



## **TWO BEAUX AND A PROMISE**

### **3 Allison Lane Novellas**

[parts 2 & 3 of The Three Beaux trilogy]

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## **FOR RICHER OR POORER The Three Beaux, Part 2**

**Allison Lane**

— 1 —

“Dearly beloved...” The bishop’s voice filled the nave.

Richard Hughes finally relaxed. There was nothing more he could do. The bride and groom glowed with an unmistakable happiness, and the witnesses validated the match.

He stood to one side of the altar, where he could see both the wedding party and the guests. Every gossip in town was in attendance, so the scandal should finally dissipate, leaving only envy that his sister had snared one of society’s prizes.

The term annoyed him, though he didn’t let it show. Emily was lucky. Because she was female, attaching a wealthy suitor increased her credit. Even if she’d deliberately sought such a prize, no one would condemn her – not that Jacob’s fortune mattered; the pair were wildly in love.

But he was not so lucky. His modest means meant many considered him a fortune hunter. Gossips watched his every move, waiting for him to pounce on an heiress. He need only dance with a girl who had a good dowry to ignite whispers. Fathers looked at him askance. That his closest friends were wealthy enough to rival Midas increased people's suspicions.

He forced himself to calm down lest the guests mistake the cause.

Damn the gossips and their constant buzzing. He might have to watch his purse, but he was not in debt. Never would he stoop to wedding money. When he took a wife, she would be sweet, frugal, and have no more than a modest dowry.

He nearly cursed as he recalled the most recent rumors. All he'd done was speak to Miss Downes at a rout – a conversation *she* had initiated with a question about Emily. They hadn't exchanged a dozen words, yet half of London expected him to seduce her so he could claim her ten-thousand-pound dowry. Lord Downes was furious.

Herriard had to have started the tale. If the scoundrel had discovered Richard's investigation, he might think that discrediting him would prevent people from listening to his accusations. No one else would blow the incident so badly out of proportion. Herriard was a cheat, a liar, a vicious—

"Do you take this man..." The words recalled his attention to the service.

He unclenched his fists, hoping no one had noticed. His sister's wedding was no place to think about Herriard. Renewed speculation about why Emily had switched grooms only five days ago would undo all his efforts.

He searched the crowd for Lady Beatrice, London's most powerful gossip. With luck, she was watching Emily, not him. Only her support would rid this union of scandal.

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Georgiana Whittaker scrambled to her feet, suppressing a shudder when she noted the gutter's filth. She had no time to fret about horse droppings.

Ignoring the pain slicing her left ankle, she hobbled up George Street. Derrick had been gaining on her even before her fall. Now it would be worse. She had to reach Hanover Square before he spotted her. It was

her only chance. The square had a dozen exits. Derrick would never guess which one she chose.

But Hanover Square was two blocks away, and every step was agony. Her pace slowed, then slowed again. Even terror couldn't prod her ankle faster. She was doomed.

A sob escaped as reality crashed over her.

Horses and carriages crowded George Street and jammed Hanover Square. Pedestrians thronged the walkways. Vendors accosted every passerby. With so many eyes peering about, someone would remember her. Many someones. They would tell Derrick.

Desperate, she ducked behind the broad columns of St. George's Church, rushed up the steps, and stumbled inside. Maybe the rector would offer her refuge. Maybe—

As the door closed, a woman's voice replaced the cacophony from the street. "...for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health..."

A wedding. She nearly groaned. She should have known that the crowded street meant the church was full.

Curses nearly tumbled from her lips. A hundred people had gathered here. A hundred aristocrats, judging from their finery.

So far no one had noticed her. All eyes were fixed on five people standing before the altar. Four faced the bishop, who was prompting the bride. But the fifth was half turned toward the crowd.

She frowned.

His presence so near the altar was odd enough, but he seemed too aloof to be part of the proceedings. The bride and groom glowed with happiness, even when seen from behind. The redheaded witnesses radiated joy. But the lone blond was tense, almost poised for battle, with his gloved hands clenched and his weight balanced on his toes. It was an odd posture for a wedding. Who did he think would attack?

She shook away the thought, her own problems more urgent than a puzzle of no import. The rector stood behind the bishop, so she could not approach him. Nor could she afford to be seen. Yet leaving was impossible. Derrick would have reached George Stre—

Angry voices outside sent her heart into her throat. He was closer than she'd thought.

Trapped but not yet ready to surrender, she limped

quickly along the wall and ducked into a chapel.

He doesn't know I fell, she prayed as she crouched behind the chapel's altar. Let him believe I at least reached Maddox Street. Send him around the church, not into it. Please!

But she knew her luck had run out.

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Richard studied Lady Beatrice. Did she recognize the love that bound Emily and Jacob, or was she too devoted to rules to excuse so juicy a scandal? He couldn't tell, for the gossip's face showed nothing. Unlike him, she was in complete control.

