, lying with him was the most glorious experience of her life, but staying would

be wholly selfish, for it would ruin him. She could not sit by and watch his friendship turn to hatred as his dreams faded to dust. Passion could not hold the world at bay.

When weakness threatened to overcome sense, she sat up.

“Stay here,” he panted.

“I can’t.” When he reached for her, she squeezed his hand, then released it. “Staying would confirm whatever suspicions your staff already harbor. That can only cause trouble.”

He pursed his lips, then nodded. “Very well.”

Gathering her clothes and leaving took all her determination. She wanted nothing more than to curl up next to him all night. Perhaps letting him teach her about intimacy wasn’t a good idea after all.

But she knew she would be back tomorrow and every other night until she left. And she couldn’t lie about her motives. Practice had nothing to do with it. She needed the memories to keep her warm...

Chapter Sixteen

Montrose is gone. I have done everything possible to keep my darling safe and assure that he can one day claim his inheritance. And I warned him over and over to fear Chester. Yet can he understand at his age?

Duchess of Westfield, July 8, 1787

John smiled at Faith over breakfast the next morning, convinced he was finally making progress. Last night had been the best encounter of his life, enriching the love he’d thought was already complete. Even thinking about it—

He pulled himself back. She wasn’t ready to accept his love – which was the real reason she’d returned to her own room. Instead of letting him hold her while she slept, strengthening their intimacy, she’d retired to rebuild the wall she kept between them. But at least she was relaxed today.

“Would you like to visit Bullock’s Museum?” he asked. “It houses artifacts from all over the world, including Napoleon’s carriage and an Egyptian mummy.”

“How do I get there?”

“I’ll take you. It’s not far, and I’ve time,” he added

when she tried to object – breaking down her barriers was more important than any commission. “And if you are concerned that someone might spot you leaving the house—”

“Lord Portland to see you, sir,” said Treburn, appearing suddenly in the doorway. “I’ve put him in the drawing room.”

John bit back a sigh. There went the morning. No cozy discussion of other lands as they studied museum exhibits. No chance to touch her hand or steal a kiss. No opportunity to remind her of the problems she would face if she refused to wed him. “Thank you, Treburn.”

Faith raised her brow. “Why would he call here?”

“Perhaps he found Francine. Are you finished?”

“Yes.”

He understood buildings far better than he understood people, admitted John as he escorted her from the dining room. Even the beginnings of decay left clear signs, but people habitually hid thoughts and feelings behind social masks, making it impossible to know what they wanted. Especially Faith. All he could do was guess, which didn’t help his temper.

A night alone had given her too much time to think. His biggest fear was that she was willing to bed him but still wouldn’t accept marriage. It wasn’t a concept ladies approved, but her education had been very different from what other well-bred girls received. Had she learned the consequences of flouting society’s expectations?

Yet even Faith couldn’t be *that* ignorant. Joining him last night should have meant accepting his suit. Unwed ladies did not risk pregnancy. A reputation for being fast was bad enough. Bearing a bastard would sever all contact with the polite world. Despite her unconventional upbringing, she *had* to know that. Even the servants who’d raised her understood that much, for it was a concept that applied to many classes.

So more than disparate breeding must stand between them. She couldn’t have responded with such enthusiasm if she disdained his blood. So what was wrong? Wedding a monster was better than trying to live on her inheritance, and he was no monster.

“I spoke to Bernard again,” announced Alex once they reached the drawing room, “and introduced him

to a friend who is skilled at sketching faces. Thank you for the suggestion.”

“So you have Francine’s likeness now?”

“Possibly.” Portland shook his head. “Bernard is not satisfied – it’s been thirty years since he last saw her, so his memory might be off. But perhaps it is good enough to jog memories among the Dingles’ neighbors. He made a copy for you, too, if the offer remains open. Spitalfields is far enough from Mayfair to offer a measure of safety to someone avoiding society, but I have no contacts out there.” He held out a small sketch.

“Of course.” He reached for the picture, but Faith beat him to it.

* * * *

Faith’s mouth gaped as she stared at the woman who figured so prominently in the duchess’s diary. “It’s your mother,” she blurted out.

“Impossible.” John glanced at the sketch and shrugged. “There is a superficial resemblance, I suppose, but no more. You are not thinking clearly, my dear.”

“Certainly I am. It looks just like the sketch you have of your mother.”

“Impossible,” he repeated, glaring. “Half the women in London look like that sketch. You know I’m no artist.”

“I’ve never seen a finer painting of my estate than the one you did,” said Portland.

“Buildings are easy. Straight lines. A little decoration. Anyone can draw them. People are trickier, which is why so many artists start with generic types that could fit a host of subjects. Mother and Francine have the same basic facial shape, but they cannot be the same person. To begin with, Mother was years younger – not yet forty when she died. And we lived with my father’s aunt. She and half the neighbors attended my christening.”

“You are sure?” asked Portland.

“Of course, I’m sure! They never tired of telling me what a feisty baby I was, screaming loud enough to wake the dead when the water touched my head. I was thirteen when Aunt Frobisher died, so I remember her well.”

“You needn’t snap at me, John. It was a reasonable question. I have to consider even remote possibilities,

so let's dispose of this one once and for all." He picked up the sketch. "May I see the picture of your mother?"

John sighed. "Get it for him, Faith, though I don't see what good it will do. Since Bernard admits that this is not a good likeness of Francine, even the similarities mean nothing."

Faith frowned as she hurried upstairs. Granted, she'd seen the sketch only once, but there was more than a superficial resemblance. John must recognize that as well as she did, so why was he protesting? Most men would leap at the possibility of noble blood, especially when a fortune came with it.

But John wasn't most men.

She studied his sketch as she lifted it down. Yes, there were differences. Quite a few, actually. But the similarities were strong. High cheeks. Rounded chin. An odd bump in the nose. The unusual shape of the ear. Finding all those features in one face was not common.

Was Marie Lascar actually Francine DuBois, born Molly Dingle? The extra years could account for the weariness, and Francine might well have chosen another French-sounding name so the mannerisms she'd cultivated wouldn't draw notice.

Yet John's objections were sound. Living with family who had known him from birth was a huge obstacle. Francine had vowed to reveal Montrose's identity on his twelfth birthday. John had been thirteen when his mother died. And it was hard to see a puny, sickly child in tall, broad-shouldered John.

She carried the sketch downstairs, but paused outside the drawing room. John was staring out the window, hands clasped behind his back. Portland strode toward him, sketch in hand.

"I just realized why Bernard doesn't like this," he said, shoving the sketch at John. "The first time I interviewed him, he mentioned a mole beneath Francine's left ear. He forgot that when describing her to the artist."

John tensed.

Faith stepped forward and handed John's picture to Portland. It clearly showed a mole beneath Mrs. Lascar's left ear.

"Many people have blemishes," insisted John, shrugging. "I don't recall anyone on our street who wasn't marked. You cannot ignore facts. I had a father,

mother, great-aunt, and friends who knew me from birth – as in, they knew me long before Da died.”

“Any evidence to support that?” asked Portland.

John glared.

“If this is a false lead, then let’s prove it so I can get on with my job,” Portland repeated. “I will doubtless have to eliminate a host of women who bear some resemblance to this sketch. I might as well start here.”

Faith laid a hand on John’s arm, shocked at how tense he was.

He finally nodded. “Horse guards will have Da’s service records. He wed Mother in 1782. I was born in November of 1783. I have their marriage lines and my baptism certificate. Both are registered at St. Matthew’s, Spitalfields. We lived across from the church until Da died. Then we moved in with Aunt Frobisher, two streets over.”

“Get the records.”

John left.

Faith remained silent.

Portland studied the two sketches, nodding from time to time as he noted the same similarities she had seen.

John returned with a sheaf of records. “Mother had more than I thought – I’ve never really looked at her papers.” He laid them one at a time on the table. “Her marriage lines. Da’s enlistment papers. The baptism certificate naming my godparents – I’ve no idea who the men are, since I never met them. Probably soldiers from his regiment. My godmother was Aunt Frobisher. And here’s the lease agreement for the rooms my parents occupied. The letter informing us of Da’s death... My life is an open book.”

“So it would seem. But the resemblance is uncanny. I’ll verify these papers. And I want to show both pictures to Mr. Dingle. He remembers Francine well and will know if the similarities are coincidence. It might help me hone the sketch of Francine.”

* * * *

John shook his head the moment Alex left. Only effort kept his hands from shaking. “I always thought him intelligent. Now I have to wonder. Why the devil would he waste time on something so obviously ridiculous?”

“You know he has to check all possibilities.”

“What possibility? A vague resemblance between a

twelve-year-old boy's sketch and a picture no one believes is accurate? I will accept that Francine had a history of lying about her age, though it is hard to believe anyone could subtract that many years without drawing notice. But she couldn't produce a family and a dozen neighbors, all willing to lie about knowing me."

"Not easily, but it's not impossible, either."

"Not you, too! Think, Faith. She can't have used the duchess's money to bribe them into supporting her. I know those people. At least half a dozen would have extorted every shilling she had, then trumpeted her scheme to the world, hoping to find another pigeon they could pluck. Spitalfields isn't the stews, but its residents aren't always upright citizens."

She bit her lip, for he had a point.

"And if there was any chance my mother was Francine, don't you think she would have said something? I was thirteen when she died. Montrose would have been at school by then. At the very least, she promised to raise him as a gentleman. I grew up in the working class – toward the bottom of it, if truth be told."

"Did you? Think, John. That may be where you lived, but your manners, your accent, your sense of honor, even your attitudes are those of a gentleman. I noticed from the first that you are more a gentleman than Chester or any of his friends. Few from the working class share those traits."

He glared. "You insult me. Or maybe you don't understand what gentlemen's attitudes really are. Chester is a prime example. Arrogant. Selfish. Uncaring how his behavior affects others. He expects instant, unquestioning obedience from all inferiors and insures that he gets it by punishing every transgression harshly."

"You've described him perfectly, but he is not typical."

"Isn't he? What about your grandfather? The man arranged your father's life to his own advantage, then disowned him and you because your father refused to go along with his plans."

"Yes, there are so-called gentlemen who are selfish – Chester, Grandfather, Bitstaff, and several others I've met. But most gentlemen are responsible, caring men concerned more with protecting their dependents and improving their estates than with their own pleasure."

They adhere to their duty to provide for future generations and are honorable men who avoid causing harm. And that describes you.”

“If you consider me a gentleman, then thank Soane. He taught more than architecture, especially to me, as I came to him so young. He lectured constantly on the behavior expected of a professional. To be successful, one must share the manners of one’s patrons despite always remembering one’s place.”

“Did your mother enforce different standards?”

He frowned. “I don’t remember – it’s been twenty years since she died, and that first year with Soane is a blur. Between grief and fear that I couldn’t keep up with the work, I didn’t notice much – he would have tossed me out if I hadn’t maintained his standards. He can be harsh to anyone who disappoints him, even his own sons.” Soane hadn’t spoken to them in years.

“Perhaps Soane taught you manners, or perhaps he merely polished what you already knew.” Faith studied him closely. “But my point remains the same. There is a very real possibility that those sketches depict the same woman. You should at least keep an open mind until Portland finishes his investigation.”

“No! I refuse to waste more time on this rubbish.” He headed for the door.

“What’s wrong, John?” Faith grabbed his arm, forcing him to look at her. “Why are you so angry?”

“I hate to waste—”

“That’s not it. You act as if I’m holding a knife at your throat.”

“You are.”

She flinched as if he’d struck her. Only then did he realize that she’d equated his words with his marriage offer, which gave him no choice but to reveal the terror swirling through his breast. “Don’t you understand, Faith? All my life, I’ve had to fend for myself. And I did. I avoided the workhouse by impressing Soane with my skill. I won scholarships and awards, then established a respected practice despite my youth and breeding. I’m very close to winning a post with the Office of Works. I’m proud of those accomplishments.”

“You *should* be proud.”

“Really? How can you say that after telling me that my breeding puts me above those I’ve always considered my peers, that all my work was for nothing, that my accomplishments will wind up under the rug

with all the other dirt?”

“What rubbish is this?” she demanded, shaking him.

“Everyone knows blood defines one’s station. If you toss an aristocrat into a group of working men, he will outshine them every time. It is the way the world works. So how can you expect my thanks when you’re stripping away every scrap of my pride by insisting that an accident of birth means more than my work?”

“I’m not.” She gripped his head so he couldn’t turn away. “You aren’t thinking clearly, John. While it’s true that high breeding provides advantages not available to most, it cannot guarantee success. It cannot even guarantee respect. Think about it. If breeding is everything, then Chester would be an honorable man, and you would gladly invite Bitstaff into your home.”

John shuddered.

“But breeding is only the beginning. Even the most rigid members of society judge on more than blood. Honor, fortune, and any defect in body or soul count as much. Sometimes more. I saw many aristocratic sons in the army, for they comprise most of the officer corps. And I saw many common soldiers. If breeding determined success, then dividing the army by merit, setting the best men on one side and the worst on the other, would separate them by blood as well. Yet in reality, you would find officers and soldiers in both groups, and in equal numbers.”

“The army does not operate the same way society does.”

“No, it doesn’t. Birth means less, for when your life rests in the hands of others, you care only for their abilities. The ladies who control society’s drawing rooms might call me a heretic, but I believe that talent exists separately from breeding.”

“To some extent.”

“To all extent. No exceptions. Many men cannot develop their talents because their station in life prevents it. Others lack the funds for suitable training. But that does not mean the talent doesn’t exist. So whatever rank a man holds, he should take pride in his accomplishments, whether they involve well-run estates, effective leadership in Parliament, or designing functional buildings that appeal to the eye.”

“Any aristocrat can manage all of those.”

"No!" She stamped her foot. "Does Byron's poetry please because he's a lord? If so, then anyone of decent breeding should write as well. But I saw you cringe at Reginald's words, and there are others who are even worse."

"True."

"And what about Wellington? Is he a brilliant general because his father was a marquess? If so, then duke's sons should achieve even more. Do you think Chester could have defeated Napoleon faster or with fewer casualties?"

"Of course not."

"The army would be awash with brilliance if breeding guaranteed success. But it doesn't. So no matter what Portland discovers, take pride in your work, John. You deserve it."

He shook his head, wondering where he'd lost control of the conversation. It wasn't like him. "I will agree that my beliefs might be too rigid," he said with a sigh. "But they are mine and cannot be changed by a word. And in the end, it doesn't matter, for you've sent Alex haring off after a fantasy. I can only pray he accepts the truth quickly so he can return to his job and let me return to mine."

"Whatever he finds, you will deal with it." Her arms slid around his waist. "No one promised that life would be fair, but I've no doubt you will succeed at whatever you try."

He kissed her briefly, then headed for the door. He needed time alone to shore up his defenses before he could again consider courting her. "I have work, Faith. We'll visit Bullock's after lunch. Is there anything you need in the meantime?"

"No."

"Come down if you want additional books." He escaped before she could try again to convince him. She had to be wrong. He would die otherwise.

* * * *

Faith frowned at the door, her brain so full she couldn't think.

To give it time to settle, she stared at the carpet, counting the strands that formed the largest rose in its pattern.

Five thousand twelve, she decided at last.

The exercise calmed her. Inhaling deeply, she considered the ramifications of today's revelation.

The moment she'd picked up the sketch of Francine, euphoria had burst through her breast. They had actually found the duke, thwarting Chester's ambitions and discrediting his spite. Once that news swept society, no one would believe a word of his attack on John.

Then the ramifications had hit. If John's mother was Francine, then John was the duke. That's what had halted her outside the drawing room.

Despite her decision to find a protector, she'd clung to her hope that a living duke would sweep away her problems. But John would never write the character reference that would assure her of a respectable position. Aside from that finicky sense of honor that demanded marriage, he knew beyond all doubt that she was ruined. No man would perjure himself by lying in writing.

Which made leaving more urgent than ever.

If he was the duke.

She hoped fervently that he was not.

Calming him had been an automatic response to his need for comfort. But comfort was only the beginning. His disdain for the upper classes must change if he hoped to gain that seat at the Office of Works. The men he would have to please were not arrogant idiots. Treating them as such could only cause trouble.

Now she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. He was right that the similarities might mean nothing. One of the peddlers at last summer's fair had looked enough like Colonel Parker to be his brother. So Molly's mole might be coincidence. And the sheer number of people who claimed to have known John since his birth was daunting.

Please be wrong, she prayed as the consequences became clear. Whoever had said that love made people blind was right. Love created fantasies, like hers of somehow correcting her defects so she could wed him without ruining him. But while that might be possible with a mere mister, it would never happen with a duke. People were far more critical of duchesses than of architect's wives.

"Stop dreaming," she growled, prowling the room. "Whatever Portland discovers won't change your future. You can't stay with John, and he won't help you leave. No duke will provide a reference without talking to those who know you. John won't corroborate

lies, and Chester will trumpet your sins to the world.”

So she must prepare for life as a courtesan.

At least her unconventional studies left her with few illusions. Men used mistresses purely for their own pleasure, so her duties would be nothing like John’s lovemaking. The right protector could make it tolerable, but to find such a man, she must convince York’s gentlemen that she was an accomplished lover.

She could do it. John had enjoyed her experiments last night, emboldening her to try others next time. The duchess had described the intimate games she’d played with her husband. And the *Tableau* included sultrier arts than even the duchess had noted.

So that aspect of the business was under control. Her real problem was clothing. Courtesans did not dress like ladies, not that her wardrobe suited a lady, either. Needlework had never been one of her talents, but she must contrive something. She couldn’t afford a dressmaker.

* * * *

“What’s wrong?” Faith asked when John unexpectedly returned to the drawing room an hour later. He did not look happy. Had Portland returned?

“Simmons demands to see you.”

“Again? I told him yesterday to leave me alone.”

“Since when does he listen to anything he doesn’t want to hear?” he said, tossing her own words back at her.

She sighed. “What does he want this time?”

“He didn’t say.” He handed her the note. “I can tell him you’re otherwise engaged.”

“No. He would start screaming about abduction again, which would make the rumors even worse. I’ll have to see him.” The note infuriated her with its arrogant, petulant demands.

“Can you discourage him this time? I’m trying to run a business.”

“I’ll try, but you know what he’s like.”

“Too well.” John shook his head. “You’d best come down. He should be here shortly.”

“He’s probably already outside, hoping to accost me before I can reach your protection.” She frowned. Reginald was becoming a serious nuisance. John’s reputation could not withstand more rumors. All the more reason to leave immediately.

“He will be disappointed, then.”

"He will conclude that I am staying here."

"Nonsense. You are a lady. You would never enter my house without a maid in attendance at this time of day. People would see you. To protect your reputation – which Simmons obviously didn't consider – I had my coachman escort you through the back door."

"That will only work once, though. I must convince him to leave me alone."

"Come along, then." He held out his arm.

Instead of taking it, she slipped hers around him. "He won't add to your woes, John. I'll make sure he doesn't return."

"I'm more concerned that he's annoying you." He pulled her closer, nuzzling her hair.

"He's always been like this." She sighed. "But I shouldn't have to put up with it now that I've left Westcourt." She kissed him lightly, then headed for the door before his nearness upset her sense.

Reginald arrived a few minutes later, bursting into the library without even a greeting. "How did you get here so fast?"

Faith glared. "Sit down, Mr. Simmons," she snapped. "I had business with Mr. Lascar, so was here when your note arrived. I nearly refused to see you. I've never seen such arrogant drivel in my life. You should be ashamed of yourself."

But as usual, he ignored her admonition. "What business could you possibly have with a tradesman?"

"That is not your concern."

"It damned well is!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the door.

"Let go!" Faith slapped him with her free hand.

"Yes, release her." John suddenly appeared in the doorway, his face like thunder. "I don't tolerate mishandling females, Simmons. If you want to speak with her, then do so. Otherwise, leave."

"How dare you insult your betters?" snapped Reginald.

"The only insult was to Miss Harper, and you administered it. This is my office, not a place where schoolboys can throw tantrums."

"Both of you be quiet and sit down." Faith rubbed her arm, unsure who was more likely to make a scene. Once they complied, she scowled at Reginald. "Say what you must, then leave. I am tired of your demands and sick of having you interrupt my life."

"Where are you staying?"

"Oh, no. If I reveal that, you will pester me to death."

"Then tell me what business could keep you here so long. I was outside a good hour and did not see you arrive."

"Because you refuse to use your head," growled John. "Don't you know that ladies cannot wander about town unescorted? This isn't Westcourt. Since Miss Harper has no maid, my coachman brought her in the back so no one in the square would note her arrival. Anyone with a care for her reputation would do the same."

Reginald's eyes widened.

Faith nodded. "As for my call, I asked Mr. Lascar to recommend a man of business to handle my affairs. I do not wish to leave my inheritance in the hands of the Westcourt solicitor. Now suppose you state *your* business. Then leave me alone."

"You have to talk some sense into that damned publisher. I've never been so insulted in my life." He leaped up to prowling restlessly about the library.

"What happened?" As if she couldn't guess...

"He tossed me out with barely a glance at my epic! I *told* him it would make us both rich, but he tossed me out!"

John shrugged. "So try another publisher."

"I did! No one would speak with me, and their clerks demanded that I leave everything there until someone had time to look at it. That could take *days!*"

"Or weeks. Or months." She shook her head. "If you want to succeed, you must first find out how the publishing business works, Reginald. That is not something I can do for you," she added when he tried to object. "Go back and speak with the clerks. Politely – you need them far more than they need you, so you must humble yourself. Ask them about proper procedures. Ask them if they publish your sort of material. Then make a fair copy for each one who might be interested and wait for a response."

"But I need money now!"

"Then find a job."

"No. I'm a poet, not a hack. I suppose it was too much to expect London idiots to understand my vision. I'll have to go to Scotland. You must come with me, Faith." He reached for her, but halted when John rose.

Reginald scowled. "Tell him to leave. He has nothing to do with us."

"I asked him to stay because I knew you would be unreasonable."

"I? Unreasonable?" He backed a pace.

"Exactly. You never listen to anything you don't want to hear, but that will change right now. I want you to leave and never return. Scotland won't help you. Go back to Westcourt and your silly dreams. Or stay in London and find a job. But don't bother me again."

"I can't leave you to fend for yourself. Do you know what they're saying about you?"

"Of course, I do. Chester hates me, so he will spread as much slander as possible. But that is not your concern."

"It is. The only way to make it go away is to wed me."

"Nonsense. It will fade as soon as people learn that Chester is lying – which will happen much faster if you stop demanding these ridiculous meetings."

"Ri—"

"Ridiculous. Take my advice and return to Westcourt. I doubt that anyone will waste money on your epic. It is incomprehensible."

"Why, you—" He jumped forward.

John caught his arm. "This way, Simmons." Before Reginald could object, John escorted him to the street and locked the door behind him.

"Sorry about that." Faith joined John in the hall.

"Someone needs to teach him about the world."

"He's learning." She leaned against him as his arm came around her shoulder. "I cannot entirely blame him, though. His mother coddled him. If he'd attended school, he would be the better for it. He knows little about people and nothing about life."

"He knows enough to understand that only a husband can counter Chester's lies."

"Or a change of name." She laid her fingers over his mouth. "No more, John. You have work to do." Leaving him in the hallway, she headed upstairs.

* * * *

Faith could barely choke down dinner that night, too aware of John's black mood. Was he furious that she'd again turned him down? Or was it the similarity between the sketches? He was probably the only man

in England who shunned titles.

She could understand to some extent. A title meant abandoning his dreams. The Office of Works wouldn't accept a duke into its ranks. Unfair, but life was often unfair. John did not yet comprehend the benefits that would balance that loss. If he was the duke...

"How are the Worthington changes coming?" she asked while Treburn laid out the second course. After Reginald's call, he'd postponed their visit to Bullock's, so she assumed new problems had arisen.

"Badly." He shook his head. "I can't concentrate today."

"Why? If you're right that Portland is chasing shadows, everything will return to normal in a day or two."

"Maybe. But I know Alex too well. He does not accept failure. Having been hired to find the duke, he will find one. And since he despises greed, he will find a living duke to cut Chester from the succession. Much as I admire the skill he exhibited during the war, I fear that his determination might twist facts until he shoves me into a position I don't want."

So she was right. "A title offers many advantages."

"Not to me. Aristocrats are casually cruel all too often. I could never deal with such people on a daily basis. There is no pride in a position one holds by an accident of birth."

"That might be true for the title itself, but addressing responsibility is as worthy of pride as designing a building."

"Hardly. My successes arise as much from loving my work as from any skill I possess. I've no skill for other pursuits. Being forced into a position I don't want eliminates pleasure."

So he'd settled for being stubborn. It was a trait every Willowby shared. Years of dealing with Willowbys told her that argument would make it worse, so she changed tactics.

Because she loved him, she must do what she could to help him accept whatever truth Portland discovered, even if that truth was that he was Westfield. "The title offers challenges you are uniquely skilled to address – repairing Westcourt, for example. I saw how Chester's ideas made you flinch. You love the place."

"Perhaps," he conceded grudgingly. "But a free rein at Westcourt can hardly compensate for the rest. Not

that it matters. I am not Montrose, and I won't let Alex pretend that I am."

Treburn stepped into the dining room. "Lord Portland to see you, sir."

All the blood drained from John's face. "Put him in my study. I will speak with him after dinner."

"He claims his errand is urgent."

"If he wishes to speak with me, he must wait."

Treburn withdrew.

Faith swallowed food without tasting a bite. She doubted that John did, either. There was only one reason Portland would return this late.

John's reluctance was understandable. The dukedom didn't just include Westcourt. It was an empire far more complex than his architectural office, encompassing agriculture, politics, manufacturing, and a host of other businesses that he knew little about. Aristocratic heirs learned early to oversee their inheritances. They were taught from birth to accept duty. Duty to the crown. Duty to their title. Duty to their family. Nothing could interfere with carrying out that duty. There was no way to avoid their destiny.

It was the duchess's one miscalculation. By demanding that Montrose live in anonymity, she had deprived him of the training that would make accepting duty automatic. Instead, he'd lived with boys who could choose their trades. Rather than duty, he'd embraced desire. John had become an architect because he loved designing buildings. He'd worked hard, studied hard, and succeeded with little help from others. Pride was natural.

But Portland now threatened that pride. A duke would have little time for design. John would be miserable unless he took pride in his new position.

Her heart went out to him. If Portland had proved that Mrs. Lascar had no connection to Francine, he would have sent round a note, then resumed his search. Instead, he'd called, interrupting dinner...

So John must be the duke. Despite the disparity in ages. Despite a circle of family and friends. Despite everything. Thus she must leave by morning. The news would sweep London tomorrow. He would face doubt, suspicion, and outright antagonism from established peers. And he would face desperate derision from Chester. He couldn't court further trouble by living with a lady not his wife.

Tonight, she must help him accept the benefits of the title. He could accomplish much with the power and wealth of the dukedom behind him. Making him see that truth was the only way to express her love.

Treburn removed the covers and set out the sweet course. Faith toyed with a lemon cream while John plodded methodically through a tart, three biscuits, and a bowl of nuts. But finally he could delay no longer.

“Shall we, my dear?” He held out his arm.

Chapter Seventeen

Goodman brought Chester to Westcourt to talk sense into me, as he puts it. It proves that Richard miscalculated. Goodman never believed his warnings, attributing them to a childhood grudge. Now he ignores the avarice in Chester's eyes. So I must persevere alone. At least Montrose is safe...

Duchess of Westfield, July 12, 1787

“Good evening, Your Grace,” said Alex the moment John entered the study.

All the blood from John's head drained out the soles of his feet, making him sway. “No. I won't let you twist facts so you can claim success!”

“I twist nothing!” Alex glared.

“Please, gentlemen,” begged Faith, taking a seat.

John sucked in a breath to steady his nerves. He'd feared this since the moment Alex had produced that damnable sketch so like his mother – if only he hadn't suggested making one. But he would not go down without a fight. Living as someone he despised would destroy him.

“Alex, I know you often succeed where others have failed, but not every case can end to your satisfaction. I am John Lascar and nothing you contrive can change it.”

Alex rubbed the back of his neck. “My sympathies, but while you have lived as John Lascar for twenty-eight years, you were born Montrose Willowby, heir to the eighth Duke of Westfield.”

“No!” John slammed his fist onto the mantel. Faith jumped, but he couldn't consider her sensibilities just now. He was fighting for his life.

Alex sighed. “It's been a long day, and I don't want a

fight at the end of it. Sit down, John."

He hesitated, then took a seat next to Faith. She clasped his hand between both of hers, lending enough strength to clear his head.

"What did you learn?" asked Faith.

"I first called on Bernard. He identified your sketch as Francine DuBois, though she looked more careworn than when he'd last seen her. When he learned that she was dead, he grieved. I suspect he loved her."

"He loves Francine. You know as well as I that strangers can share a face. It happens too often to be ignored."

"That is true, and you are correct that it is Francine he loves. He would have helped her after the duke's death, but she left without a word. It was to protect her as much as Montrose that he lied to the trustees. A man does not forget the woman he loves." He shook his head.

"But that does not rule out similarity of countenance between Mother and Francine."

"Don't forget expression," said Faith softly. "You are enough of an artist to capture her character as well as her face."

He glared, torn between pride in his work and the need to deny it.

Alex studied the picture a moment longer, then continued. "A good point, for Bernard commented on the characteristic tilt of her head in the sketch you did." A raised hand stopped further protest. "I next called at Dingle's tobacco shop. Mr. Dingle swears this depicts his Aunt Molly. He remembers her well, for he was ten when she arrived. He also recalls her son, Arnold. The children called him Peewee because he was small for his age."

John flinched as both names reverberated in his head, too familiar for comfort.

"Mr. DuBois also remembers her, for they are of an age. He was infatuated with her as a young man, so it annoyed him that she paid more attention to his father than to him. He also recalls her return twenty years later, child in tow. He had a wife and several babes of his own by then, but he still carries a soft spot for her."

"Did she tell him where she'd been?" asked Faith.

"No. He rarely saw her. They nodded if they passed on the street, but she stayed indoors for the most

part.”

“To avoid people’s questions, I suppose.”

He nodded. “I next visited Little Bacon Street.”

John frowned, for the name meant nothing.

“That is where Marie and Henry Lascar lived after their marriage – the direction is in Henry’s service records. The landlord remembers them fondly. Henry was of medium height with dark hair and wiry build. Marie was tiny and dark-skinned, but very pretty. And she was eighteen when John was born...”

Faith gasped.

John shook his head. “After thirty-three years, it is hardly a surprise that he would confuse her with another tenant. The coloring is right, but Mother was of average height. She worked as a seamstress for ten years before meeting Da and was twenty-five when I was born. Everyone says she aged badly after Da died, so she undoubtedly looked younger than her years before then. The landlord probably equates marriage with youth.”

Portland ignored his interruption. “I showed him the picture. He swears it cannot be Marie. Her face was narrow, with a pointed chin and turned-up nose.”

“More proof that he confused her with another tenant.” John shrugged.

“I doubt it. He recalls all three Lascars clearly – I suspect he was sweet on Marie. I next visited Orange Street.”

John frowned, for the name again meant nothing.

“That is where Marie Lascar lived with another military wife after Henry left for India. Without his income, she could not afford to stay at Little Bacon. Shortly before Henry died, fever claimed the other woman. Marie couldn’t afford the entire rent, so she left. The landlord doesn’t remember much. He thinks this portrait is familiar, but he can’t swear she was a tenant.”

“Hardly a surprise,” murmured Faith.

“I know.” Alex again stared at the picture. “To clinch matters, I visited Hare Street.”

“Where Aunt Frobisher lived.” John relaxed. There would be no surprises from Hare Street. He knew everyone too well.

“Mrs. Parker recognized this picture as Marie Lascar,” continued Alex. “She watched you sketch it.”

“Aunt Frobisher was ailing,” he admitted. “I spent as

much time in the Parkers' rooms as in ours."

"So she said. She also identified the sketch of Francine as Marie Lascar."

"Which only proves that Mother and Francine resembled each other. We know that already."

"And neither resembled the real Marie Lascar," he continued relentlessly.

John tensed. "Don't, Alex. You cannot accept the clouded memory of one old man as fact when you've nothing to support it. I don't care if he *was* sweet on her. It isn't possible. Can you recall every face you met thirty years ago?"

"No, but I am not relying on one man's memory." He leaned closer, using his finger for emphasis. "Mrs. Parker is a font of information, John. The neighbors may be full of tales of your christening, but none of them saw Marie there."

"Of course, they did."

Alex shook his head. "You assumed they did, but in truth Marie didn't attend. Mrs. Parker recalls quite clearly that Marie was ill and remained in bed. It is a common enough occurrence, for fevers often plague new mothers. Baptism requires only that the godparents be present. The guests were disappointed. They'd looked forward to meeting Marie since none of them had been invited to the wedding, not even Mrs. Frobisher."

"But—"

"Henry didn't call on his aunt once between his marriage and his departure for India. Thus Mrs. Frobisher met Marie for the first time when she showed up on the doorstep, accompanied by her five-year-old son. That was several weeks after Mrs. Frobisher learned of Henry's death in India. Marie said she'd remained in her rooms until the lease ran out, then followed Henry's instructions to seek out his aunt."

Faith frowned. "Why his aunt and not his parents – or hers?"

John shrugged. "Da's parents died when he was fourteen. He lived with Aunt Frobisher for two years before joining the army. Aunt Frobisher never discussed it, but Mother said they'd argued fiercely just before he accepted the king's shilling. The invitation to stand godmother for me was the first step in a rapprochement, but something halted further

progress – or so I pieced together from various hints.”

“The important point is that Henry never introduced Mrs. Frobisher to Marie. The only proof we have that you are Henry’s son is that your mother possessed Marie’s papers. Thus I must seriously consider her appearance. Everyone who has seen this picture identifies it as Molly Dingle, who adopted the name Francine DuBois and took charge of the Duke of Westfield while he was still in leading strings. Those who knew Marie Lascar when she lived with her husband swear this picture is not her.”

“Don’t say *everyone* when you speak of only one man who is likely confused. Time distorts many recollections. It especially exaggerates differences. How tall is he? How big?”

“Hulking,” admitted Alex.

“Even tall women would seem small to such a man. And thirty years of fond fantasies can exaggerate truth, making her younger and darker—”

Alex interrupted. “There is other evidence, John.”

“More people who clearly remember a woman they last saw more than thirty years ago?” he scoffed.

“No. I’m frankly amazed to find even one. But while Henry’s family is gone, Marie had many relatives. I hope to find some of them. In the meantime, the duchess gave Francine the duke’s signet ring.”

John stiffened. While he’d skimmed most of the duchess’s diary, he’d paid attention only to mentions of Chester.

“Francine was to give it to Montrose when she told him about his inheritance,” continued Alex.

John smiled. “I have no signet ring.”

“Are you sure?”

Faith prevented him from rising, though she must sense that he needed to pace. “Did you keep her things, John?” Her thumb stroked his palm.

“A few trinkets. There wasn’t room for much at Soane’s.”

“But you still have them.” It wasn’t a question.

He nodded.

Alex also nodded. “Have you looked at them recently?”

“No. I’ve not opened that trunk since I packed it.” He feared where this would lead, but couldn’t halt the admission. “I cursed it every time I had to move, but I couldn’t leave it behind.”

“It’s time to see what it contains,” said Faith briskly. “A grieving boy would not note the significance of things like signet rings.”

John sent Treburn to the attic to fetch the small trunk containing his mother’s effects. No one spoke while they waited, though he clung to Faith’s hand. Only she could save him from drowning.

* * * *

Faith kept John’s hand in her lap, praying that she could somehow ease his pain. She wasn’t surprised at his stubbornness. Admitting that he was Montrose Willowby, ninth Duke of Westfield, meant that his revered mother had lived a lie since leaving home at seventeen, that his family history belonged to someone else, and that his nearest blood relative wanted him dead. It was enough to put anyone off.

She couldn’t escape the irony, though. If Chester hadn’t decided to renovate Westcourt...

Treburn returned, setting a small chest at John’s feet.

John stared at it for a long moment, finally leaning over to lift the lid. A poisonous snake would be more welcome. Grief washed over him. And anger.

The anger was old, dating to the day he’d packed these things away. Anger at the carter who had killed his mother. Anger at his mother for taking in extra work – if she’d been satisfied with the life they’d led, she would not have died. Anger at fate for disrupting his plans.

Nothing had been the same again. Oh, he’d been grateful enough to learn that she’d set money aside for the apprenticeship he’d wanted so badly. But he’d felt guilty as well. If not for his dreams, she would have worked less. So in a way, he’d killed her...

Now he was more angry than ever, for fate was again disrupting his plans. Was this his payment for daring to dream? No matter what this box held, his life would never be the same.