In the days since Emily had jilted Charles, Richard had done what he could to minimize the scandal. Charles stood beside Jacob at the altar. Charles's sister stood beside Emily. Charles's cousin, the bishop, presided. Charles's mother was overseeing the wedding breakfast. But one never knew what Lady Beatrice would do. And without her support...

A disheveled maid slipped into the church and paused in dismay – as well she might. She was caked with mud and intruding on her betters. Yet his gaze was caught by an enchanting face whose big eyes, tilted nose, and blonde curls belonged to an angel. The contrast with her tattered cloak was striking.

Her eyes suddenly widened. Glancing wildly around, she ducked into the chapel.

At least she wouldn't interrupt. Relaxing, he concentrated on the service. Or tried to. Her face teased his mind, igniting a familiar heat that distracted him from Emily's vows. He wondered where the girl worked. Maids often enjoyed a lighthearted romp in bed. Would she...

The door banged open, fracturing his fantasy.

Everyone turned to stare as two men stormed inside – Herriard and his maggoty friend Stagleigh, their faces black with fury. Both were undoubtedly drunk.

Richard nearly snarled.

As Jacob raised his voice for the ring ceremony, reclaiming the crowd's attention, Richard hurried toward the door. It would be just like Herriard to stage an embarrassing scene.

"Is there a problem?" he murmured, blocking access to the nave.

"Nothing I can't handle." Herriard glared.

"Hawthorne's wedding is no concern of yours."

"But the wench who stole my purse is. She ducked in here."

Richard raised his brows. "When?"

"Just now. Two minutes ago. Maybe three."

"I've had the door in sight since the service started," he lied. "Only Hawthorne's guests came in." The girl must be fleeing Herriard. No wonder she was terrified. He dismissed the theft charge, for Herriard was a liar. And even if it were true, Richard could not in good conscience help Herriard catch her. Whether making love or war, the man had a reputation for brutality that turned Richard's stomach. And Stagleigh was worse.

Herriard clenched his fists. "You must have seen her – blonde hair, brown cloak, height about here." He extended his hand level with his shoulder. "A coachman saw her enter."

"The only brown cloak was his." He nodded toward Leonard Waters, who was standing at the back of the crowd. "He arrived about five minutes ago – late, as usual."

Herriard glared at the diminutive dandy. Golden hair glistened above brown velvet.

"You are certain?" demanded Stagleigh.

"Absolutely. The wench probably slipped around the corner." He looked pointedly at the door.

"She didn't have time to reach the corner," insisted Herriard. "She's here somewhere, and I'm going to find her."

"If you want to find her, check Maddox Street. No one came this way. The longer you delay, the more likely she is to escape."

"But—"

"Shall we ask the bishop who came in? He was also facing the door. As was the rector."

To his relief, Herriard shook his head and left, dragging Stagleigh with him.

Richard returned to the altar, but his mind remained on the girl. Herriard had to be lying – all else aside, he had nothing to steal. So she must be fleeing his advances.

He shook his head, wondering how she'd been unfortunate enough to catch Herriard's eye.

As the brief ceremony drew to a close, he nodded. Misdirecting Herriard wouldn't protect the girl for long – Herriard had to know where she worked. The man

would press her again in the future. So the only way to help her was to find her a new position.

While the bishop led the wedding party to the rector's office to sign the register, Richard sped the guests toward Hawthorne House for the wedding breakfast, keeping one eye on the chapel lest the girl slip away before he could address her problem. She wouldn't be the first he'd helped, though Lady Beatrice would likely expire of shock to learn of it. Such activities stood at odds with his reputation.

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Georgiana scrubbed the tears from her cheeks, berating herself for falling into despair. No matter what happened, she could not give up. And perhaps her prayers had been answered. Had Derrick really left? She'd heard the front door open and close.

But it was likely only a brief reprieve.

Voices rose as the wedding guests departed. She considered mingling with the crowd, but her fall had turned her cloak from shabby to disgusting. Someone was bound to object.

And Derrick would be watching. He might have hesitated to interrupt a society wedding, but he knew she was here – had probably seen her enter. So he would also know that she was limping. The moment the church was empty, he would search every nook and cranny. He was only waiting because he wanted no witnesses when he found her.

She was trapped.

Questions without answers battered her mind. How many exits did the church have? Which ones would Derrick watch? How many men were helping him? Would the rector stand up to a lord?

Her task seemed hopeless. If she hadn't caught him by surprise, she would never have escaped the first time. That wouldn't happen again, and not just because of Derrick's vigilance. Her swelling ankle was already twice its usual size. The very thought of standing made it throb. And where would she go?

But she had to try. Remaining here was impossible.

The last of the voices died away. The doors closed, again muffling the street noise. She was rising when footsteps approached the chapel.

*Derrick!* She shrank against the back of the altar.

"You can come out now," said an unfamiliar voice. "Everyone is gone."