His hand shook.

A stained infantry uniform lay on top. “Da’s,” he explained shortly. “Mother received his effects along with notice of his death. I’d forgotten that.”

Alex frowned.

The next item was a pocket watch, engraved to Henry from Marie. How many gowns had she embroidered to afford it?

"If Henry accepted the king's shilling at sixteen, how did he meet Marie?" Faith asked.

"He was wounded during the American rebellion and sent home to recover. Mother never told me how they met, but he worked on the docks for a time after their marriage – the American rebellion ended before he could rejoin his regiment, reducing the need for soldiers. Eventually the need revived. I was two when he left for India. We never saw him again." He shrugged, though the tale raised questions he'd never before considered, such as why Henry hadn't stayed with Aunt Frobisher while recuperating. Surely if the estrangement had been *that* serious, he would never have asked her to stand godmother for his son...

Stifling curiosity, he lifted out other items belonging to his father, then reached his mother's meager possessions. The needles and pins so essential to her trade. Her brush and comb. Her favorite shawl – he'd given it to her at age ten, paying for it with pennies he'd earned delivering messages for a solicitor. Her box of trinkets. The box had been a wedding present from Henry. Yet she'd hidden it from Aunt Frobisher...

He dumped its contents on a table, spreading them so everyone could see. "My baby teeth. The enamel pin she wore to church every week. Da's ring."

Alex picked it up. "The signet ring of the Duke of Westfield."

"It can't be!"

"It's the Westfield crest, John," said Faith taking it from Alex. "Look at it. You must recognize the design. Chester demanded that you install it in every room." She shoved the ring into his hand.

He stared, blinded by rampant lions and crossed swords...

The ring flashed in a blaze of sunlight, fixed on the finger of the man he'd seen in the duchess's apartments. Laughter tickled his ears and shook his chest as it swooped closer, until the hand caught him, then flung him back into the air. That odd warmth again blanketed him...

It couldn't be memory. It couldn't!

Alex sighed. "Before you claim she stole it or borrowed it or found it on the street, there is one proof that cannot be fabricated. Montrose has a distinctive scar on his left buttock."

Faith gasped. "There was nothing in the diary about

a scar. What sort?"

"Bernard recalls it well. Montrose fell into the kitchen fireplace barely a week before his father's death. The scar might have faded by now, but it was deep enough to leave permanent marks. It originally displayed a perfect impression of the top six inches of the andiron, complete with the duke's crest."

John nearly passed out. He recalled the kitchen andiron perfectly. Relic of an earlier age, it was fancier than current specimens, embellished by curlicues and a bronze crest. Yet he refused to accept that his own mark matched. Not even when Faith stared at his hip, obviously casting her mind back to last night, then nodded. "I would know if I spent the first two years of my life as Montrose! The name means nothing!"

"But they didn't call you Montrose," said Faith, cupping his cheek so he had to meet her gaze. "Westfield's heir is the Earl of Othmar. Everyone, from parents to servants, addresses him as Othmar from the moment he is born."

"She's right," said Alex briskly. "All heirs are addressed by title. My brother had to study his given names when he left for school. He hadn't known all of them."

"But the duchess referred to him as Montrose in her diary," he tried in a last desperate appeal to reason.

"I'm not surprised," said Faith. "He was named after her favorite uncle. But she knew her duty. The heir to a title must accept that title and all that goes with it. It is the only way to instill a proper sense of duty. Addressing him like lesser boys might let him forget."

John flinched, grateful that he was seated. His legs suddenly felt like water.

He could no longer deny the truth. The name Othmar resonated in his head – just as his first sight of Westcourt had resonated. Was that why he felt so strongly connected to the house? Was it his birthplace?

The evidence was overwhelming. And now that he accepted the possibility, other memories crowded his head. His mother had been desperate to talk as she lay dying.

Mon— Mon— Mon—, she'd said over and over. He'd thought she feared he would forget the money she'd set aside, so he'd done his best to comfort her.

But she'd become even more agitated, spitting out

sounds until tears of frustration ran down her face. Her head had been injured so badly that the words made no sense. All he'd understood had been her overwhelming sense of failure, which he had attributed to her death before he was properly apprenticed.

Now, when it was too late, he understood. She had tried to explain his heritage, but died believing that she'd broken her vow to the duchess.

Other things now also made sense. Terror and grief had made it difficult to think, but he should have questioned the extent of her savings – far more than a seamstress could accumulate in a lifetime. The money must have come from the duchess. Only now did he understand the extent of Francine's devotion and the strength of the fear that had driven her. Living in comfort might have drawn Chester's attention, so she'd accepted a menial post as a seamstress's assistant, then encouraged him to work, too. She'd known the trustees would watch the public schools closely. No matter what kind of background she devised, he risked exposure. So she'd kept him home, subscribing to three lending libraries and pushing him to read constantly, swearing that he would be grateful for the knowledge one day. She'd encouraged his dreams, for they required that he learn better manners than his friends exhibited. And they gave him an incentive to adopt attitudes more suited to his betters. Not once had she complained about her diminished status.

He was so deep in memory that he barely noticed Treburn hand a note to Alex.

What he couldn't understand was why she had hidden the truth from him. Had she thought him too young or stupid or undependable? He'd had a right to know at ten, or certainly by twelve. Even the duchess had expected him to know by twelve. Boys that age routinely worked in factories or aboard ships. Did she think he would attack Chester?

He had more sense, though even at twelve he would have hated hiding behind a false name.

Which brought him to Marie Lascar. "What happened to Henry Lascar's wife? If my mother was not she, then where is she? And where is her son?"

Alex held out his note. "The final proof. John Lascar's godfathers were Marie's uncles. One of their sons works at Horse Guards. I left a message there

this morning. This is his response.”

John gingerly unfolded the missive. Samuel Pepperidge was brief. His cousin Marie Lascar had died of a fever in October of 1789 and her son with her.

Alex nodded. “That’s when Francine left the Dingles. She must have known Marie well enough to take possession of her effects and assume her identity. The landlord paid little attention to his tenants, so would barely notice that the Marie Lascar who moved out at the end of the lease was not the one who’d moved in three years earlier. She had to leave that area, though, in case the neighbors said something. And moving took her farther from her family and any society members who might recognize her. It was another way to protect you.”

“She certainly did an outstanding job of that,” said Faith. “Few boys orphaned before they turned twelve could have achieved as much as you did.”

“I was thir—” His voice died, for if he was Montrose, Francine had died a week before his twelfth birthday. He was more than a year younger than he’d thought. No wonder he couldn’t recall his earliest years. He must have been four when they had moved in with Aun— Mrs. Frobisher.

“We will call at the College of Arms in the morning,” said Alex, returning to business.

“No. I won’t claim the title. I’m happy where I am.”

“You have no choice,” countered Alex. “Titles follow blood and take no account of preference.”

John glared. “I won’t do it! If you persist, I’ll move to America and renounce my citizenship. Foreigners cannot hold British titles.” He pitched the signet ring into the fire, then strode to the window, turning his back on the room and its uncomfortable intruder.

“You would leave Westcourt to Chester?” demanded Faith, accepting the ring Portland recovered. “You would increase his power over the staff, tenants, villagers, and your remaining family? No matter how much you dislike them, they are your responsibility.”

John’s shoulders slumped.

Portland pursed his lips, then collected his papers. “He is understandably in shock, Miss Harper. Perhaps you can explain better once he’s had a chance to settle. I will return in the morning.”

“Of course, my lord.”

The moment Portland left, John dragged Faith into his arms. "I can't do it," he swore. "I have no use for the aristocracy. Hateful people!"

"We spoke of this already, John. There are good lords and bad lords and everything in between. Just as there are good and bad architects. You needn't change your ways. But you cannot turn your back on the thousands of people who depend on Westfield. Even if you *could* renounce the title, you are too good a man to leave them in Chester's hands." She pulled back to stare at his face. "Now come to bed, my dear. He's right. You are in shock. Put off thinking about it until morning."

"Only if you join me."

"Of course."

Chapter Eighteen

Chester revealed his true self this morning. When I refused to discuss Montrose, he beat me. Thank God I don't know where Francine went, for I might have weakened. The pain... I suspected I was carrying another child, but that hope is now utterly dashed.

Duchess of Westfield, July 13, 1787

By the time John reached his room, he was shaking so hard he could barely stand. Faith half-carried him to the bed and helped him sit.

She remembered all too well that shock could inflict pain from head to toe. Her mother's death – the fourth family death in two days – had left her abandoned, bewildered, and begging to follow them into the hereafter. All that day she'd sat at her mother's bedside, clinging to her stiffening hand as she tried to make sense of a world gone mad. Not until a neighbor responded to their wailing maid had someone dragged her screaming from the room.

For days she'd suffered debilitating pain, as if someone had scraped her raw inside and out. She'd been wracked with nausea, tormented by shaking so bad she couldn't stand, overcome by grief. Not just for her family, but for the life they'd known. It, too, had died of raging fever, sending her to a place as alien as China or ancient Greece.

John would feel the same. He'd lost a family tonight, too. The father he'd admired. The mother he'd revered.

His life would never be the same. He'd gained a family as well, but he wasn't ready to consider that, and she had to admit they were far from lovable. His new responsibilities would weigh heavily until he accepted them. Old dreams would weigh heavier. He would never sit at the Office of Works now.

But before he could face the consequences of his birth, he must forgive Francine's lies. Portland would not let him lick his wounds for long. Chester would act even faster. Thus she couldn't leave him alone. He had to adjust now.

John would hate breaking down in front of her, though, so distracting him was her best course. And what better distraction than lovemaking?

She ignored the question of whose interests passion would serve. It was the only course she could think of. Only three days ago John's touch had pushed her own terror and pain aside. Now she must return the favor.

"Don't think about it," she murmured, sliding his coat off and untying his cravat.

"I can't help it." His voice cracked. "Why—"

"Hush," she ordered. "Tomorrow is soon enough for talk. For now, concentrate on my hands. I'm going to touch every inch of you." She tugged off his shirt.

"Faith."

"Relax." She pushed him gently onto his back, then stretched his arms above his head. "Don't move, John. Just enjoy." She started with his hands, tracing muscles, exploring textures, licking and kissing as she worked along his arms, across his shoulders, around his face. Lowering her mouth to his, she sampled long and deep until he trembled. Pleased, and more than a little breathless, she moved on.

By the time she reached his abdomen, he'd arched into her touch, his hands gripping the bedpost so hard it was a wonder it didn't snap. But she kept her pace slow, savoring, teasing, toying with his desire – and her own.

"Faith!" He groaned as she inched his pantaloons down his hips.

She deliberately avoided his jutting manhood, though the sight made her belly clench. It was thick and hard, with moisture dripping from its tip. But she wasn't ready to finish.

Exploring John was the most erotic experience of her life. Every touch raised awareness of her own

need. Beneath her corset, her breasts throbbed, demanding to be free, to press against his fingers and tongue. Heat seared her womb until the mere sight of him urged her to take him deep, riding to the completion they both needed.

But not yet.

Yesterday had taught her that anticipation made the final release stronger, so she concentrated on his flesh, amazed at the range of textures one body offered. Warm here, cool there. Rough, smooth, pulsing with power. His heart hammered against her palm. His panting speeded her breathing until she was dizzy with excitement. And his moans...

Surrendering to temptation, she brushed his shaft, curling her hand around its thickness. He jerked, rubbing hard against her palm as a growl rumbled deep in his chest. But when she felt his control slip, she pulled back to resume her exploration.

"Now!"

"Not yet," she panted.

"I need you."

"Soon. Very soon. But first, feel my hands."

His shape pleased. Wide shoulders. Hard chest. His belly quivered at the slightest touch. Her hands glided, pale against dusky patches of hair, rosy against the silvery web of an ancient scar. Emotion welled like wine to cloud her senses.

"Let me touch you," he groaned, writhing.

"Not yet." She hadn't pushed him high enough, had yet to remove all of his clothes.

John could hardly string two words together as Faith's hands roamed over his body. Her scent engulfed him until his groin ached and blood roared through his head. And when she brushed moisture from the tip of his manhood, he nearly exploded. Only determination kept him still. As long as she was enjoying herself...

But he needed her, desperately.

He hadn't expected such bold advances, but it boded well for the future – if he lived that long. His heart would surely batter free in another minute. He felt its pounding clear to his toes.

She cupped his testicles, kneading lightly as if rolling them through her fingers. Without realizing it, he grabbed for her.

"Not yet," she repeated firmly.

“Can’t – wait.” But he returned his grip to the post.

“Soon. I need to catch up first.”

He shook his head, not understanding, for she was clearly as ready as he. Her eyes blurred with passion. Her skin flushed with desire. Her moans and sighs whispered across his skin, driving his own need higher.

But again she surprised him as she stepped away from the bed to let her gown slither sensuously to the floor. His breath froze as her petticoat followed. Never had he watched a lady disrobe – and certainly not one who did so solely for his titillation. Her corset fastened in the front, offering enticing glimpses of flesh as it inched open.

“I’ve heard that men enjoy looking,” she purred, lifting her breasts in offering. Stiff nipples pressed against the thin chemise, making him ache to draw them into his mouth.

“Men very much enjoy looking.” He barely forced the words past his dry throat. Her breasts seemed different cupped in her hands, and different yet as she slowly drew the chemise aside, leaving her clad only in stockings. Reddish curls marked the apex of her thighs, the sight driving reason away.

“Now, Faith. Right now.”

When she extended her hand, he dragged her against him. The room spun in dizzy circles as he ravished her mouth, drinking in the taste he craved more than life, tongues tangling wildly as they rolled across the bed. Each new encounter revealed sides of pleasure he’d not known existed. She fit him perfectly, body, mind, and spirit.

But as he shifted to plunge inside, she rolled above him. “I’ve not had my fill of you.” Her hands danced over his flesh until he feared the heat would set the bed aflame. Her mouth followed, licking and nipping until he shook with need. And when she reached his manhood...

“My turn,” he croaked. Merely looking at her swollen breasts drove him higher. And she, too, dripped with need. But he had to touch. Had to make her as crazy as he.

So instead of ending it, he kissed her from head to toe, drawing her fingers into his mouth even as his own worked within her, sending her into a screaming climax that nearly finished him.

"Again," he gasped, sliding his tongue inside.

"John! My God!" She bucked against his mouth, tearing at his hair. Nails clawed his back, drawing blood, but he wouldn't stop, couldn't allow her even a moment to catch her breath.

Up she went again, higher and stronger, until she shattered a second time. Yet as he twisted to plunge, she found the energy to slither away.

"You've asked for it now," Faith gasped, pushing him onto his back as she fought to clear her sight. The *Tableau* mentioned what he'd done to her – and offered reciprocal suggestions. Smiling, she licked his shaft from one end to the other, then drew it deep into her mouth.

His body spasmed, nearly bucking her off.

Since he'd claimed men could climax but once, she drew back, stroking lightly while she gauged his reaction.

John moaned.

"You like that?"

"Too much. I won't last a minute."

"You think not? A big, strong man like you can surely control himself longer than a minute."

His hands fisted in the sheet as her tongue swirled around him.

John couldn't believe what was happening. But with her challenge ringing in his ears, he held on, his body arched upward as she worked him. Five minutes. Ten.

His control snapped.

Flipping her over, he thrust wildly inside, beyond thought, beyond reason. The sheer glory of filling her burst through his head like the sun. She met his wildness with her own, locking her legs around his hips, her moans wrapping him in a siren song, more and more frenzied, until the world exploded, leaving only blackness and the most profound peace he'd ever known.

* * * *

"Am I alive?" he muttered groggily sometime later.

"I think so." Faith stretched against him. They'd landed against the post at the foot of the bed. "Now I know why mothers guard their daughters so assiduously. Lovemaking is too pleasurable to abjure for long."

"With the right partner. This sort of bliss is rare."

Faith wished he hadn't reminded her. Satisfying

future protectors would be more difficult now that she knew the pleasure John could produce. If only—

But she couldn't. Second-guessing her decision could only lead to trouble. Society would crucify him if they learned about her, especially now. A duke needed an impeccable wife who could provide an unimpeachable heir. That was doubly true for a duke in his position. He badly needed society's respect.

A blaze of jealousy seared her soul at the image of him sharing this bed with another.

She shook it off. If God was merciful, she would never know who that woman was. And she would be gone in any event. Must be gone. Tonight. Society would be watching him by tomorrow.

"We must wed," said John, snapping her out of her thoughts.

"This is no time to consider marriage," she said briskly. "First you must establish your identity and learn your new responsibilities. Only then can you consider marriage. You will need a wife worthy of your position."

He pinned her to the bed, glaring. "You have it backwards, Faith. I cannot face so much upheaval alone. I need you with me."

"The future is less fearsome than you think." She tried to sound positive.

"You can't know that. But whatever the truth, I won't face it without you. I'd flee to America first."

"You'd let Chester win?"

"Alex's evidence will prevent him from claiming the title, and the trustees will bar him from the estate. If you want me to do more than that, you must help me. I won't go through this pain alone."

His plea shattered her shield, wrapping itself around her heart. Staying even a day or two would make her departure worse, but how could she refuse? She loved him.

"I'll do what I can," she finally said. *For now*, she added silently. Unless he took his place as Westfield, the duchess's sacrifices would be in vain. If achieving that meant staying where she could press him when he balked, she would do it.

He relaxed at her vow, apparently thinking she'd accepted his offer. Before she could correct him, he pulled the covers over them and fell asleep.

Faith wasn't so lucky. Staying even briefly increased

the danger of scandal. He must hire a chaperon immediately if his reputation was to survive. And she dared not leave the house in his company. Connecting them in the public eye would cast doubts on his judgment. It wasn't the perfect solution, but it was the best she could come up with for now.

By the time he was accepted as Westfield, he would understand that marriage was impossible. If she wasn't good enough for an architect, she could never aspire to a duke. Convincing the aristocracy that he was legitimate would be hard enough without her dragging him down. They would despise her.

While she'd stressed the difference between talent and breeding while trying to soothe him, in truth breeding was paramount to the upper classes – which would work in John's favor once he established his parentage. She wasn't so lucky. Her breeding would never pass muster even without the deformity of her limp. Her relatives had made that clear. Not only did her mother hail from the lowest levels of the gentry, Faith couldn't even prove she was legitimate. Her parents' marriage lines had disappeared along with those missing trunks. No other record existed, for they'd married over the anvil. Living as a family in India didn't count. She'd known several officers who openly lived with mistresses and their bastards. Few in India condemned them. But England was not so tolerant.

Then there was the heir problem...

So all she could do was prop up John's courage until he accepted his fate, then disappear from his life. Her own future looked grim – for once she was brutally honest with herself – but she would survive.

John was in his study when Alex returned the next morning. Thanks to Faith, he'd slept peacefully and awakened with a clear head. He might curse fate, but she was right. Destiny did not consider personal preference. Nor did English law. He must not only accept his noble birth, but the duty that went with it.

But it hurt. Badly.

Almost as badly as Faith's latest refusal. He wasn't naïve enough to think last night's agreement covered more than a few days. She meant to leave once his situation settled. That weighed even heavier than the prospect of spending the rest of his life as a man he

despised.

The one benefit of her latest refusal was proof that she was not judging him on breeding. If she'd accepted the duke's offer after refusing the architect's, something inside him would have died. But this meant he'd misconstrued her reasons. Did she secretly despise him? Had she joined him last night because she felt sorry for him?

He shuddered.

Yet he couldn't believe it. No one who harbored disdain could have responded so freely.

Somehow he had to convince her that he loved her and that honor had nothing to do with his offer. Or very little.

Was she carrying his child? The chances were better now—

Alex's arrival thankfully distracted his thoughts. Faith remained in the dining room, but he did not summon her. He would conduct this meeting alone.

It was a terrifying prospect, and one Alex wouldn't understand. Alex considered any title a prize. His own was an even bigger prize since he'd earned it for meritorious service. He would never see that the only prize John wanted was that seat at the Office of Works, which was now utterly impossible.

"Good morning, Your Grace," Alex said, taking a seat.

"Enough, Alex," snapped John. "I won't use a title that is not yet mine. That is Chester's way."

Alex shook his head, but took a seat.

"Speaking of Chester, have you reported the results of your investigation?" asked John.

"No, and I don't plan to, at least not to Chester. Even if the duchess's diary had not raised questions about his character, I was hired by the trustees. Once I prove the fate of the duke beyond all doubt – which won't be until the College of Arms and the Committee of Privilege at the House of Lords accept the evidence – I will send them a report. They will likely contact you sooner, though. There is no way to prevent rumors."

"They are out of town."

"All three?" Alex raised his brows.

"They are verifying my claim that Chester cheated the estate of several thousand guineas."

"That should keep Chester occupied. They will have informed him of their visit – might even have taken

him with them.”

John hoped not. Chester might intimidate the staff into destroying the other records. He would certainly blame any shortfalls on Faith. Another reason to keep her close.

“We’ll deal with Chester and the trustees later. I requested a meeting with the College herald and a representative from the Committee of Privilege.”

“Is that usual?”

“Nothing about this situation is usual, but there is no point in going through this twice. The College will determine whether you are a legitimate member of the Willowby family and thus entitled to bear the Willowby arms. The Committee decides whether you are heir to the Westfield title and thus entitled to a seat in Lords. Once they rule in your favor, the Lord Chancellor will issue a writ of summons to take your seat in Parliament. Publishing that writ in the *Gazette* will constitute the public proclamation of your status. Be prepared. The moment you are gazetted, you will be inundated with callers and invitations.”

“Are you sure there is no other way?”

“None.” Alex rose. “Titles follow blood with no regard for ability or interest. There is nothing anyone can do about it. Short of coercing Parliament and the Regent into abolishing the title entirely – which I can guarantee they won’t consider unless you prove you’re a traitor, in which case you will lose your head – you are the duke. Accept it and move on.”

“So I must abandon everything I’ve worked for and assume a position I know nothing about.”

“I didn’t say that. Whether you are John Lascar or Montrose Willowby has nothing to do with how you live your life. No one can stop you from designing buildings if that is what you want. Few will deign to comment on it, for a duke wields great power. Anyone wishing to benefit from that power will avoid criticizing you. Even lowly barons can stifle criticism. A few harridans frown on me because poking into other people’s secrets is ungentlemanly if not outright dishonorable. That stain is worse because I opened my business after winning the title. But society still welcomes me.”

John frowned. “I thought gentlemen were roundly condemned for dabbling in trade.”

“True, and if you decided to open a tailor’s shop on St. James’s Street, most would avoid you. But the line

between gentlemanly pursuits and trade is blurry, and growing more so every year. The world is changing, John. For centuries, lords lived on the proceeds of their land. Crops and rents have always been accepted as proper sources of income. When Lords Grosvenor and Berkeley planted houses on their estates, then leased them to fellow aristocrats, no one said a word. That was little different from collecting rents from tenants. From there, leasing land for factories and mills was only a small stretch. Another small step tied the amount of the rent to the factory's income. But having a stake in that income gave the landowner a voice in decisions that affected it. In my book, that means he is involved in trade."

"That seems reasonable."

"I can name a dozen peers with just such arrangements. I see little difference between a lord who influences how the businesses in his estate village operate and one who owns ships, taking a percentage of the profit from each voyage. But I also believe that makes him a partner in the business itself."

"But discussing strategy and offering advice to a manufacturer is not the same as working in his mill. And owning a ship is different from selling the products it carries."

"True. And an architect does not actually build houses. Setting designs on paper is a far cry from digging holes and pounding nails. I see nothing wrong with it. Architecture has long been an appropriate interest for gentlemen. A century ago, the most influential architect in England was Lord Burlington, who used the power of his government position to change architectural fashion overnight."

"Not for the better," growled John.

"I know you dislike Palladianism." Alex returned to his chair. "But no one thought his activities smacked of trade. And he designed public buildings as well as private."

Not well. But John kept the thought to himself. And to be fair, it wasn't Burlington's fault that he had failed to anticipate the fashion for gowns too wide to pass between the close-set columns in his York assembly rooms.

"Never forget that architecture is far more genteel than poking one's nose into private affairs or exposing family secrets to public scrutiny – which is what I

often do.”

“But it takes time if done right.”

“True.” He paused. “If I might make a suggestion...”

John nodded.

“Keep your office open. Can your assistant run it?”

“Yes.”

“Check on him, of course, but let him do most of the work. That will give you time to learn about the Westfield dukedom. It is very extensive, wields much power, and produces a considerable income. In truth, its fortune is one of the largest in England, double what it was when your father died, despite Chester’s depredations. As a businessman, you understand why you must learn about it. But every lord has stewards, bailiffs, secretaries, managers, and other employees who oversee daily operations. Once you are comfortable and have installed overseers you trust to manage those aspects that don’t interest you, you can accept whatever architectural projects you wish. You might find it easier not to use the income for yourself, though. If it were me, I would create a scholarship fund for talented young men who cannot afford proper study – perhaps administered through the Royal Academy.”

John pursed his lips. It was an interesting suggestion. “Is that what you do?”

Portland nodded. “Income from my office goes to one of my wife’s benevolent societies.”

“I will think on it. As you say, there is much to consider.”

“For now, we’ll call on the herald. The sooner you are proclaimed duke, the sooner your inheritance will be in good hands.”

“What does Westfield own besides Westcourt Park?” John asked as they headed downstairs.

“You’ll have to ask the trustees. That information wasn’t pertinent to my investigation. But Westfield House in Grosvenor Square is part of the dukedom. Chester has lived there for nearly thirty years. Are you familiar with it?”

“Not by name, though my moth— Francine enjoyed walking through Mayfair on Sundays, often as far as Hyde Park, so I’ve seen most of the buildings.” She’d used those excursions to familiarize him with the upper classes and their environs. *That’s Lord Alvanley*, she would say, pointing to a young macaroni. *He is*

friend to the Prince of Wales. And there's Lady Beatrice outside the modiste shop. A formidable gossip, or so I hear. Nothing happens in aristocratic circles that she doesn't know.

That remained true. Age hadn't diminished Lady Beatrice's sharp mind. It amazed him that she didn't know all of Westfield's secrets.

Why had he never questioned those Sunday walks? Not once had he asked how an unfashionable seamstress's assistant knew so many lords and ladies. Nor had he wondered why she took such pains to never draw their notice—

"Westfield House is the largest house on the south side of the square," continued Alex. "Classical façade with six columns."

A lump rose in John's throat. That had been his favorite house on those long-ago treks. Three times the size of its neighbors – which were large by London standards to begin with – it had spoken to him. Just as Westcourt spoke to him.

Now he knew he'd been inside. He'd accompanied his parents whenever they went to town. The duchess had refused to leave her son behind for even one night.

He'd sketched Westfield House for the first time at age eight, then spent hours poring over books until he could name every element of its façade. That building had triggered his love of architecture...

After his mother had died, there had been no time to walk the streets of Mayfair, so he'd not seen the house again until last fall when he chanced to be in the square. It had hurt deeply to discover that it had fallen into disrepair. Chester again. That must change.

It was time to claim his birthright. Severing Chester's ties to Westfield couldn't happen too soon.

Chapter Nineteen

Chester would banish me if he could. I've never seen anyone so angry. But at least Goodman took him away so I can grieve in peace. If only I could prove that Chester killed Richard... But I can't. The man Richard commissioned to watch Chester lost track of him that day...

Duchess of Westfield, July 14, 1787

Faith finished breakfast, then retired to her room to

consider her options. They weren't good.

She should not have agreed to stay even an extra hour, but she couldn't renege on her word. John needed more than moral support and a prod in the right direction.

Chester would be even more dangerous once he learned John's identity. His problem with Bitstaff and the list of debts John had found proved that he'd counted heavily on Westfield's fortune. Using John's renovation proposals to squeeze money from the trustees was now impossible. With his expectations shattered, his creditors would demand immediate payment unless John disappeared...

So John was in deadly danger. Portland could protect him for the moment. And while they were busy, she could keep Chester from sneaking inside to set traps. But once John had the title in hand – which could be as early as today – he must watch his own back. At that point, staying would hurt him, so she must leave. In the meantime, she would work on her wardrobe and arrange funds.

Courtesans wore scandalously low-cut gowns that were often nearly transparent. It would take time and money to acquire the expected clothing. In the meantime, she would alter her existing garments.

It was a daunting prospect. She pulled out her oldest gown as a practice piece. It was a worn muslin that clung shamelessly if donned without petticoats. No one would consider it fashionable, but it would teach her how to modify the others.

Not until she searched all three trunks did she realize that her workbag remained at Westcourt. She'd taken it to Cook's room while sitting vigil Sunday night, but she'd been too grief-stricken to sew. When Polly had relieved her, she'd left the bag behind. In the haste of packing, she'd forgot it.

Sighing, Faith fetched Francine's needles and pins. John would be furious if he found out, but she had no choice. She could hardly explain her dilemma to his housekeeper.

Collecting her funds was not so easily solved, though. She'd intended to use her inheritance to purchase a coach ticket to York and support herself until she found a protector. Unfortunately, despite the excuse she'd offered Reginald yesterday, she had no idea how to take possession of the money. Mr.

Goodman had invested it in shares before sending her to Westcourt. Her quarterly payments came from a bank, but guardianship of the money would have passed to the new trustees along with the duke's other affairs. After all, Westfield was her guard—

She collapsed, suddenly swamped in hysterical laughter. Several minutes passed before she could control herself.

John was her guardian. Not an anonymous duke, but John. It hadn't penetrated her head until now.

Sucking blood from the finger she'd poked with a needle, she considered this new complication.

Despite that she'd long since reached her majority, her guardian still held considerable power. Especially financial power. While widows faced few restrictions, unwed ladies weren't so lucky. She could not buy or sell shares, for example. The trustees could do so, but even before Westfield's return, they would have refused – or at least consulted Chester before agreeing. Now they would leave the decision to John.

John would refuse. He was so convinced that honor required marriage that he would deny her the means to leave.

Damn him! She would have to abandon the income from those shares, too. Leaving her direction with the bank would let him find her.

If only she'd paid attention to the statements that accompanied her quarterly drafts. She should have noticed that they had started coming from a different bank two years ago. Anyone of sense would have asked why. If she'd questioned the change, she would have discovered Goodman's death and might have found a way to hire her own man of business.

Maybe.

Don't be a dolt, her conscience snapped. How can you hire anyone when you make only twenty pounds a year? Who would be interested?

It didn't matter. She couldn't go back, so regrets served no purpose. But without access to her inheritance, her only assets were her parents' knickknacks and the pieces Ned had slipped into her cloak. She'd intended to return them. Now she must pawn them.

How did one pawn things?

Setting aside that problem until later, she concentrated on lowering the neckline. If ladies could

not pawn valuables, she was sunk.

* * * *

John returned to the house at three, frustrated beyond belief. He'd run into bureaucratic inertia and nitpicking before, but never to this extent. If not for Chester, he would consign the title to hell and move to America.

Faith was curled up in his study, reading the book on Italy. Pulling her close generated enough heat to dissipate the fury of listening to supercilious voices for hours on end. Only when the knots in his shoulders began to unravel did he bend to kiss her.

"Did your meeting not go well?" she asked when he released her mouth.

"As well as could be expected considering the situation." He nuzzled her neck. "The herald is a sober man who accepts nothing without a hundred proofs. The Committee of Privileges is worse – at least Lord Cunnington is; he's their representative in this matter. They would rather hold a title in abeyance for centuries than hand it to the wrong man. Never mind the damage such uncertainty inflicts on his dependents or how it affects his possessions."

"But stripping a man of his title if someone with a better claim suddenly appeared would wreak worse havoc," she reminded him. "What if they'd accepted the preponderance of evidence and given it to Chester after Waterloo? He might have lost everything at the gaming tables by now."

"I know!" He paced to the fireplace and back, raking his hair with his hands. "They aren't completely convinced that I am Westfield, though everyone agrees it is likely. I did learn a great deal about the dukedom, though. It seems I own nine estates, forty-seven other properties, three Caribbean plantations, and a weaver's consortium that has expanded into a thriving woolen mill since any duke last saw it. God knows what the trustees have inflicted on those concerns, to say nothing of Chester. Alex claims my wealth is double what my father held, but he knows no details. No one does. I've no idea if doubling it in thirty years is good or bad, though I would have expected a better return, given the state of the economy. Nor do I know how much of that wealth rests in investments. Only the trustees can answer that question, but they're not here."

"They should return tomorrow."

"Why? Alex hasn't told them about me. Untangling Westcourt's problems could take days, if not weeks."

She glared. "Everyone in town will know about you by sundown. One of the trustees' secretaries will send a messenger. What did the herald and Cunnington say?"

"They suspect that I am Westfield but need more evidence before they will rule on the question."

"What sort of evidence? Portland already found more than I thought existed."

"That damnable scar!" He again pulled her against him. "Cunnington ordered Alex to produce everyone still living who worked in the Westfield nursery. The herald wants to see everyone Alex interviewed – as if Alex would twist the truth!" he exploded, ignoring that he'd implied just that only yesterday.

It wasn't the implied distrust he hated most, though. He faced baring his buttock to a steady stream of people in the weeks ahead. The prospect was unsavory.

"That's horrible!" Terror twisted Faith's face. "They may not decide for months!"

"Why does that matter? Do you doubt my identity?"

"Of course not. But delay gives Chester time to kill you. It will be less suspicious to arrange a fatal accident before you are proclaimed Westfield."

"He won't know."

She pulled back and glared. "You may not have grown up in society, but you must know how gossip spreads. You accepted that the trustees will hear about this by tomorrow – and they're not even in town."

"Yes, but only because the herald will certainly notify them. Gossip is another matter, for who would start it? Alex will tell no one. Nor will the others. No one else will suspect that I am Westfield. All manner of people may have seen me with Alex today, but everyone knows he and I have been friends since I worked on his house. And they know he investigates all manner of questions. He often visits the archives at the College of Arms, frequently with friends in tow. No one will connect today's visit with the missing duke."

"Naïve." She shook her head. "The herald might remain silent, as might Cunnington, but I doubt their secretaries will. And I can guarantee at least one

servant overheard your meeting. The return of a duke who's been missing for thirty years is news. Far more than a nine-day wonder. The man who is first with the tale will enhance his stature tremendously. Chester's scurrilous rumors will make people even more eager to talk about it. What did Cunningham say about those, by the way?"

He hadn't planned to tell her about the rumors since they were rapidly becoming ridiculous as Chester's spite embroidered the tale into obvious fantasy, but she was too knowing to keep her ignorant. "Everyone is understandably concerned," he admitted. It was yet another reason they wanted more evidence. "But Cunningham knows enough about Chester to discount them. And it doesn't hurt that Chester's fury made him careless. There are currently three versions of your debauchment making the rounds, each less believable than the last. I set their minds at ease on that point, so my own explanation should be sweeping society by now."

"What explanation?" She looked torn between hope and terror.

"You accompanied me to London to report Chester's thefts to the trustees and beg for pensions for the staff. Chester's refusal to deal fairly with estate dependents made the trip necessary, but you lacked the means for the journey until I offered my help. The trustees left for Westcourt the day after we arrived in town, which makes the tale believable and explains Chester's attempts to discredit you."

Faith muttered something that sounded like curses.

"What is wrong? It is a perfectly logical explanation."

"You just gave Chester yet another grievance against both of us, especially if the trustees did not tell him about your charges. When he learns that you are Westfield, you will be in deadly peril."

"So you keep saying, but even Chester has limits. I won't be caught in one of his accidents, and he will never attack directly. He was born a gentleman."

"That means nothing. Think, John! Chester has wanted the dukedom since birth. He most likely killed several people in his quest for it, so he will hardly quibble at killing you."

"By arranging accidents. Besides, I told Treburn I am not at home except to Alex."

“That might deter curiosity seekers and toadeaters, but it won’t stop Chester. He might even arrange to have a supposedly irate patron disrupt your office so he could slip in and shoot you.”

John paced the room, chilled by her suggestion. Francine had taught him that breeding made gentlemen different from lesser men. She’d often expounded on the virtues that made a gentleman unique.

It had been her way of teaching him what he would need to know without telling him why he needed to know it. But her lessons had been one-sided, dwelling only on the advantages of that breeding. Soane’s lessons had concentrated on the less sterling qualities that made gentlemen difficult patrons. John had observed many of those faults himself, which made Soane’s words seem nearer the mark.

But neither of his mentors had been unbiased. Francine had painted a rosy picture so he would be delighted to learn of his heritage. Soane had painted a negative picture so he would be prepared for the problems he would face trying to satisfy such men. Neither had done more than offer generalities. But some people had bad blood despite their breeding. That was true at every level. It was time he took advantage of his unique background to think for himself.