She paused, suspecting a trick.

"Are you a thief, as Lord Herriard claims?" asked the man.

"Thief!" she choked. "How dare he?"

"Come out. I can't advise you until I know what he wants."

With no real alternative, she shakily stood, grasping the corner of the altar when her leg tried to buckle. Her eyes widened as she turned toward the door. The blond man from the wedding party blocked her escape.

"You're hurt." His voice gentled.

"Ankle."

Before she realized his intent, he swept her into his arms and carried her to a bench.

He was strong.

Also tall. And handsome. His hair brushed the collar of his blue superfine jacket. Brown eyes beamed from a face that reminded her of a Greek god – a rather wicked Eros, actually. Something about him demanded her touch.

Her heart lodged in her throat as she clasped her hands to keep them still.

He joined her on the bench. "Richard, at your service. And you are...?"

"Georgiana." She hesitantly offered her hand. Heat tingled up her arm when he raised it to his lips.

"If you aren't a thief, why does Herriard claim you stole his purse?" His tone seemed curious rather than accusatory. That in itself set her at ease. Most men accepted a lord's word as gospel, no matter how ridiculous his charges.

"He is my cousin and guardian."

His eyes widened. "Guardian? I've not heard that he has a ward."

"Hardly a surprise. He keeps me hidden. Despising my mother's marriage, he refused to bring me out. But his debts are now so great that he's selling me to Lord Stagleigh."

"Not good. Stagleigh is venal."

"I'm glad you agree. My skin crawls whenever he is in the house. I try to avoid him."

"Wise."

"But no longer possible. Stagleigh agreed to pay Derrick's debts in exchange for my hand. Neither of them cares a whit for me. But Derrick needs money so badly that he swore to beat me into compliance.

Stagleigh doesn't care. He considers my hatred a challenge."

Richard nodded. "He would. So how did you escape?"

"They didn't realize I overheard them negotiating terms. I slipped out before they could give me the good news. Unfortunately, they discovered my absence almost immediately and chased me here."

"I sent them away."

She shook her head. "They won't go far. Derrick may have declined to make a scene in front of society's *crème de la crème*, but he knows I'm here. He was too close behind not to have seen me enter."

"Where were you going?"

She sighed. "I had no time to think." She hesitated to say more, but Richard was her best hope of escape. Unless he believed her, he would turn her over to her guardian. So she must reveal the full story – or most of it. "I have no other close relatives, and I have no money – my quarterly allowance is only two pounds."

"That's less than a maid makes."

"I know." She patted the large reticule hanging from her arm. "I grabbed Mama's pearls and a few other things before fleeing. Selling them will pay my keep for a time." She shrugged.

"Do you think he will change his mind?"

"No. But I turn twenty-one in six days. My dowry will then come to me. It will let me set up my own household."

"Not if you hope to retain your reputation."

Again she shrugged. "Society doesn't don't know I exist and would reject me if it did. My mother may have been a baron's daughter, but my father was a merchant. The business went to his partner, of course, but my inheritance will do. One can live on very little in the country."

"But what about marriage?"

She laughed. Bitterly. "Why should I put myself at the mercy of yet another man? Five years with Derrick has cured me of any romantic notions." She had yet to meet a man she could trust when her needs opposed his desires. Even Grandfather had ignored her preferences.

"This isn't the time to argue your future. We must leave. How bad is your ankle?"

"I fell rounding the corner from Conduit to George



Street.” She lifted her skirts to reveal the ankle, which had swollen even larger. “It can’t be broken, for I continued running on it, but it hurts like blazes.”

Richard knelt, gently bending the ankle as his fingers prodded the bones. She nearly screamed.

He shook his head. “It’s the worst sprain I’ve seen in some time. I’ll have to carry you.”

“Where?”

“To my horse. It’s waiting on Mill Street, just outside the rector’s office.”

She tried to protest, but he cut her off.

“I can’t remain here. My sister will already be wondering where I am – she just married my best friend, so I’m expected at the breakfast. We’ll stash you out of sight until I have time to think about your problem.”

“I won’t return to Derrick.”

“Of course not. What the devil was your father about to leave Herriard in charge of you in the first place? He must have known the man is a scoundrel.”

“He named Grandfather. But Grandfather and Derrick’s father died in a carriage accident a week after my father died, so Derrick inherited my guardianship along with the title.” She still shuddered to recall those days. Her grandfather had wanted her to make the society match her mother had refused, though he’d long since come to terms with his daughter’s elopement. Derrick abhorred his grandfather’s acceptance of so base a union, but he’d been careful not to admit it while the old man controlled his allowance. Only after the accident had he shown his true colors, relegating his low-class ward to the attics and refusing to recognize their blood ties.

“We will discuss alternatives later. Come along.” He lifted her easily, then peeked out the chapel door to make sure the nave was empty before heading for the office and his horse.