He’d lived as a member of several classes and had learned to respect people from each. So he knew that character arose from more than parentage or education. It was a radical notion to judge on behavior rather than breeding, but assuming that all aristocrats were identical – or all merchants, or all laborers – was too risky. Anything that threatened him also threatened Faith, so he must judge Chester on his own actions.

The unvarnished truth was that Chester was unbalanced. Faced with the collapse of his dreams, he might well run mad, posing a danger to John’s staff and even his students. More than ever he wished he remained simple John Lascar.

But it was too late.

“How long will he wait before he acts?” he asked, settling on the couch with Faith in his lap.

“It depends. In his fury over your interference with Bitstaff, he might have already embarked on some

scheme. Even if he controls his temper long enough to plan an accident that won't redound on him, he won't wait long. Now that you've accused him of embezzlement and claimed his title, he can't afford to. Our biggest advantage is that he knows nothing about the duchess's diary, so he won't expect you to understand him or to be on guard against him. Someone will watch him, I presume?"

"I'll send a note to Alex. He can arrange something. I don't suppose Chester will accept fate."

She smacked his chest. "Never. Ambition aside, he is too deeply in debt to give up the title. Nothing else can forestall his creditors or placate the trustees. If the title were his, the trustees would overlook any irregularities, for no prosecution is possible without the duke's support."

"And he would never charge himself."

"Exactly. So he must eliminate you now. Not next week. Not next year. He will try to arrange an accident, but he will murder you outright if that is what it takes. Desperation will ignore any consequences but the one he wants."

John nodded.

"How much of the diary did you read?"

"Mostly the passages concerning Chester. If even half of what she claimed is true, I am amazed others did not see his purpose."

"I'm not. Chester has a great capacity to hide a black heart under a genial façade. Richard saw the truth only because Chester had attacked him since childhood. The duchess loved Richard enough to accept his word. But few others can conceive of such crimes, so they never look for evidence. And even the duchess didn't know everything." She met his gaze. "You should read the diary again – all of it. It contains much besides information about Chester."

He nodded. It was something he'd intended to do anyway. Perhaps it would jar loose another memory.

The image of that toy dog hovered before him. Her rooms had felt special from his first glimpse. Warm. Comforting. Hardly a surprise now that he knew, for he had stayed there often, absorbing her love. She had sacrificed that love to keep him safe. He must see that it had not been in vain.

His first step was to protect everyone at risk.

"Read it again," repeated Faith. "This time

concentrate on Montrose. She penned long letters on your birthday each year. She loved you very much."

He nodded. "In the meantime, I will close my office for a week." He would parcel the students out to his assistants so they would not be trapped in the attic if Chester attacked.

Dropping a light kiss on Faith's nose, he headed downstairs.

* * * *

John joined Faith in the drawing room after dinner, determined to renew his offer. While she willingly indulged in intimacies that would send most ladies into screaming fits, any hint at marriage made her stiffen and pull away.

The conundrum annoyed him more with each passing hour. If she hated him, how could she give herself so completely? If she cared, why did she refuse? And why was she working so hard to help him in either case?

He had no reservations about marriage. She was everything he wanted in a wife. Intelligent. Sensual. Well-read. Lust-crazed. Competent. Hot enough to melt his bones...

He forced control over his breathing as he locked the door behind him. He wanted no interruptions and no escape.

Sliding the key into his pocket, he forced his mind back to logic. Emotions would prevent a rational discussion. He'd spent the hours before dinner considering and disposing of all possible objections so they could settle the question tonight. He wanted them wed before the week was out. Even if Cunnington or the herald dragged his feet, he could get a license as John Lascar, for it was the name he was generally known by, thus satisfying England's marriage laws.

Self-interest alone should have made her jump at his offer, for without her virtue, she had no viable alternative. He had destroyed her chance to arrange another match. She had no money, no prospects, no home. And she might well be pregnant. Discovering he'd been born to a title should have clinched matters. He'd never met a lady who wouldn't sell her soul for a duchess's coronet.

Yet Faith still refused.

Was she in love with another? The possibility hurt, especially as the only viable candidate was Simmons.

But if she loved Simmons, how could she continue lying with *him*? Men took their pleasure anywhere, with no thought beyond relieving a temporary need, but women were different. Only the most desperate whores would bed anyone who produced their price. Most courtesans needed more, and widows interested in dalliance demanded more yet. Every widow he'd kept over the years had been a little in love with him.

But not Faith.

"We need to talk," he began, then winced at his words.

"So you finally understand the threat Chester poses."

It took him a moment to follow her, for he'd accepted that threat earlier. Why else had he closed his office? "You know I do. Your eloquence convinced me even before I re-read my mother's diary. But we are safe here. The house sports the latest locks, and my servants are more than competent." He shrugged. "What I wanted to discuss was you."

"Me?" she squeaked.

"Exactly. I do not understand why you remain so opposed to marriage. It made sense when I was merely an architect. Few ladies are willing to marry beneath them, but—"

"I never considered you inferior!" She surged to her feet, her face in flames. "Don't you dare denigrate yourself! You know you are worthy of the highest in the land. Duke or architect makes no difference. You are the best man I know."

"It does make a difference. No—" he continued when she tried to protest. "I knew my place very well. I was welcomed into aristocratic homes only because my manners were acceptable, my behavior never encroached, and I kept my eyes off the females of the house. It is the way of the world and nothing you need apologize for. But that is no longer the case."

"That was never the case, John." Her eyes shimmered.

"The last time you refused me, you claimed a duke needed a high-born wife acceptable to society. It stands to reason that you refused me the first time because my breeding was inferior."

"Never! Living with the army taught me to judge on behavior rather than breeding. But I know society puts great store in blood, so you must find a wife of good

breeding. I would not be eligible in any case. I cannot wed anyone, high or low."

"What nonsense is this?"

"It's not nonsense. I've known since childhood that I am ineligible. Lady Catherine was kind, but she couldn't hide the truth. The colonel agreed, as did Chester. It is not something you can overlook, particularly now that you must go about in society. My defects would tarnish your reputation, make it impossible for society to accept you, and annoy potential patrons should you continue your business. You will have enough trouble without me dragging you down."

He glared. "I haven't the slightest idea what you mean. Besides, Alex assures me a duke can do whatever he pleases."

"He cannot wed someone disdained by the polite world. Not if he expects to take his place in that world. Especially not if questions linger about his very identity."

"I don't care a whit for aristocratic society. You know that. But even if I did, you would not be disdained. Alex has no objections, and he knows that world better than you. It seems Lady Catherine filled your head with nonsense."

"She did nothing of the sort. Even breeding has its limits, and one of them is deformity. Society demands perfection and ostracizes anyone who fails to meet its standards. Lady Catherine barely tolerates me, and she is not unusual. No one near Westcourt could stand to look at me."

"Deformity? You jest. There is nothing wrong with you."

"Of course there is!" She stomped to the window, then whirled to face him. "You are as aware of this disgusting limp as I am. I can't move without revealing it."

"My God!" Pain slashed through him for all that she had suffered in the hands of the insufferably arrogant Lady Catherine. He moved to draw her against him, stroking her back as if she were a child. "Lady Catherine lied," he said bluntly.

"Never! She is a lady and has no reason to lie."

"Don't you dare tell me ladies don't lie after demolishing my claim that gentlemen don't kill. Lady Catherine has every reason to lie. She is an arrogant

witch who cannot stomach being compared unfavorably to someone both younger and prettier than she. By pushing you into a servant's role, she could claim credit for running Westcourt without lifting a finger. And she could abuse you without penalty, for you could not leave your post to find more genial employment."

"You ignore that everyone agrees with her judgment. The colonel knows firsthand how the world treats deformity. His family could not bear the sight of him, finally turning him off to protect their children's sensibilities."

"For which he sought sympathy. I can see that he played on your emotions until you supplied it. But a slight limp is nothing like a lost limb, and neither necessitates ostracism. As for Chester, you know better than anyone that his word means nothing. He will do or say anything that furthers his own goals, so why would you accept his disdain? He hates you. Not because you deserve it, but because you are living proof that his brother was a good man who incited loyalty and respect in all who knew him."

"But—"

"The neighbors?" He smiled. "Did they dismiss you before Catherine arrived?"

She shook her head. "But I never really met them. No one calls on children, and the colonel discouraged visitors."

"I think any coolness is Catherine's doing. Think about it, Faith. Alex's face is badly scarred – a far more obvious deformity than your limp – yet he is accepted everywhere and found a wife who loves him dearly. I've seen other lords with similar marks. Lord Marsh's limp is more pronounced than yours. As is Captain Thomson's. I know two aristocratic gentlemen who are missing limbs. Neither is turned away when he calls."

"How would you know?"

"I've worked for several of them, both in my own practice and when I was apprenticing with Soane. The world is a brutal place. Few survive unscathed."

"But they are men, not women, and they weren't born defective."

"Stop denigrating yourself!" he snapped. "I've seen ladies with physical problems, too, though I've not met them personally – not that it matters. Did your parents consider you defective?"

She shook her head against his shoulder.

"Did Baines or Mrs. Baines or Cook deride your limp?"

"Of course not. They would never criticize someone above them."

"Look at me, Faith." He waited until she complied. "There is nothing to criticize. I adore your limp. It imparts a delightful sway to your hips. Lady Catherine exaggerated to keep you isolated. Not only would you outshine her – inevitable, for you are beautiful – but she didn't want to sponsor you into society. Girls must have female sponsors, so the chore would have rested on her shoulders. She was the only lady under obligation to the trustees. But accepting such a charge would reveal that her connections are not as powerful as she claims."

"Perhaps she exaggerated a little," she admitted. "But that changes nothing. Yes, Portland and other gentlemen show the effects of life's mishaps. But ladies have always been held to a different standard. And not just in physical perfection. Ladies must demonstrate accomplishments that I never learned, and they should never indulge in the sort of reading I have done."

"According to whom? You've had no chance to meet anyone who understands society." He wanted to shake her until she saw reason. "Lady Catherine might set herself up as an authority, but she is barely accepted into society's fringes. She eloped, which made her father disown her, and she did it before her first Season, so she's never been to town. Her mind is both shallow and closed. There are many society ladies who are as educated as you. Ask Alex if you don't believe me. Intellectual soirees draw ladies as well as gentlemen."

"It doesn't matter. This cursed limp is not something I can hide. It prevents me from moving gracefully. I can't even dance, which is an accomplishment every lady learns from birth."

John frowned. Lady Catherine would pay for her cruelty. But such engrained beliefs would take time to overturn. The word of someone raised outside of society wouldn't do it. So he tried another approach. "Are you sure you were born with the limp? There might have been an accident when you were very young."

"My parents claimed I was born with it. My earliest memories are of pain – I cannot remain on my feet long before my hip begins to ache. It restricted my activity from the moment I left the cradle."

"Really?" He raised his brows. "Which hip hurts?"

"Right."

"It's always the right?"

She nodded.

"I wonder..." He backed away several feet and studied her, then returned to untie her gown.

"What are you doing? We can't make love in here."

"We could. I locked the door. But that is not my purpose." He grinned. "Unless you wish to distract me?"

She slapped his hand away.

"So I thought. I want to look at you when my mind isn't clouded with desire." He let her gown slither to the floor, then attacked the strings that held up her petticoat.

"What do you hope to accomplish?" Her voice quavered.

"I once knew a man who was born with one leg longer than the other. He often complained of hip pain. We relieved it by raising the shoe on the shorter leg."

Hope burst through her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of her petticoat.

He forced his gaze away from the breasts swelling above her corset and concentrated. Her chemise clung, teasing the eye by displaying those shapely legs. But unless her corset was skewed, one hip was definitely lower than the other.

"Come here, sweetheart," he murmured, positioning her so her right hip rested against the wall. "Stand on your right leg only." He marked the top of her head, then turned her and repeated the process with the left leg. "More than an inch difference. No wonder you are in pain. Have you half-boots I can experiment with?"

She nodded, her face a study of confusion and hope as she reached for her gown. "I'll fetch them."

John paced as he awaited her return.

Lady Catherine must pay. His immediate urge was to toss her out of Westcourt without a shilling to her name, but he reined in the impulse. It was odd to think that he had the power to actually do it, and there was no one who could stop him.

What a terrifying idea.

He must be very careful how he exercised that power if he hoped to live with himself. His moth— Francine had taught him to care about others, no matter what their breeding, and to treat everyone with respect. He could not insult her memory by abandoning her precepts.

He faced a multitude of decisions in the weeks ahead, he realized. And not just familiar problems like Westcourt's leaky roof. What to do with the ducal dependents was another.

Lady Catherine must leave Westcourt, for he would not force Faith to deal with the woman. Somewhere among his many properties would be a place she could use. A small manor, maybe. Or perhaps a large cottage. Banishment from Westcourt would be punishment enough.

The Westcourt dower house would go to Hortense and Esther. They would also benefit from escaping Lady Catherine's tongue.

The colonel could stay. He was reasonably occupied with compiling a history of the American rebellion along with a memoir of his contributions to it. Defeat made that conflict unpopular, but recording history was always worthy.

Reginald must find a job – a clerk or secretary, perhaps. Without supervision he would accomplish nothing.

Then there were the servants. Ned and Polly would make an excellent butler and cook. Faith would know if any of the maids should be promoted to housekeeper. He would find someone to care for Baines and his wife. Aside from their kindness to Faith, they deserved a reward for their years of faithful service. Living out their final days in comfort would be a step in that direction.

But first he must convince Faith to wed him. Surely minimizing her limp and a serious talk with Alex would convince her that she was not and never had been a pariah.

* * * *

John disappeared with Faith's half-boots, leaving her to pace the drawing room, torn between hope and despair. How had he twisted her into implying that her limp stood between her and marriage. Even if it disappeared – and she didn't believe for a minute it was possible – the polite world would still shun her.

She was an unknown with marginal breeding, unfashionably red hair, no accomplishments aside from knowledge that would make the average lady swoon, and an inability to remain quiet when faced with stupidity. That last might be forgivable in a dowager, but not in someone of her age.

Yielding to temptation would doom John to ridicule for the rest of his life.

She should have slipped away the first time they'd stopped to change horses after leaving Westcourt. He would have forgotten her in days if she hadn't come here. But sharing his house and his bed had strengthened his determination. It was a mistake she must rectify immediately. Promise or not, she must leave.

The moment John fell asleep tonight, she would carry her trunks to his office. Then she could flag down a hackney – she'd seen several pass through the square. The driver would direct her to a pawn shop.

She hated leaving John to face Chester alone, but the tale he'd started made it necessary. Too many people would try to prove which rumor was right. If society found her here without a chaperon, the scandal would destroy him. Most gentlemen kept mistresses, but the rules were clear. The woman never lived under his roof, and he never flaunted her before respectable matrons.

John returned and held out her half-boots. "Try these."

Faith frowned. He had added an ungainly inch-high platform to the left sole, making it look as awkward as pattens.

"I know it doesn't look like much," he said, sighing. "But try it. If it works, a bootmaker can devise a more elegant and more flexible shoe."

"Very well." She tied them on, wondering if the ribbons could support the additional weight. And it *was* weight. She nearly stumbled on the first step.

"Take my arm," he suggested. "It is bound to feel odd at first. The sole will never be as flexible as the other one. But with practice, you can walk smoothly, and you will no longer tug crookedly on your hip."

"It's heavy," she said, taking his hand.

"This one is, because the only material I had was wood. Leather with a hollow center will create a lighter product."

She circled the room once on his arm, then let go and tried it alone. The oddness receded as she became accustomed to the new feel. And he was right about her hip. Already it felt better.

By the third circuit, she'd discovered that short, ladylike steps eliminated any stiffness. They also made her glide smoothly. When she caught sight of herself in the mirror, she gasped. "I look like a lady!"

"Of course you do. You've always looked like a lady, Faith." He pulled her against him. "A perfect lady. A lady I love to distraction."

"Not now." She covered his mouth, unwilling to listen to whatever lies he'd devised to force her into marriage. "Let me celebrate walking limp-free."

"And how do you suggest we celebrate?" He nipped her nose.

She smiled provocatively. "I once found a very suggestive engraving tucked into a history of Rome. Shall we see if it is possible?"

Chapter Twenty

My marriage seems so short now. How can I go on without Richard? People hammer at me night and day, and there is no one I can trust. I try to ignore them, as Richard would want. Going back is impossible. But how am I to endure without husband or son?

Duchess of Westfield, Sept 1787

With his employees gone, John settled at his desk to sketch designs for the gentlemen's club. It had been years since he'd last had the luxury of working without distractions.

But his solitude didn't last long. He'd been there barely an hour when someone pounded on the window.

Simmons.

He'd break the glass if given half a chance, so John opened his private door.

"Bastard!" Simmons shouted, slamming John into the wall as he surged into the hallway. "How dare you pass yourself off as a nobleman. You are nothing but a filthy tradesman."

"If this is how gentlemen behave, then I would love to renounce any connection. Sit down, Simmons," he added, ducking a swing, then all but pushing him into

his office.

"You dare to touch—"

"*Sit down!* Do you think I *want* to have anything to do with you? But circumstances leave me no choice."

"Hah!" He spun away from the chair. "I won't let you get away with fabricating evidence, sirrah. You shan't steal Faith so easily."

"I can't steal what was never yours. She made it clear enough that she wants nothing to do with you."

"Because you made her think you could offer a title."

"Sit down." The cold fury in John's voice finally made Simmons comply. "You insult Miss Harper with every word. She turned you down at Westcourt and again in town before she had any inkling I might be the missing heir. It's time you grew up, sir."

"You dare—"

"Much as I might wish otherwise, it appears that I am Westfield."

"Do you really expect me to believe that bothers you?"

"Your beliefs don't matter. What *does* matter is that one of the many duties I will face is responsibility for a pack of relatives I've never known, the least likeable of which is you. I strongly suggest you take Miss Harper's advice and find a job, for I detest leeches."

"I *have* as job. I'm a poet."

"Until you can support your own establishment with the proceeds of your writing, you are a leech. I will never house an artist unless he shows talent, and I've seen no evidence of talent in you. And don't cite that weak chest. I've seen no evidence of that, either."

"I've always been weak. I nearly died as a child."

"I don't doubt it, but many a sickly youth grows into a robust man. And many more are sickly only in their mother's eyes. If you expect to waste the rest of your life in idleness, then you'd best pray I escape this title. Or find yourself another patron. Because if the Westfield title comes to me, my first act will be to find you a post, then wash my hands of you."