## — 2 —

Richard was shaking with fury by the time he reached Hawthorne House. Their departure from St. George’s had not gone as smoothly as he’d expected. He had set Georgiana across his horse, then mounted behind her. But he’d hardly settled into the saddle before Herriard had attacked. If the man had been

mounted, they would never have escaped. As it was, Herriard had caught Georgiana's foot and nearly pulled her off. Only a sharp kick had freed her.

Herriard was a menace and a disgrace to his breeding. He should never have been put in charge of an innocent maiden. But no one who might have objected had known about her. Once her mother had eloped with a merchant, she'd ceased to exist in society.

It wasn't the first time he'd questioned the dictates of his class. Young ladies ought to be more than breeding stock or assets to stave off financial disaster. Guardians should not have total control of their wards. Nor should parents. Society should protect girls from the Herriards of the world – or so he'd argued with Charles more than once.

Georgiana was a prime example. Imagining her under Herriard's roof made his blood boil. And Stagleigh would be worse. So lovely a girl was no match for a lecher. He had to protect her – and not just because it would let him pursue Herriard openly. She deserved more than a life of abuse.

The question was how to proceed.

Keeping her at Hughes House until he dealt with Herriard would expose his mother to Herriard's spite. Not a price he was willing to pay; her health was too fragile. Yet there was nowhere else he could take her. He had no rooms of his own and lacked the means to lease something. Even an inexpensive hotel would cost too much just now – his pockets were empty until next quarter day, still two weeks away.

His only option was to swallow his pride and beg help from his friends.

"Stay here," he ordered, laying Georgiana on the couch in Jacob's study. "I must attend the wedding breakfast, but I will lock the door so no one can bother you. As soon as I can get away, we will discuss the next step."

"But—"

"Relax. I won't return you to Herriard. The man is a cad. But this is my sister's wedding day. I cannot abandon her."

"Of course not."

"I'd rather keep your presence quiet for now, even from the staff, so I'll bring refreshments when I return."

She nodded.

He didn't like to leave her alone, but he had no choice. Slipping the key into his pocket, he hurried toward the drawing room. Locking the door protected her, but it also protected him if he'd misjudged her – as occasionally happened. She could not rob Jacob and flee before he returned.

"Where have you been?" hissed Emily as he joined the receiving line.

"Finishing up at the church."

Jacob raised an aristocratic brow, but said nothing as he turned to greet Lady Debenham, another of London's most ferocious gossips.

An hour passed before arrivals dwindled to a trickle. As usual, many more people attended the wedding breakfast than had witnessed the actual wedding.

When Emily finally headed for the drawing room, Richard held Jacob back. "I need your help. Let me know when you can get free."

"Can't Charles—"

"Not this time." Though the three had been friends for twenty years, Charles supported the rights of guardians, even when doing so was not in the ward's best interests. Jacob had no such reservations.

"Very well, but why now?"

"I didn't choose the time. The problem arose without warning."

"Is this why you were late?" Jacob asked as they entered the drawing room.

Richard nodded, then flashed a practiced smile at Lady Beatrice as Jacob moved to his wife's side.

Lady Beatrice glared at Jacob's retreating back and snorted. "I know the Beaux share everything, but passing around a fiancée is beyond enough." She transferred her scowl to Emily.

"My sister would object to that charge," he said lightly, though this was exactly what he'd feared. Jilting a gentleman always raised brows, but the Beaux' reputations made it worse.

He, Jacob, and Charles had acquired the sobriquet The Three Beaux ten years earlier, in part because of their closeness, but mostly because all three were rakes – though not as incorrigible as rumor claimed; he knew of only one female who'd actually lain with all three of them, and he knew about her only because she'd thrown a public fit when Jacob turned down a

second encounter. The incident had tarred them with an unwarranted reputation for sharing conquests, adding to the scandal when Emily jilted Charles to wed Jacob.

Richard met Lady Beatrice's stare. "Emily and Lord Charles mistook friendship for something deeper. I find it commendable that they addressed the problem as soon as they recognized it. That marriage would have made all three of them miserable. Since the decision occurred only a few days ago, it was easier to change grooms than to cancel the wedding arrangements."

"Perhaps." She raised a lorgnette to study the new Countess of Hawthorne. "I must admit I've rarely seen two people so pleased with each other."

"Exactly. This was meant to be." He stifled a spurt of envy as he watched the pair move through the room. Even as they spoke with guests, they were enclosed in a bubble of mutual awareness that excluded those around them. Their joy shone brightly enough to cast all others in the shade.

"She has done very well for herself," Lady Beatrice continued. "Impoverished girls have sought Hawthorne's eye for years. No one else has his combination of title, wealth, and good looks. The connection will serve you well, too. Better than the other would have done."

Richard nearly ground his teeth. Why did she insist that Emily was a fortune hunter? Not only had the pair been close since childhood, but Em had a decent dowry. And why did she think Em's marriage could help him? Jacob was his closest friend. They didn't need weddings to further that bond.

But he refused to vent his frustration aloud and even managed several more exchanges before moving on, though his mood remained black. He was tired of her relentless suspicion and very tired of how she pounced on every sign that he might need money.

This wedding breakfast was yet another thorn in his side, for it was far more elaborate than they had originally planned – thanks to Lady Inslip's handling the arrangements and tapping Jacob's bottomless coffers. His own marriage would not be celebrated in such style. His family couldn't afford it, and he was determined that his wife would never overshadow him, financially or otherwise.

Long practice stifled any resentment, for thinking of money always strained his friendship with the very wealthy Beaux. It had nearly fractured the group when they'd pressed him too hard to join an expensive outing one summer. Jacob had finally healed the rift and no longer argued when Richard refused. But memories continued to hover, casting shadows on his soul.

The next hour passed in a blur as he dampened further hints at scandal and toasted the bride and groom. The gossips grumbled, but followed Charles's lead. Lady Beatrice's toast finally eliminated his fears for Emily's future, allowing him to fully relax.

Now he could concentrate on Georgiana.

The thought ignited anticipation – because helping her would irritate Herriard, he assured himself. It was the battle, not the girl, that stirred his senses. He could hardly wait to learn her full story. She might even have information that could help his investigation.

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Jacob found Richard in the refreshment room half an hour later. "What happened?" he demanded softly, helping himself to a lobster patty.

"Herriard and Stagleigh." Richard handed him a plate.

Jacob tensed, noting the fury that changed Richard's warm brown eyes to a feral ocher. To keep his hands busy, he piled delicacies on the plate. "Is that who barged in during the service?"

Richard nodded. "I maneuvered them outside, but they accosted me afterward."

"What do they want this time?" The pair had long been a wart on society's backside and were no longer included in even the most inclusive invitations. But their feud with the Beaux was personal. Herriard had cheated Richard some years earlier. If the Beaux had not recovered the funds, Richard would have been forced to leave London. It was unlikely that he could have returned.

Herriard had hated the Beaux ever since, especially Richard, who wasn't satisfied with recouping his losses. Determined to protect other young men from Herriard's predations, he kept a close eye on Herriard's gaming, seeking evidence of cheating that would expel him from the clubs.

“Did you know that Herriard has a ward? A female ward?” Richard added cream cakes and a lemon biscuit to his own plate.

“My God!” Jacob lowered his voice when heads turned his way. “Who would trust him within a hundred miles of an innocent? How old is she?”

“Twenty – until Friday, when she gains control of her dowry and hopes to move out.”

“Herriard won’t stand for that. He’s always deep in the River Tick, so he’ll demand the money as payment for keeping her. Especially now.” Herriard had lost badly the night before. It was doubtful that he could cover his vowels.

“Her small inheritance won’t begin to pay his debts,” said Richard, pat on the thought. “So he’s selling her to Stagleigh.”

Jacob cursed. His butler took one look at his face, then herded nearby guests toward the drawing room. “Why didn’t you say something earlier?” Jacob asked when he had his temper under control.

“I told you, I just found out about it. She escaped this morning and is currently in your study.”

“Devil take it. Can’t you keep your lame ducks away from my wedding?”

Richard glared.

Jacob waved a hand in apology. “That was uncalled for. But why the devil don’t you let people know about your crusades? At least then you could ask someone besides us to help you.”

“It isn’t even *us* this time. I can’t involve Charles.”

“I know.” He grimaced. “He can be a real prig when it comes to the letter of the law. What do you need?”

“A place where she can stay.”

Jacob frowned.

“Not here,” Richard added. “Herriard nearly grabbed her as we left St. George’s. Since everyone in town knows where I was headed, he must already be watching the house. I hoped she could use Oakhaven for a week.”

“Possibly. But first I need to meet her.” He had to decide for himself if she was telling the truth. Richard had fallen prey to false pleas for help before. He had no sense when his compassion stirred. Herriard’s involvement would skew his logic even further. “What is her name?”

“Georgiana. Her mother and Herriard’s father were

siblings. The mother married beneath her, drawing Herriard's contempt, but I haven't had time to learn more."

Jacob shook his head as he led the way to his study, the plate still in his hand. Richard regularly leaped to the rescue without learning anything relevant. But Jacob wasn't so gullible.

The library door refused to open.

"It's locked," said Richard, proffering the key. "I didn't want her to be disturbed."

"Ah." And maybe Richard wasn't as oblivious as he seemed.

His papers seemed undisturbed, allowing him to relax – his parliamentary work meant he often kept sensitive documents at home. The girl was asleep on the couch, a filthy cloak jumbled on the floor beside it. While her face was fair enough in a vapid blonde way, her body could best be described as plump. And her gown was frankly hideous.