Simmons's mouth worked several times, but no sound emerged. Finally he drew himself erect. "Don't think you can get away with this, Lascar. Dealing with publishers has kept me too busy to consult Mr. Goodman, but I can assure you that he will expose you for the fraud you are. You'll spend the rest of your life

in Botany Bay.”

He slammed out harder than he'd entered.

John followed to check the locks, then shook his head and returned to work. Simmons was worse than a leech. Perhaps he should send the fellow to India or the Caribbean where he wouldn't be able to annoy Faith.

John bit back a sigh when Treburn again interrupted dinner, yet another letter on his salver. Faith had been right that servants knew everything. His staff had become insufferably formal, treating him like royalty. He had no doubt they were already rubbing their improved consequence into the noses of neighboring staffs, especially the ones who had looked down on those who served a mere architect.

God deliver him from snobs...

“From Lord Portland, Your Grace.” Treburn bowed obsequiously.

John waved him away before cracking the seal. He hated people who hovered. There would be mass departures if this kept up.

“Don't scowl at him, John,” said Faith once they were again alone, then cursed her sharpness. It did no good to be irritated at him. He was coping as well as could be expected.

“He's changed.”

She caught his hand before he could slap the table in frustration. “He can't help it. Servants have a very keen sense of what is due their masters.”

“I know their standing derives from mine, but—”

“Accept it, John. Arguing serves no purpose. Servants have a more rigid hierarchy than even the stuffiest aristocrats, and they don't ignore consequence. No one knows that better than I, for I was raised by them. The Westcourt staff loved your father because he was a good man. They adored you because you were a delightful child. They prayed that you would return safely, and they tried to keep your inheritance safe until you did, but they stayed on after the duchess's death mainly because leaving would have diminished their credit. They had no chance of moving to another ducal household.”

“That may be true, but it is ridiculous to treat me different because of an accident of birth I neither asked for nor enjoy. I am the same man I was a week

ago.”

“Are you?”

He glared, unwilling to argue.

“I don’t imply that you are better or worse, but shock changes people. You cannot look at the world in the same way. You ask different questions when making decisions. You even see your own past in a different light.”

“Perhaps I do – or will once I have time to think.”

She nodded. “You are as aware as I of how your position compares to those around you. No craftsman can succeed without knowing who he must defer to and who he can dominate. You are good to your servants, and they appreciate it. You pay them well, and I’m sure they appreciate that, too. Now you’ve handed them a bonus. A duke’s title adds benefits they will enjoy wherever they go. You can’t blame them for reveling in it, especially since it was unexpected.”

John cursed, though he knew she was right. No one would treat him the same again. Nor would they speak honestly to him. He must now weigh every word against the speaker’s motives.

“What does Portland say?” Faith asked, glancing at his letter.

Sighing, he unfolded the page. “He will call in half an hour, accompanied by the witnesses Cunningham requested.”

“That was fast.”

“He’d sent a man to Westcourt to seek old servants the moment he suspected I was the duke. They just arrived.” He could never accuse Alex of slow thinking, but he wished the man was a little less efficient. Keeping up with all these surprises made him dizzy.

“The trustees will be back in town, then.”

“Undoubtedly, but until my identity is proved, they cannot discuss the duke’s business with me. Nor will they wish to. They need every hour they can muster to devise explanations for their laxity and to replace missing funds.”

“Which means their first call will be on Chester to demand restitution.” She bit her lip.

“It can’t be helped. You said yourself that he knows about me by now. Simmons certainly does.”

“But another demand for money can’t be good.”

“There is nothing we can do about Chester until I have the title,” he reminded her.

She sighed. "What witnesses did Portland find?"

"He doesn't say, but we'll find out soon enough." He tackled his tart.

"Does he always work this fast?" asked Faith, choosing a cream from the sweets tray.

"He didn't when I first met him, but he was retired then, exhausted from years of chasing spies. He had a reputation at the Home Office for determination and efficiency. His recent investigations confirm that."

"I hope he shares our fears about Chester."

"How can he not? He read the diary. And I would wager he saw the trustees the moment they returned, so he will know the full story of Chester's defalcations, too."

* * * *

Alex arrived promptly, accompanied by five people. John recognized two of them. Ignoring Ned for the moment, he seated the other, bowing over her hand.

"It's been a long time, Mrs. Parker. How is Wesley?" She and her son had been childhood neighbors.

"Good. He drives a delivery wagon for Grayson Imports. His four sons are the delight of my old age."

"Not old," he swore, squeezing her fingers. "You've a good many years in you yet, I'd wager."

"Too many shocks like this, and I won't. Who would have thought I smacked the behind of a duke all those years ago?" She'd often looked after him when Mrs. Frobisher was ailing.

"I deserved it." He glanced around, but Faith was murmuring with Ned instead of pouring coffee, so he turned back to Alex.

Alex motioned the others forward. "This is Mrs. Truitt," he said, presenting a stout woman with callused hands. "She was the nursery under-maid before wedding the innkeeper's son. They now run the Blue Stone in Westcourt Village."

"I can't believe it's you," she exclaimed. "His lordship's claims seemed so fantastic, but you have your father's cleft chin. He was so proud of you. Spent as much time in the nursery as in his office."

"Mrs. Truitt," John replied, unable to think of a better response. Perhaps if he'd studied the pictures in the Westcourt gallery this wouldn't be such a shock. He remembered seeing the Blue Stone across the village green from the church. "Your inn is lovely," he said now, unsticking his tongue. "Blue shutters, as I

recall, and a neat yard. I hope the trustees inspected the stables during their visit."

"*You* sent them." Her face lit. "Truitt insisted Chester had finally forced them to listen, but I knew it wasn't possible. That man is evil!"

He nodded before he could catch himself. "We'll straighten out any problems once this other business is concluded."

She bobbed a curtsy and backed away as Alex drew the next witness forward, an elderly woman with rheumatic hands, a face like a dried apple, and a stoop requiring support from a cane. But he recognized her eyes. He'd last seen them as his mother's life faded away.

"This is Molly Dingle's sister, Rose Kemp," Alex said. "She married the chandler across from her father's tobacco shop and occasionally looked after Molly's son."

Recognition tickled John's mind in a quick flash of a woman, hands on her hips, berating him over a broken bowl. "Mrs. Kemp," he said, bowing over her hand. "You bear a strong likeness to my— Molly."

"And you've grown quite tall." She craned her neck to meet his gaze. "We worried a bit, for you was small for your age. Why my William was inches taller for all he was a year younger."

"I was younger, too." He shook his head, still unused to that oddity. If Soane had known—

"You don't say!" She laughed. "How like Molly, though she'd have raised fewer brows by saying so. But it does me heart proud to see what you've come to."

"I'm sorry I didn't notify you of her death." He grasped her free hand, battling renewed grief. "I'm afraid I had no memory of her family by then." His throat closed.

"No need to fret," she said comfortably. "His lordship explained how it was. And it was like Molly to hide what she didn't want known. Always swore she'd be important one day, and she was right."

"I'm sorry just the same." But it was true that Molly had hidden much. Her only mistake had been not anticipating that she might die. If she'd left him a letter...

Again he recalled her desperate attempts to speak in those final hours. Now that he knew the truth, he

could pick out several messages beyond his identity. A warning against Chester. Orders that he return to the Dingles – she'd probably feared that he might fall into the workhouse without help.

Faith noted his hesitation and moved to Mrs. Kemp's side. "Come and sit, ma'am," she murmured. "Would you like coffee or tea?"

John watched her hobble away, then turned back to Alex.

"And this is Bernard," said Alex.

Bernard was in his sixties, with gray hair and a careworn face. But he stood ramrod straight, his eyes sparkling with intelligence.

John held out his hand. "I owe you much. Without your misdirection, they would have followed, thwarting Her Grace's plan."

"You are alive. That is payment enough." His grip was firm.

"Hardly. Chester tried to ruin you. It leaves a huge debt."

"Not huge. I've enjoyed many of my students."

John nodded, liking that the man had made the best of his situation. Bitter whiners were not to his taste. "Would you consider returning to secretarial work? I will need help from someone familiar with the ducal business."

"It must have changed considerably in thirty years."

"Undoubtedly, but you still know more about it than I do. Once this business is complete, I'd like to discuss it."

"I would be honored." He suddenly looked ten years younger. "You've your mother's eyes, though your brows turn up like the duke's. A delightful combination."

"Thank you." He turned to Alex. "What now?"

"A necessary formality. Each has already described your scar before witnesses. It is distinctive enough that I have no doubt they know you, but they must actually confirm that it is yours before they can swear to your identity. Your study would be the most suitable location, I believe. If you will be so kind..." He gestured to the door.

Refusing to grimace, John headed for his study to bare his behind.

* * * *

Faith forced calm over senses that were again

whirling. Or tried.

How could she have been so blind? Her instincts had warned her the moment John had walked into Westcourt, but she'd ignored them.

Idiot!

How often had she studied the portraits in the gallery, particularly those of the eighth duke and duchess? She knew his chin and eyes, knew the odd way the duke's brows turned up. But she'd believed Montrose was dead and hadn't even entertained the possibility that John might be related in a natural way – the sixth duke had reputedly sampled every female for miles, giving half the villagers ducal blood.

Only a naïve fool would have attributed that niggling sense of familiarity to passing him unnoticed on the street. Talk about absurd!

John was a man who demanded notice. She could never have walked past without wondering who he was.

Her willful blindness would cost her dearly. If she'd questioned his identity from the beginning, she could have started the identification process before she'd sacrificed her virtue. John would not feel honor-bound to wed her, and she could have found a position that would keep her content. Surely there was someone who might appreciate an educated companion who could also run a household.

But she hadn't, and it was too late to repine.

At least Portland's efficiency would settle John's identity quickly, so she could leave tonight with a clear conscience. Portland could keep John safe and see that Chester paid for his crimes.

Treburn summoned the witnesses. As they filed out, Faith brought Portland a glass of wine. "Do you know where Chester is?" she murmured.

"I have a man watching him. His knocker remains down, and he is avoiding his clubs, which I find suspicious. He may be planning some trick for which he can avoid blame by claiming to be out of town."

"Or he may be ducking creditors. Bitstaff wants payment of that vowel, and the trustees will demand repayment for what he stole. But how is he spreading slander about John if he doesn't go out?"

"By post. He sent a dozen letters from Westcourt."

"Which makes his charges sound more plausible." She nodded.

"A second batch went out from Oxford, implying that he's headed west."

"How—"

"Valet. His man is not currently in town."

Faith glanced at the drawing room door, which remained firmly closed. "I fear what Chester will do now that John has blunted the gossip. Murder is no stretch."

"He won't have long to consider it." Portland set his empty glass on a table. "His money woes are the least of his problems. I've discovered half a dozen accidents involving men who irritated him, and I've barely begun to look. Two of the victims are powerful lords."

"Chester will never change his ways," she warned quietly. "Something isn't right with his head. If he discovers your interest, he will move faster against John and attack you as well."

"I know, which is why I have a man watching this house and another outside my own. John will be safe. I will meet with the trustees tomorrow and press for an arrest. I've found no evidence that he hires others to carry out his plots – which is why no one noticed them previously – so holding him in prison should prevent further trouble."

"Thank you." Smiling in relief, she settled behind the coffee tray and poured a cup for herself.

Mrs. Truitt returned, her eyes aglow. "It's him," she breathed. "It's really him, Miss Harper. I'll never forget the day he fell into the fire. Thought I'd lose my post over it. I'd taken him down to the kitchen, for he dearly loved Cook's scones. We'll never taste the like again, now that she's gone." She sniffed. "Othmar liked his scones dripping with butter and honey. Not a speck of clotted cream or jam would he allow."

"That hasn't changed," said Faith.

"Don't that beat all." She shook her head. "But that day... Othmar had the puppy with him. I swear I didn't take my eye off them for a minute. Not even half a minute. A comment to Cook was all. But when I turned back, the dog was racing off to sniff the roast and Othmar right behind. He tripped. Tripped often in those days. His feet could never quite keep up with his energy." She again shook her head. "Fell in the fireplace and caught his shirt on fire. 'Twasn't 'til we tore it off that we saw the real damage. The ruckus Cook raised..."

"I can imagine." Cook always overreacted to injuries, as she had cause to know.

"But I can't believe he's alive. We'd given up hope. I'm pleased as punch I can finally rub Smith's nose in his own black theories – he swore up and down that the duchess lied to cover Othmar's death and retain her own standing. Lord Chester would have seized any excuse to toss her out. But I never believed him. Not for a moment. 'You mark my words, that woman died of a broken heart,' I told him often enough. Yes, she had a chill, but Othmar had been gone so long that—" She broke off. "But there's nothing we can do about her now. Thank God he's alive. I've been terrified these last years that the title would go to Lord Chester. He's not the man his father was, by all accounts. Nor his brother, either. Why the tales—"

"Coffee?" asked Faith, interrupting. Mrs. Truitt could talk the sun around without drawing breath.

"Don't mind if I do." She cocked her head. "What are you doing here anyway? I won't believe the filth that Lord Chester was claiming, especially about our dear duke, but it does look odd, my dear."

"I know, but I discovered that Lord Chester was stealing from the estate accounts and felt I had to bring the evidence to the trustees. They arranged to replace your stables a year ago, but Chester kept the funds for himself. The church roof, too."

"You don't say!"

"I do. Since I hadn't the wherewithal for a hotel room, Mr. Lascar offered to help. A trifle unseemly, of course, but now that he turns out to be my guardian, there is no trouble. He's finding me a post."

"Ought to bring you out in town – or wed you himself."

"Impossible."

"Not in the least. You're worth a dozen of Lady Catherine, my dear, though she'll never admit it. Nose in the air every second of the day. The eighth duke never liked her. Some spat from childhood, or so they say, but he was a canny judge of character despite his youth. So don't you listen to Lady Catherine, my girl. Jealous from the moment she laid eyes on you."

"Absolutely," said Ned, joining them. "And isn't her nose out of joint these days!" He grinned. "Between the trustees and Lord Portland's messenger, she's fit to be tied. And when I tell her it's true—"

“What’s true.”

“That the duke’s been found, of course. I started as a nursery footman, you know, and was with Nurse when they carried him up from the kitchen. What a day that was! But he survived and thrived, from all accounts. And to think he was actually at Westcourt and we didn’t even know it.”

“One of fate’s ironies,” said Faith. Would Portland have found him if she hadn’t had to escape Bitstaff? Without the duchess’s diary, they might never have known. She might even have succumbed to temptation and wed the architect. He would be less hurt by her deficiencies than a duke would.

Ned rattled on, relating the events of the last few days, aided by Mrs. Truitt.

Cook’s funeral had been well-attended despite Chester’s orders to the contrary. She’d been renowned for her pastries before illness had forced her to avoid ovens – heat too often brought on spells.

With Faith gone, Catherine had to see after the household herself. She wasn’t doing a good job of it. One of the maids had left rather than face her constant displeasure. But at least Chester had not yet turned off the staff, not even when service disintegrated after he’d tossed Faith out – she cringed at the risk they’d taken in showing their displeasure. At least with John in charge, they would be safe.

Bernard returned, tears in his eyes. “Proof that Her Grace chose right, though I wish I could have been with him all these years. The duke had arranged that I accompany—”

“The duke would have approved her change in plans,” said Faith. “With Mr. Goodman in the house, you could never have reached Scotland without being caught. Your silence about Francine’s destination was the greatest service you could offer. And it worked. She saw to it that he learned all that was necessary.”

“How do you know so much?”

“The duchess kept a diary. She hid it just before her death. I found it about a year ago but said nothing because I assumed he’d died in childhood – it was the only explanation I could imagine for why he hadn’t returned. If Lord Chester gained the title, my position would have been worse, so I selfishly hid the diary, never suspecting that it could have located him long ago.”

"Perhaps this was better," said Bernard slowly. "He is more able to handle himself now, and Lord Chester will be occupied defending his own actions." His eyes showed understanding and a trace of fear.

"We can only hope so."

Before the others could ask questions, Mrs. Kemp returned. "Little Arnold. I never thought to see him again after Molly left. She always held herself above the rest of us, but I never suspected she was raising a duke." She shook her head. "'Tis sorry I am she died, though. I'm the only one left of the six of us."

Portland cleared his throat. "That settles it, then. Mrs. Parker knows him even without the scar, and she identified Molly Dingle as the woman she knew as his mother. So we can trace his life from cradle to present. Once you give your oath tomorrow, it will be done. My carriage will collect you in the morning."

"He will wish to thank you," said Faith as several faces fell. "Plan on coming here once the legalities are concluded." She would leave word for Treburn when she slipped out tonight.

Portland's eyes thanked her as he herded his charges away. Her invitation satisfied everyone while giving John the time he needed to digest this latest step.

* * * *

John clung to Faith as they headed upstairs. Every time he thought he'd accepted his fate, something else happened to overwhelm him. This time it had been Mrs. Truitt.

She'd broken down in tears the moment she'd seen his scar, gasping out a mishmash of thanks, praise, memory, and imprecation that had made little sense. He hadn't known what to do. Words did nothing to soothe her, and he could hardly slide his arms around her when he was half naked.

Fortunately, Treburn had ushered her out.

Yet Ned hadn't been much better, though at least he'd shed no tears. It raised questions about his return to Westcourt. He must meet dozens of servants, tenants, villagers, neighbors. How would they react? Euphoria wouldn't survive long against thirty years of grievances. Replacing the inn's stable was something he understood, but how could he evaluate complaints that didn't involve buildings? He knew nothing about other subjects.

He faced other problems, too. A duke did not relate to others in the same way as an architect. Every friendship, every acquaintanceship would change. And Chester...

Thank God for Faith. She was the one rock in his madly whirling world.

"That went well," she said once they reached his room.

"Will it be enough?"

"It must." She turned suddenly somber eyes on him. "Portland has witnesses from every stage of your life. He is even taking Soane's valet with him tomorrow – the man helped you dress for the interview that won you that scholarship. Even the most fastidious gentlemen will find no holes. And they must agree that continued uncertainty is dangerous."

"Very well. I will cease thinking about it until tomorrow. And for tonight, I checked the locks myself, so you can cease fretting." He pulled her into a heated kiss.

Passion exploded, stronger than ever. Frustration transformed into desire so powerful he could barely stand. The flood he'd once watched sweep a wharf out to sea was a mere trickle compared to the torrent of his love. With Faith in his arms, he could accomplish miracles – even convince her to wed him.

Or so it felt tonight.