He could see why she'd caught Richard's eye, though. The lost-waif expression would appeal to his soft heart. And her connection to Herriard made her irresistible.

"Georgiana?" Having set his plate on the desk, Richard gently shook her shoulder. "Wake up."

Startled, she shot upright, then groaned.

"Be careful of that ankle," he added.

"What happened?" asked Jacob.

"Bad sprain." He helped her settle, his hand lingering overlong on her shoulder, then joined her on the couch. "This is the Earl of Hawthorne, Georgiana. He will help you."

"Georgiana what?" Jacob sat behind the desk. A surreptitious glance into the top drawer confirmed that his cash box remained intact.

"Whittaker."

"And your father?"

She paused. "Humphrey Whittaker, my lord."

"Ah." Jacob nearly laughed at the puzzlement in Richard's eyes. Richard rarely heeded financial opportunities because he didn't have any money. Thus he didn't recognize the name. But Humphrey Whittaker had founded one of the more profitable independent import companies. Jacob had reaped several fortunes by investing in it. *Small inheritance*, indeed. Miss Whittaker was a considerable heiress –

which explained Herriard's interest. And Stagleigh's.

Despite his frequent protests to the contrary, Richard needed an heiress. Jacob had sworn only last week to see that his friends found suitable wives. It was time that Richard swallowed his pride and stopped pretending he liked living frugally.

He could summon the bishop from the drawing room and demand an immediate hearing on replacing Miss Whittaker's guardian, but this was not the time to exercise his influence. Far better to make Richard stay with her while the matter crept through the legal process. Already he could see sparks flying between them. All he had to do was shut them up somewhere safe and let nature take its course.

But first he must verify his impressions.

He soon set her at ease and elicited the full tale of her life with Herriard. It wasn't pretty.

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Richard's fists clenched as Georgiana revealed Herriard's refusal to bring her out, the petty cruelties he'd inflicted, and her duties as an unofficial – and thus unpaid – governess for Herriard's three hellions. She'd been a virtual slave. Never mind that Herriard's wife was nearly as abused. The thought of Georgiana enduring such hardships fanned his fury.

When she finished describing her flight, Jacob nodded. "You are right," he told Richard. "She must stay out of sight until her birthday. Take her to Oakhaven. My solicitor will file a petition on Monday to end Herriard's guardianship."

"So I will be free?" Hope lit her face.

"Not completely." Richard patted her hand. "You still need a guardian. The court will not dismiss Herriard unless there is another willing to assume responsibility for you. Who would you prefer?"

"But—"

"That is the law, Miss Whittaker," said Jacob firmly. "All unmarried females must be under the care of a parent or guardian. Consider it a form of protection. Many businesses won't deal with females. Others will cheat you beyond charging you higher prices. You need someone who can see after your interests and prevent scoundrels from taking advantage of you."

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Georgiana wanted to scream. At the world. At Hawthorne. But mostly at herself. This wasn't



something she'd learned in childhood, nor had the subject come up under Derrick's roof. All her plans had focused on escape. She'd not considered how she would go on afterward. How many other problems would prove troublesome? It was a question she must answer.

"Finding another guardian will be difficult," she admitted. "I know very few people. Father's partner now owns the business, but he criticized Father's marriage and accused him of giving me airs above my station, so he would not make a comfortable guardian. I know no other relatives. And I was not allowed to meet callers while living with Lord Herriard."

Richard shook his head. "We can discuss possible guardians after the guests leave. For now, Hawthorne and I must return to the drawing room." He stood.

But she had more questions. "Where is Oakhaven?"

Hawthorne smiled. "Four hours south of London. It's one of my smaller estates. My staff will make you comfortable." He picked up a pen.

"You know we can't stay here," added Richard as Hawthorne pulled out a sheet of paper and began to write. "It's the first place Herriard will look. And moving you to another town house – or even a hotel – would start rumors that would attract his attention. My friend Charles can't help either. So going to Oakhaven will keep you out of sight."

She nodded, then froze as his friend's name suddenly connected the other two. Richard. Charles. The Earl of Hawthorne.

The Three Beaux.

Dear Lord, she'd fallen into a nest of degenerate rakehells.

Even living as an unpaid servant didn't insulate her from gossip. Everyone knew of the Beaux, for the tales titillated all classes. Their escapades were legion. So were their conquests.

The Earl of Hawthorne was renowned for the swath he'd cut through the demimonde. Tales claimed he bedded someone every night, but never the same person twice. His wealth was legendary, his exploits larger than life. Even seducing his best friend's fiancée did not tarnish his social standing, though he'd had to wed the girl. Richard's sister.

She shuddered.

Lord Charles Beaumont always had the most

desirable courtesan in London under his protection, yet he flirted with everyone he met and wasn't averse to seducing matrons. Rumors claimed he'd bedded most of society's hostesses. Like Hawthorne, he was wealthy, with an inviolable social position. Even being jilted in favor of Hawthorne hadn't hurt him.