"Faith." Her taste intoxicated him with the flavor he craved more than his next breath. She staggered as his hands raced over her, removing clothes. This wasn't a night to be gentle. Storms were bursting inside him, shattering any hope of control. Desperation drove him. A desperation he finally understood.

Those birthday letters from his mother had nearly broken him. The love. The poignancy. The connection they formed with his past...

She'd written of the Willowby family. Not of its individuals, though they appeared often, but of its history, its strengths, and its weaknesses. Thus he now knew that Willowby men conceived one great love in their lives. Once formed, it dominated everything they did. That love superceded custom and manners and society's dictates.

His father's love had been for his mother, raising brows that only his title stilled. But Willowby

obsessions were not always for women. A great-great uncle had loved thrills, especially those found around a gaming table. A cousin had loved tea in all its varieties, boring everyone he met with perorations on his special blends.

Chester loved power.

His own love was already established, and it wasn't architecture, which surprised him. It was Faith. Nothing would keep him from having her. Not as a possession, for that would diminish her value, but as a partner.

It was a concept he would not have considered before reading his mother's diary, but his parents had so clearly been partners that it seemed inevitable that he and Faith would be, too. Her intelligence was too useful to waste.

"I need you now. Right now."

"Yes."

Faith nearly melted under his onslaught, but she was determined to wrest from him as much pleasure as possible. By morning she would be gone. Lovemaking would never be the same again.

What she felt for him was special. She knew it, deep in her soul. He completed her in a way she'd not thought possible, filling spots that had remained empty since her parents' deaths.

She loved him. Forever. But she could not have him. Not because of breeding or deformity or any other excuse. Couples had overcome such obstacles before, but only a deep, abiding love made it possible. A marriage where she loved and he did not would be worse than anything she could imagine. And she could not give him what he needed most. So she must leave.

But first she had tonight.

They came together in desperation, violent as any thunderstorm. Heat flowed straight to her belly, then burst out the top of her head with the force of a steam engine. Electricity sizzled along her nerves, smoking her senses as his hands raced over her body.

She rolled, fighting to give as much as she got. Over and over they scrambled, wrecking the bed as they fought for pleasure, climaxing together in a burst of joy greater than anything that had come before.

"Wonderful," she panted as he lay gasping for breath next to her. "Glorious." But she wasn't yet satisfied. These memories must last a lifetime. Somehow, she

must revive him enough to continue.

Her hand trailed down his chest, lower and lower yet, until she dragged her nails along his length and grasped him.

He stirred.

“Witch,” he panted as she squeezed.

“Don’t ever forget it.”

She stroked and caressed, thrilling to power as he returned to life. This final encounter deserved everything she had, so she opened her heart, letting her core revel in her love for him.

“Slow down,” he murmured. “This time we’ll savor.”

He rolled, pinning her beneath him while he indulged in a deep kiss, mesmerizing her, transfixing her with tongue and teeth, dragging her into a vortex of feeling divorced from the world.

Her mind melted as he tasted her lips, her throat, her breasts, casting her adrift on a sensual sea until she was so enervated that even the tiniest motion was impossible.

Stupefied, she tried to think – and failed. This wasn’t the overwhelming passion she’d felt earlier. Yet passion was there, in the subtlety of heat and touch, gathering power until she was ready to explode.

“Now,” she begged, forcing her hand to his shoulder. “Please!”

“Not yet.” John eased back, holding her on the edge, savoring the anticipation. It was a struggle. Wild beasts clawed at his guts, demanding relief. Never had he felt such a violent surge of hunger, not even half an hour ago before the climax that had nearly killed him.

But first he had to bind her.

Her lovemaking tonight was totally uninhibited. Such a gift had to come from love. Somehow, he would make her admit it. Somehow he would convince her of his.

If he lived long enough.

Her skin flushed bright with passion. Her heart beat frantically in time with his own.

“Now,” he commanded, sliding into her welcoming sheath. “You’re mine. Only mine. Now and forever.”

She clenched around him, her eyes going hot. But stubborn denial still lurked in their depths.

Damn Catherine for convincing her she was ineligible. He ought to wring the woman’s neck. His campaign would take longer than he wanted, for Faith

would find it difficult to abandon beliefs learned over a lifetime.

But she would know his love if it was the last thing he did, he vowed as she writhed beneath him. She would believe in her worth and accept her destiny as he'd had to accept his.

Faith was his. Forever.

He crushed her mouth, abandoning all control as he pounded into her, reveling in her heat, her passion, and the dizziness that drove the last thought from his mind.

Her fingers clawed his back, driving him onward until they shattered together and fell into blackness.

Chapter Twenty-one

Montrose is three today. He thrives, yet I am empty. I know nothing of his life. Losing him hurts worse than I ever dreamed, though he would be dead had he stayed.

I remind myself daily that it was the only way. Not knowing

where he is torments me, yet it controls my weakness. I would surely go to him if I could... Time creeps by. His puppy has long since grown. Buster sleeps on my bed, but it is not the same...

Duchess of Westfield, Apr. 1788

Chester slipped through the mews, careful not to disturb the horses. No one must suspect his presence – which was why he'd dispatched the vagrant loitering on the corner. The man had seen nothing before a blow knocked him flat, so it was safe enough. Or would be soon.

Fate had played him the worst trick yet. Everything had been set. Portland should have found evidence in Le Havre that Francine had passed through a week after leaving Westcourt, accompanied by a child and headed for her family's home near Avignon. Judicious inquiries would then have discovered that the child had perished of smallpox in 1788 and that Francine herself had died during the revolution. Tragic, but hardly unusual.

But Portland had betrayed him. The idiot had not gone near Le Havre in spite of compelling clues that should have led him there. It was frustrating enough that Portland had insisted on following the same stale

path others had trod thirty years ago, for it delayed resolution of the problem. But then...

How the devil had he picked up Francine's real trail after all these years? It wasn't right.

Fate's laughter rang in his ears, standing his hair on end and rippling chills across his skin.

He shook it away.

Fate remained on his side. She had to. She had always supported his struggle to claim his rightful place in the world. The dukedom needed a strong man at the helm, one who understood power and how to wield it. Only *he* could do so. Not his meek father, who felt comfortable only in the company of weaklings. Not his reformist brother, who actually advocated letting shopkeepers and laborers plan policy. And never an upstart who knew nothing about anything. Right-minded gentleman everywhere would thank him for preventing such a travesty.

So he must settle matters personally. Tonight would culminate a lifetime of battles to achieve his destiny. He'd paid too often for the mean-spirited attacks of others. Richard had always hated him, finally conspiring with their father to send him to Harrow instead of Eton, where every duke had been schooled. Fury still burned in his breast over the insult.

Then Richard had rushed a girl barely out of the schoolroom to the altar, planting a brat in her belly before the marriage lines were dry. Chester had been stuck in school with no way to protest. For nearly a year, he'd been locked in black melancholy and might have remained there if fate had not reminded him of his destiny.

It had started with a gaming debt. Melancholy had eroded his concentration until even using his own cards had not sufficed to win. He'd had to apply to Richard for an advance on his allowance.

Richard had refused. Worse, he'd vowed to cancel Chester's allowance when the school term ended two weeks hence, then ordered him to accept a secretarial post with the East India Company.

Chester had been livid. How could he live in servitude when the blood of dukes flowed in his veins? Fate knew he deserved better – as she'd proved more than once. Hadn't she struck down Haskell after the oaf discovered who had caused the accident that killed the seventh duke? The fool had actually threatened to

tell the headmaster, so he'd deserved to be punished. It wasn't Chester's fault that he'd died. Fate had made that judgment. As she'd done on other occasions. So she would certainly aid him now.

Gripping his jar, he slipped into the yard behind the upstart's house. Never would he allow his birthright to pass to another. With or without fate, it would end tonight. Success came to those who grasped it.

A hand suddenly spun him around.

"What are you up to, Chester?" demanded Bitstaff, his glare cutting through the dim starlight. "No more excuses. Either redeem your vow, or explain yourself to the steward at White's."

"Take your hands off me. You traded that debt for Miss Harper. I owe you nothing."

"I traded it for a virgin – which she was not. Since you reneged on our deal, the original debt stands. I need the money to satisfy my own creditors, so you will pay now."

"Nothing was said of virginity, and you can't prove otherwise." He casually wedged his jar into a hedge. Bitstaff was the next problem he'd meant to address, but he was amenable to a change of plans. The splints and sling hampering that broken arm would make retribution easy.

Bitstaff actually laughed. "My word will be quite enough now that the title is out of your reach, Chester. Accept fate and move on."

"I make my own fate." He planted a fist deep in Bitstaff's gut, then followed with a facer that would have laid even Jackson out cold. Bitstaff went down like the ox he resembled, moaning as he landed on his arm.

"This is your own fault," Chester murmured, jerking Bitstaff's head back to snap the neck. "Drunken fools deserve whatever trouble they find. You never should have followed me tonight."

He recovered his jar, then stared at his erstwhile friend a long moment. This was a message from fate. She had not only delivered Bitstaff neatly into his hands, but she'd provided the perfect explanation for two deaths. Lascar would take the blame for Bitstaff, and vice versa. All he had to do was properly position the bodies, then spread word of Bitstaff's obsession with Miss Harper. Everyone knew that she and Lascar had fled Westcourt together. Few would be surprised

that her two paramours had fought.

Smiling, he verified that no one had overheard Bitstaff's bluster, then headed for the house. Fate was in his pocket tonight. Lascar would trouble him no more.

Faith startled awake, heart pounding above the echo of an unexpected noise.

Or was it an echo? The house was silent. Even the servants were deep in dreams.

Probably her conscience, she decided. Despite her efforts to remain awake, she'd dozed off. But she'd awakened before it was too late.

Dim light from the square's gas lamps illuminated John's face. Unlike most people, he slept with his windows open, uncaring that night air killed thousands every year. If she *had* heard a sound, it had likely come from outside.

Now that her departure was imminent, she couldn't move. Pain already ripped her from head to toe. Cold followed, impervious to the heat radiating from his body. How could she live without him?

Selfish! she chided herself as he shifted in sleep, drawing her closer.

Tears tickled her eyes. She had to leave. Love meant putting his needs first, even if that meant sacrificing her own.

All too soon he would discover how society penalized those who broke its rules. Everyone had reviled the duchess for abandoning her son. Now they would revile the son for neglecting his duty. Eventually they would accept his ignorance of that duty, and once Chester's crimes came to light, they would even accept the duchess's secrecy. But it would take time, and if John lost his temper when people criticized the duchess or disparaged Francine...

But if Faith remained at his side, acceptance would never happen. Many would recall that her family considered her a bastard. None would accept that her breeding was good enough for a duke, even without that stain. And when she failed in her duty...

Chester's accusations would make it worse. Bitstaff would embellish the charges to avenge his own grievances. So she must leave.

She caressed John's chest one last time. He faced a fierce battle for acceptance. Those who judged solely

on breeding would scoff at his ignorance, swearing that lords could never hide their superiority. People must have known and urged him to take up his duty. That he hadn't done so proved he was either dishonorable or an imposter.

Others would shake their heads over John's sad story, but avoid him because he espoused ideas they found distasteful. The blood might run true, but he would never be a typical aristocrat. His approach to life was too democratic and his goals too plebian. He lacked the network of friendships lords built during their school days, which would greatly reduce his power. People could ignore him with impunity.

Thus he faced a bumpy future. If he took his seat in Parliament, his voice would go unheard unless he sided with the most powerful leaders – but his beliefs did not mesh with those men's. If he abjured Parliament, he would be derided for again ignoring duty. Eventually such antagonism would pass, but if he didn't conform, it might take decades, making his children suspect as well.

She could not add her own troubles to his. She had nothing in common with ladies. Not breeding. Not training. Not ideas or behavior. She would raise eyebrows at best and draw cuts from the most rigid. John had no idea how horrid ladies could be when someone defied their standards. Catherine wasn't as unusual as he wanted to believe.

John would eventually earn respect from his peers, but society's ladies were another matter. Adherence to their dictates was their primary criteria for acceptance, even stronger than blood. The best way he could satisfy *them* was to ask their assistance in finding a suitable wife. They would never choose Faith.

So she had to leave. A man and woman became one when they wed. Her behavior would reflect on him, good and bad. What tarnished one reputation, tarnished both. Eventually he would regret subjecting himself to yet another burden, even in the name of honor.

Watching the man she loved fall into despair would destroy her. And he would eventually meet someone he could love. Might even do so tomorrow. Once he had the title, dozens of girls would vie for a position as his wife – the Season was barely underway, so there were plenty of candidates at hand. Well-bred girls with

proper educations, who were not on the shelf, and who conformed to society's expectations.

The pain made her shudder, but she locked it away. He must meet his destiny, just as she must meet hers. She had chosen her course that day at Westcourt. There was no going back.

The arm across her waist loosened as he slipped deeper into sleep. She inched toward the edge, letting it slide onto the mattress.

No reaction.

A three-quarter moon lifted above the rooftops, adding enough light that she had no need for a candle. She smoothed her pillow, then collected her clothes, removing all trace that she had been here. She was stooping to retrieve a stocking that had fallen behind a chair, when the door creaked open.

Chester poked his head around the frame, stared at John for a long moment, then smiled.

Chester? How had he got in? Where was Portland's guard?

"Out!" Faith grabbed the poker as she lunged for the door.

Something crashed behind her as she swung the poker.

Chester jumped back and pulled the door shut.

She jerked it open.

He slammed it shut.

She tugged it open again, but couldn't both hold it open and hit Chester with the poker. Shadows darted past her face.

"Out!" she screamed again, poking at him as they fought for possession of the door. "Wake up, John!" she added. "Summon the staff. Chester's here."

Chester cursed, bracing his foot against the frame. He nearly wrenched the door from her grasp, but she again pulled it open. John groaned behind her..

Another shadow buzzed past her face. A bee. Many bees. Clouds of them rose from the fireplace.

"You bastard!" She yanked the door from his grasp, kicked him in the groin, then raised the poker.

"Bitch!" Even as he doubled over, he knocked her down and finally slammed the door shut.

John pulled her to her feet.

John!

"Back in bed," she ordered frantically. "Under the quilt. Chester tossed a jar of bees in here."

“Bees?” His eyes flashed white as he backed into a wall.

“Lots of them.” Their buzzing cut through the terror ringing in her ears. “Quick! Wrap this around you.” She grabbed the coverlet, shook it briskly, then dropped it over his head. “Hurry!”

Retrieving the poker, she tugged on the door.

Nothing. He’d jammed the lock.

“Your dressing room,” she panted. “Move!”

“No. There is no other exit, and the bees have already found it.” He wrapped the coverlet around his body, leaving his arms free, then tried the latch himself. When it wouldn’t budge, he shoved her out of the way and picked up a chair.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when he smashed the chair into the door. Once. Twice. Bees blundered about the room, furious at being disturbed. Some escaped out the open windows. Others banged against the glass, seeking the light. But the rest...

She squashed one as it stung her arm. “For God’s sake, hide before they kill you!” Grabbing a pillow, she stunned several headed for John, then smashed others that had landed nearby.

“Can’t,” he panted, wielding the chair in a frenzied attack on the door. “Too dangerous. Have to escape.” He finally punched a hole in one of the door panels, letting him reach through and free the latch. “Hurry.”

Faith tumbled into the hall behind him, then slammed the door. To keep more bees from escaping, she stuffed the pillow into the hole.

“We need light,” said John.

“There’s a candle in my room. Don’t move.”

It took only a minute to fetch light and another pillow, but she nearly dropped both when she spotted a bee crawling along John’s arm. He flicked it off, smashing it with the coverlet. But that exposed the rest of him...

“Go in my room,” she ordered, smashing her pillow into two bees. “I’ll find the rest that escaped.”

“You can’t fight them alone,” he grunted, killing another as it zoomed toward the candle.

“Stand back.” She set the light on the hall table, then attacked everything that moved. There were more bees out here than she’d expected. And they were more aggressive than they should have been.

Chester would have taken no chances, she realized.

He must have brought the entire hive, including the queen. Nothing riled bees worse than danger to their queen.

The light helped draw them away, but her heart remained in her throat, choking her whenever one flew near John. All it would take was one sting...

"He won't win," she vowed even as she wondered why Treburn was taking so long. She'd summoned him from her room.

Whoosh! Her pillow smashed three bees against the wall. *Wham!*

"Damn you, hide before one stings you!" she snapped as John swung the coverlet.

"Not unless you come with me." He crushed another invader. "You aren't even dressed, Faith."

"Neither are you, but I'll live. You won't. Don't you dare take such a risk."

"Watch out. There's one on your shoulder."

She brushed it off, then screamed when a bee landed on John's face.

He flicked it off. "No harm done."

She wasn't so sure, but there was no time to think. With only one candle to light the hall, it was impossible to see if others lurked in the shadows. Images of John lying dead made her knees shake.

An argument erupted in the square, the shouts covering any telltale buzzes.

Pillow at the ready, she turned, eyes probing the shadows. Behind her, John did the same.

"I think that's all," he said at last. "I'll fetch Treburn. He can bring more light."

"I already rang him."

"When?" He picked up the candle, examining the floor so he wouldn't step on dead bees. Their venom could still penetrate his bare feet.

"When I went for the candle."

He frowned, then stalked into her room. Helping himself to her coverlet – his held smashed bees – he headed for the stairs. "You're naked," he reminded her when she tried to follow. "Get dressed."

* * * *

John used his fury at Chester to stiffen his knees – the attack left him so shaky he could barely stand. He hadn't really believed that Chester was evil enough to attack him directly. Now he would have to prosecute him for attempted murder. It would create a huge

scandal, but he could not risk Faith's life by letting Chester remain free. Even life in Botany Bay was too good for him.

But his most pressing fear was for Treburn. At least ten minutes had passed since Faith's shouts had pulled him from the warm aftermath of their lovemaking. So where was his butler?

Out cold.

Renewed fury nearly blinded him as he knelt by Treburn's side. The man had not rushed into the hall in response to Faith's shouts or to her summons, for he was nowhere near the stairs. And he'd not taken even a moment to don a dressing gown, let alone the pants and jacket he could put on in seconds when called to duty. He must have heard Chester enter.

"Oh, no!" Faith hurried to his side. "Is he—"

"Unconscious." He carried Treburn into the study and laid him on the couch. One shutter hung drunkenly from a broken hinge. The gardener's ladder stood outside. Shards of glass sparkled on the ground. Chester hadn't bothered with locked doors.

"He'll pay for this," growled Faith.