Richard Hughes was different. Not in breeding – he was heir to a viscountcy. But the family coffers were dry, so he couldn't afford courtesans. Thus he limited his attentions to widows and matrons, who expected nothing beyond a sample of his amazing prowess. Such conquests had led to threats, fisticuffs, and at least one duel, all of which diminished his credit. Only the support of the other Beaux kept him acceptable. He was also known as a hellion, with many pranks and scrapes to his credit. Derrick hated Hughes. She didn't know why, but they were bitter enemies – which raised the question of why Richard was helping her.

She could understand his reputation as a rake. His potent masculinity demanded attention, saturating the air until it was hard to breathe. His gentleness made him all the more attractive. But if she had any sense, she would decline further assistance.

"Before we leave, she needs to have her ankle wrapped," Richard was saying. "It's the worst sprain I've ever seen."

"That bad?" Hawthorne shook his head. "My housekeeper can see after it. And you will need to change clothes. You can hardly travel unnoticed in formal attire. Help yourself to my wardrobe."

"What?" asked Georgiana, realizing she'd missed something.

Richard smiled. "Once the guests are gone, you will borrow a cloak and bonnet from Emily, then leave, accompanied by Hawthorne. If Herriard is watching, he will think you are Lady Hawthorne leaving on your wedding journey."

"But—"

"Don't fret. The Hawthornes aren't actually leaving until tomorrow. I will slip out the back, then follow. Once I'm certain Herriard isn't behind you, Hawthorne and I will change places. He can return to his bride, while you and I go to Oakhaven."

"You needn't accompany me. I appreciate the use of his estate, but I cannot trouble you further."

"Nonsense. Herriard will remain a threat until the

court severs his guardianship. If this ruse does not work – and it might not, for he knows you are here, and he might know when Hawthorne plans to leave – then he will follow. Even if we escape him now, he might check Oakhaven when he discovers that Hawthorne remains in town. I must be there to protect you.”

He was right. The very thought of Derrick finding her alone in the earl’s carriage made her stomach clench. Even Oakhaven would not be completely safe, for how could she trust the earl’s staff to turn away a lord who had a legal claim on her person?

She reluctantly nodded.

“Good. The housekeeper will bind your ankle and help you change. I will return when it is time to leave – we’ve been away from the guests too long already. In the meantime, eat. You’ve had nothing in hours and won’t have another chance for some time.”

He slipped out. Hawthorne studied her a moment longer, then followed. But before the door latched, she heard him murmur, “At least this lame duck is better than the last one.”

*Lame duck?* She shook her irritation away and turned to the plates on the desk. How could she have missed them? They were loaded with a vast array of delicacies the like of which she’d never seen before. Delectable aromas filled the room.

But even fabulous food could not keep her mind from the Beaux. The future had never seemed so uncertain. Would Richard seduce her? And would it matter if he did? Even losing her virtue to a rake was better than staying with Derrick.

Not that it would happen, she assured herself stoutly. The Beaux might have larger-than-life reputations, but no one had ever accused them of forcing a reluctant female. So as long as she remained reluctant, she would be safe.

Her only fight would be against her own base nature, which wondered why every voice that mentioned his prowess held awe. She must not let this unexpected attraction grow. He had no reason to push her.

Unless...

But he did not know how large her inheritance was. She’d already made light of it. Since the business had gone to her father’s partner, he wouldn’t expect her to

have anything beyond a reasonable dowry. If he ever found out otherwise...

One more reason to remain aloof. She could not cope with another fortune hunter.

— 3 —

Richard peered out the window as the carriage drew away from the tollgate and moved briskly south. So far their escape had gone smoothly. He'd given the carriage a ten-minute head start before following, then examined every rider and vehicle he passed as he caught up. There was no sign of Herriard, who must still be watching Hawthorne House. Their ruse had worked.

He hoped.

Unfortunately, his machinations couldn't guarantee safety. Herriard would play least in sight where there were witnesses. And he might suspect their destination. The man would have studied the Beaux during their years of animosity. Everyone in town knew about Oakhaven, for Jacob stayed there often, as did Richard. Scrutiny of their every move was the price the Beaux paid for notoriety.

He bit back a sigh. There was no point in mentioning the possibility to Georgiana. She had enough problems as it was. Her ankle had to hurt like the very devil. Binding it had let her walk from door to carriage without limping, aided by Jacob's arm around her shoulders. But she had been white-faced with pain by the time he and Jacob had traded places at the second tollgate. Now she sat on the facing seat, alternately biting her lip and staring out the window.

Richard wished he'd kept his horse instead of turning it over to Jacob. Riding inside the carriage was torturing him. Georgiana was too attractive. He'd chosen the opposite seat because he'd feared that rubbing her with every jolt would severely test his control. What he hadn't counted on was the effect of looking at her for four hours.