"Definitely, but that must wait. Send a footman for Alex, then ask my valet to find me some clothes. Some of his would be best. I don't want him taking chances with those bees. And send for Dr. McDaniel. He will know how long Treburn should remain abed."

As Faith hurried off, Treburn stirred.

"Lie still," John ordered.

"Someone – inside—"

"I know. He's been and gone, with no harm done beyond a smashed window and a damaged door." He could hardly believe he'd broken a hole in that door, for it was a sturdy one. But he'd been desperate to get Faith away from danger. The effort had pulled something in his shoulder, though. Now that the immediate danger was past, he felt the pain.

"Should have stayed up."

"No. You acted exactly right." What was keeping Faith?

On the thought, she returned, carrying a tray. "Portland should be here shortly. I brought you some tea, Treburn. It will settle your head."

Treburn opened his mouth, but whatever protest he meant to utter died when shouts resumed outside. Faith shoved the teapot into John's hands and headed

for the drawing room, where she could see out.

John's valet rushed in. "There is a problem in the square, Your Grace."

Faith hurried back. "Get dressed, John. You're needed."

"If you will come upstairs, sir," began the valet.

"He will *not* go upstairs," snapped Faith. "There are bees up there, as you know perfectly well. Do you want him stung?"

"Bring me a coat and some breeches," said John, forestalling the words trembling on his valet's lips.

Someone pounded on the front door.

"I'll get it." Faith hurried off.

"Now!" John glared at the valet.

The man hustled out.

Faith returned with Alex. "Still not dressed?" she asked. "No matter. There isn't time. We carried Chester into the drawing room, but he's fading fast."

"What?" John strode toward the door.

Alex shook his head. "I don't know what happened. I left a man to watch the house in case Chester came after you. Someone bashed him on the head—"

"Chester," said Faith.

"Quite likely. When he woke up, he rushed around front – he'd been checking the mews when he went down – and saw the front door open and Chester grappling with a gentleman in the square. Just before he reached them, Chester went down gasping for breath. His opponent swears he hardly touched him, but Chester is clearly in extremis."

Chester was lying on the couch, his face mottled red and his breath coming in wheezing gasps. A lump the size of an egg decorated his cheek.

A disheveled stranger stood between the couch and a furious Simmons.

"How dare you touch me, sir?" demanded Simmons. "I won't kill the bastard, though God knows he probably needs killing. But he owes me two quarters' allowance, and I won't leave until he pays it."

"Stop this at once," snapped Faith. "Sit down. You are behaving like a spoiled child. Can't you see he's injured?"

"I didn't do it. I barely touched him."

"Then why can't he breathe?" asked Alex.

"He's been stung," said John, pointing to Chester's cheek. A stinger remained in the wound.

“He must share the family curse.” Faith knelt beside the couch, shaking her head. When Simmons tried to crowd closer, she growled, “Stay back.”

Alex pulled Simmons away and forced him into a chair. “We’ll deal with you later.” He motioned the other man to stand guard, then moved to John’s side.

For once, Simmons closed his mouth and stayed put.

Faith used John’s penknife to remove the stinger, then sliced deeper.

Chester screamed. “Whore! Don’t touch me.”

Alex grabbed Chester’s hands. “Unless you relax, you will die, Lord Chester. Bee stings are very dangerous for the men of your family.”

“Only for impost—” Choking ended his denial.

“Richard nearly died from a bee sting,” said Faith, squeezing to remove as much of the poison as possible. “Several of your cousins have the same problem, as did your father and other more distant relatives. At least two villagers descended from Willowby by-blows have died from bee stings. It is no surprise to discover that John shares that trait. As do you.”

“How would – you know?”

“I’ve studied the Westcourt archives most of my life. There is nothing about your family I don’t know, including the traps you laid for Richard when you were boys. It is entirely appropriate that you’ve been stung.”

“Where did he encounter a bee this time of night?” asked Alex.

“He tossed a hive into John’s bedroom. I tried to keep him from locking the door. While we were fighting over it, several bees escaped. One stung him.” She turned back to Chester. “You failed in your purpose, though. John escaped unharmed.”

“Not for long,” Chester whispered, wheezing harder. “You will – not steal – my patrimony. I won’t – allow it. Won’t—” With a final rattle in his throat, he fell silent.

The footman arrived with the doctor. While Faith described what had happened, John leaned over to close Chester’s eyes. To think he owed his future security to an insect he’d feared most of his life...

* * * *

Half an hour later, a fully clothed John took a seat in his study. The doctor had left after ordering Treburn to bed and suggesting that Alex’s watchman likewise

retire. Simmons sulked in the corner, too shaken to object when again told to be quiet. Alex and Faith ranged themselves on either side of him.

“Not the ending I had expected,” said John wearily.

“Nor I.” Alex sighed. “If I’d assigned two men to the house, Bitstaff might have survived.”

John still couldn’t believe his footman had found Bitstaff’s body in the garden when he’d ventured out to the privy.

Reginald had seen Bitstaff in pursuit when Chester passed White’s. Since he’d been looking for Chester himself, he’d followed, losing both men near Hanover Square. He’d wondered if Chester meant to call on John, despite the late hour. So he’d settled in to watch the house. When Chester rushed out the front door, Reginald had been there to accost him. He was *not* pleased to find that Faith had also been inside...

Faith poured wine for the men, then tea for herself. “I can’t regret that he is gone. He was nearly as evil as Chester.”

John nodded. “And it’s clear who killed him. Even if Simmons hadn’t seen them together, everyone knows that Chester reneged on a gaming debt that Bitstaff was determined to collect. Others must have seen him follow Chester tonight.”

Alex drained his glass. “With Chester gone, there is no point in describing Bitstaff’s demise. We can claim he died in a drunken brawl. Few will be surprised. It’s not far from the truth in any case.” His gaze bore into Reginald’s.

“I won’t say a word.”

“Nor will you mention Chester’s embezzlement,” added Faith. “The money is gone. Raising the issue now would create a huge scandal. You won’t do that to the family, will you?”

Reginald shook his head.

“Excellent.”

Alex sent a subdued Reginald to stand guard over the drawing room so no servants would disturb the body. Then he moved to the fireplace. “There are several things you need to know, John. Chester was responsible for at least three deaths outside the family. He was adept at varying his methods to prevent suspicion. But unless you demand otherwise, I will cease that line of investigation. It can only bring new pain to his victims.”

John nodded. "I can't believe anyone could be so dishonorable."

"I can." Faith touched his hand.

"There's more," said Alex, shaking his head. "When Chester hired me, he claimed that a search fifteen years ago had traced Francine as far as Portsmouth, where she took the packet to Le Havre six days after leaving Westcourt. Since we were at war with France, no one could follow, but he was sure that I could trace her now that travel was again possible."

"Le Havre?" asked Faith. "I know of no such search."

Alex nodded. "He was furious when I produced proof that the Le Havre packet didn't sail that day – bad weather. No women with young children sailed for several weeks afterward, so I passed it off as yet another trail to nowhere and started my own search into Francine's past life."

"Which led to her family," said John.

"With help from Miss Harper. But Chester threatened to fire me for dismissing his claims. He swore she must have crossed with smugglers rather than wait for the next packet. His insistence raised alarms. Why was he so sure I could pick up her trail in Le Havre thirty years later? I decided to ask him, in case Cunningham had also heard those claims – I want this matter settled at tomorrow's meeting. So I called at Westfield House this evening, claiming an appointment. The butler left me in the library to await Chester's return. I found false papers showing that Francine and her son both died in France. If I'd gone to Le Havre, I would have found his carefully constructed trail."

John stifled a curse.

Faith didn't bother to stifle hers. "That's why he was so sure he would have the title soon. He meant to produce his proof, claiming that he'd hired another investigator to scour France while you concentrated on England."

"He would never had got away with it," swore Alex. "I've seen French immigration documents from that period – I studied them often during the war. These carry none of the stamps and seals they should have had. Even the one that supposedly documents passengers on the Le Havre packet – he'd prepared those before I told him the packet didn't sail – is missing the seals used by Louis XVI's officials."

"What will you do with the papers?" asked John.

"Destroy them. They have no bearing on your case, for they are clearly false. I see no need to produce them. It would precipitate the very scandal you are trying to avoid."

"Thank you," said Faith.

"What now?" asked John.

Alex nodded. "It is late. Get some sleep. I will see after Chester's remains and make sure Simmons behaves himself. Cunningham and the herald should rule tomorrow, so be prepared for a parade of callers."

"I'll need to thank the witnesses," said John. "But no one else is welcome just now."

"That will work for a day or two, but you must appear before Parliament, and you should accept some of the invitations that will pour in."

John grimaced, but it was sound advice. "Bring the witnesses here once the herald has ruled."

Alex nodded, then took his leave.

Chapter Twenty-two

I am dying, but I welcome it. I can do nothing more for Montrose, so when Richard came to me last night... We will be together as soon as I hide this journal. It has brought me much comfort, but I see now that I was indiscreet enough that Chester could use it to intercept Francine when she posts her next message. It is too late to destroy it, but I will find the strength to open the secret place. Then I will
Duchess of Westfield, Mar. 13, 1792

"You can't go back to your room," said Faith as they headed upstairs. "It could take days to find every bee. Some will be lurking in the chimney."

"Unlikely. The smoke will kill any that try. The rest will find their way outside by morning. But for tonight, I'll stay with you."

Joy vied with irritation at the announcement. She still had to slip away, and it was already three.

"Did any of the bees sting you?" he asked as he pushed open the door to her room.

"Two, but it doesn't matter. I've been stung before, as you well know."

"You should have said something while we had the doctor here."

"There is nothing he can do. I've an ointment to remove the pain. In a day or two, all trace will disappear."

"Get the ointment. I want to see." He sounded angry.

Sighing, she dug it out of her trunk. At least it had remained in her Westcourt room from the last sting. Such things were usually kept in the still room.

"You haven't unpacked." The anger was more pronounced.

"There is no point. You know I cannot stay."

"Faith—" He snapped his mouth shut and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he took the jar of ointment and smoothed some over the sting on her arm. "Where is the other one?"

"My back."

Nodding, he stripped off her gown and treated her back. "You need to be more careful, Faith. These welts are larger than before. You could easily develop the same problem as I have."

"I doubt it, but I don't intend to seek out bees to test that theory. Encounters are rare enough that I need not worry. Tonight was unusual."

"True." He paused "I haven't pressed you, Faith, but now I must. Tonight changes everything. There is no way to hide that you were in my room when Chester attacked. Alex knows it. Simmons knows it. The staff knows it. Whatever shreds of reputation survived Chester's rumors will die unless we marry."

"It doesn't matter." She didn't want to have this discussion yet again, but she had to make him understand that *his* reputation and *his* future were more important than hers. And a reputation for wantonness could actually help her find a protector once she reached York. "I can change my name and slip away. It is doubtful that I will meet anyone who knows Faith Harper by sight."

"Do you hate me that much?"

She stared, shocked. "I could never hate you, John. But neither can I force you into marriage."

"What force? I want to wed you. I love you."

"You have to say that, of course, but I wish you wouldn't lie. Let's not part with falsehoods."

He grabbed her shoulders and shook. "Do you trust me, Faith?"

"Of course, except—"

"No exceptions. I have never lied to you. Not about my feelings. Not about my past. Not about anything."

His eyes burned into hers, sending shudders down her spine. Dared she hope...?

"I love you," he continued. "I loved you long before Bitstaff arrived at Westcourt. I'll love you tomorrow and next year and fifty years from now. If you cannot tolerate being a duchess, then we will find trustees to oversee everything and move to America. You are more important than any title or any career. Don't you know that I battered that door down because I knew you would take sting after sting fighting those bees. Even those without my sensitivity can succumb to numerous stings. I could not go on living if you had died trying to save me."

"John—" Her voice shook as hope battled years of training.

"You read my mother's diary, so you should know that Willowby men love obsessively, eternally, and only once. We will do anything to satisfy those we love, even let them go if that is what they truly need. But if you leave, make sure it is for the right reason, Faith. I love you. I want you. I need you. If society can't accept that, then society can go hang. I would rather endure ostracism with you at my side than acceptance alone."

She had only to look at him to know he spoke the truth. Love shone from his eyes, burning past her defenses until she stood helpless before him.

His hands touched her shoulders, sliding upward until he cupped her head between them. "It is your choice," he murmured, choking. "If you cannot love me, then at least let me help you – find you another husband, give you one of my properties, arrange a post if that's what you want. But give me a chance to court you properly before you decide."

He would help her do whatever she wanted? Even leave him for another man?

The magnitude of his love settled in her soul, exploding into more misery than she'd thought possible. Even the thought of leaving him behind paled in comparison. "I believe you, but we cannot wed, John. A duke must sire an heir, but I cannot give you one."

"What nonsense is this? No virgin can know whether she is fertile."

"But I do know. They tried to hide it, but I heard my

nurse telling Mama.”

“When?”

“In India. I, too, caught that fever – the first of us to do so. It’s my—”

“It is *not* your fault that your family died. Just as it is not your fault that you fell ill.”

“Perhaps not. But the fever was very fierce, lasting more than a week. Mother remained at my bedside even when I seemed unconscious. But I heard them clearly. Mourning and worse. My nurse prayed that I would die, for the fever would leave me barren. She’d seen it happen before, she said. Her uncle, a cousin, the commander of Papa’s regiment. None who survived this fever ever produced children. No one would wed a girl who could not provide an heir, so I would be better off dead. The maid agreed. Mama was in tears.”

His hand raised her chin until she had to look at him. He was shaking his head. “How did you survive such ignorance, my love? She was half right. Raging fevers *can* affect men’s virility. But I’ve never heard of it affecting women. Not that it matters. I don’t care if you give me an heir or not, for it is *you* I need. Without you, I am nothing.”

Tears flooded her eyes.

“There are no guarantees in life, Faith. Neither of us can prove our abilities in that area. You are my one true love. Nothing else matters.”

His eyes bore into hers, brilliant blue in the candlelight. His words banished the last of the darkness. “I believe you,” she whispered, tears of joy springing to her eyes. “I believe you! You truly do love me.”

“Forever, Faith.”

“People will criticize you for taking me on.”

“Let them. Anyone who cannot see your value is not worth my time. I’ve never had much respect for society – they welcome fools and rogues if their breeding is sound. Ignoring them won’t cause me a moment of distress. I will serve however I must in Parliament, but my primary duties will be to you and to my properties. With Chester gone, there should be little strife over that.”

“And you are absolutely sure?”

“Absolutely. Positively. To the depths of my soul and the ends of the earth. I love you, Faith. Nothing else matters beside that one simple truth.”

Her face lit. "I love you, John. With all my heart. To all eternity."

"Thank God." He pulled her into a blazing kiss.

Faith poured all her love into her response, basking in the glory of achieving her most fervent dream. He loved her. He truly loved her. As his mouth crushed hers, the storm of emotion that had battered her since the day he'd walked into Westcourt broke free.

She ripped his shirt from neck to hem, baring his chest to her palms. Beneath her hand, his heart kicked and galloped until its pace matched her own. Her head spun as he scooped her onto the bed. The hands framing her face trembled as badly as her own.

"I need you," he gasped, then kissed her again. Harder, deeper, sending her over the first edge.

But it wasn't enough. She gripped his hips, her fingers digging nearly to the bone, then rolled so he was under her.

John barely took in their reversed positions before she rose above him, then slid slowly down, taking him inside. Heat scorched him from head to toe as she pushed deeper, seating him to the hilt. He wanted to speak, wanted to cry out in pleasure, but his heart pounded so high in his throat no word could escape.

She arched back, rising and falling until the glory drove him mad. When he could stand it no longer, he grabbed her shoulders, rolled, then plunged. Harder, faster, until she screamed, clenching around him and driving him into oblivion.

Faith blinked. John was a dead weight atop her, but she wouldn't push him aside. He was hers now. All hers. His scent wrapped around her, every breath reminding her that miracles truly could happen. Her hands brushed his shoulders, wanting him again but no longer in a rush. He would be there tomorrow and all the tomorrows of their life. And if her nurse had been wrong...

Another dream resuscitated.

"I'm crushing you," he murmured.

"No. You feel good."

"I'll feel just as good beneath you." He rolled until she was sprawled atop him.

"Yes, this has advantages, too." She traced the cleft in his chin.

"We'll wed by special license as soon as I can arrange it," he said, lazily tracing her back.

"Which might take a few days. Discuss it with Portland. Will it be better to announce your title and marriage at the same time or give society the spectacle of a large wedding?"

"You are still worried about what they think. It doesn't matter, Faith. I want this settled now. We will call on the archbishop as soon as possible."

She sighed, but presenting the world with a *fait accompli* would prevent her relatives from raising objections. Once she was a duchess, they would accept her fast enough. "All right. Portland and the witnesses will come here after the hearing tomorrow. We can see about a license after that."

"And once we have it, we will wed immediately. So I suggest you unpack, my dear."

"Are we living here rather than Westfield House?"

"For the moment. If Chester let the inside deteriorate as much as the outside has, it will take time to make the place livable. In the meantime..."

He skimmed his hands into her hair, then slowly pulled her into a kiss. Sweet. Full of promises. And this time he could savor. There was no rush, for they would have a lifetime together.

As dawn crept through the window, he pulled her against him. Never again would they sleep apart.

* * * *

Two nights later, Faith gripped John's arm as he paused at the entrance to Lady Debenham's ballroom.

"The Duke and Duchess of Westfield," intoned a footman.

For one moment, as hundreds of eyes turned haughtily in their direction, she wanted to run. Then smiles creased every face, and the crowd surged forward.

"I knew your father – a fine man and a sad loss."

"You won't remember me, my boy, but I attended your christening."

"Condolences on your uncle's death, not that he is much loss."

"You must attend—"

"—at home tomorrow—"

"—will call—"

The voices merged into a wall of sound that didn't diminish until the orchestra began a waltz.

"My set," said John, giving her no chance to protest. "Relax, love," he added as he pulled her into his arms.

"I'll keep it simple, just like we practiced."

"I know." She shook the echoes from her head.
"What a mob."

"But friendly. Just be yourself. That's what I plan to do."

The gown Madame Jeanette had whipped up overnight billowed as John twirled her in a dizzy circle. He'd been right about her limp, right about society's acceptance, and right that tonight's ball was the best venue for their first public appearance. So she would trust him to be right about the future, too.

Smiling brilliantly, she threw herself into her first waltz. As long as she was living a fairy tale, she might as well enjoy it.

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