The housekeeper had arranged her hair into soft curls that did interesting things to his libido. As did her current gown – a different one than she'd worn earlier. It might be unfashionable, but it stretched tightly across a stunning bosom, leaving him awash in sensation as his body recalled how perfectly she fit

against him.

"Have you given further thought to a new guardian?" he asked to avoid hauling her into his lap so he could he ravish those luscious lips.

She shook her head. "The court will have to appoint someone. I have no suggestions."

"None?"

"Think," she snapped. "Few people know I exist. Even before Papa died, I spent most of my time with my governess. I'd barely recovered from his burial before Grandfather and my uncle died. Derrick kept me confined to the house, less visible even than his wife."

He nodded. "Now that I think on it, she never accepts invitations."

"Of course not. She must even deny callers."

"Why?"

"Derrick's orders. The house has not been redecorated in sixty years, so most of the furnishings are shabby. He refuses to waste money on it. Then there is the matter of fashion. Despite being a baroness, Margaret has a wardrobe no better than mine – simple gowns more suited to the working classes. Which proved fortunate in the end. Before I fled, I was able to don all of my gowns. Carrying a valise would have drawn attention."

He nodded, irritated that his investigations had revealed none of this information. Her words also explained why her bosom seemed more prominent than before. The borrowed valise under her seat must contain the rest of her wardrobe. "I will consider possible guardians. I know several men who might do."

"I doubt it. Aristocrats don't soil their hands with merchants' daughters."

"Wrong!" His temper snapped at yet another cut of a class she knew little about. "Hawthorne had a ward until recently. Her father was a soldier of no particular breeding, and her mother the bastard daughter of a whore. Yet he took her in and found her a decent husband. The only reason I won't ask him to take charge of you is his marriage. He deserves privacy for a time. Nor can I ask my father. Not because of your background," he added over her protest. "My mother's health is failing. I doubt she'll see Christmas. New responsibilities will hasten her demise."

"Oh." She had the grace to look abashed.

"Herriard's behavior is not typical of the aristocracy," he continued sternly. "Nor is Stagleigh's. Most of us can't stand either of them. Instead, remember your grandfather. I did not know him well, but he struck me as a reasonable and kindly gentleman."

"True." She sighed. "But you must know that most of your peers consider themselves superior to merchants. Perhaps we should find my guardian outside the aristocracy. Even Grandfather admitted that my breeding would reduce my credit."

"Not necessarily. While there are a few sticklers who will frown, the fact remains that many ladies are in your position. Consider Lady Jersey, whose mother was a banker's daughter. Yet she is an Almack's patroness with the power to ostracize the highest in the land. As long as your manners conform, you should be fine. You mentioned a governess. Who was she?"

"Miss Elizabeth Coburn, Sir Reginald Coburn's youngest daughter."

Richard raised his brows.

"Did you know him?"

"Not personally, though I've heard the stories. He lost everything at cards, including his estate. Drunk, of course, though that is no excuse for ignoring his duty. The shock drove him to his death."

"You are putting too nice a face on the incident. He wasn't a greenling gaming away his allowance. He was a forty-year-old man responsible for his own extensive family, four tenant families, and a hundred employees. Family and friends had often urged him to protect his estate by entailing it, but he refused. Just as he refused to learn anything from earlier losses – except cowardice. His wife had been furious after the previous disaster lost all of her jewelry, so rather than tell her that they must leave their home, he shot himself. Miss Elizabeth found his body the next morning."

"Poor girl."

"She rarely spoke of it. And she was never openly bitter. She did her best to mold me into a lady." She sighed. "Derrick turned her off the day Grandfather died. I'd always suspected he was cold, but that confirmed it. She would have starved if I hadn't written a glowing reference and convinced Grandfather's secretary to sign his name to it. It let her find a

position with a squire in Hampshire. When Derrick discovered that we were corresponding, he burned her letters and forbade further contact. Never again was the post left where anyone else could see it."

"I'm liking Herriard less and less."

"He deserves it. But returning to your question, Miss Elizabeth came to us when I was five, so I had her for ten years. And Mother was quick to correct any mistakes. She died when I was fourteen."

"Good. Your training settles the matter. I will speak to Lady Inslip – my friend Charles's mother," he added when she frowned. "Once she agrees to present you, we can ask Inslip to stand as your guardian. A marquess will carry the day in court no matter what protest Herriard raises."

"You don't know Derrick."

"I know Herriard very well. He'll lose – not that it matters, for he won't be able to bother you much longer anyway."

"Why?"

"He is a cheat. I've been trying to catch him for years."

"Why? Cheating at cards isn't illegal."

"True, but he would be banned from the clubs and dunned by his victims for recompense. The unpleasantness would probably drive him to the Continent. Not a satisfactory solution, but the only one available, at least until recently."

"What happened?"

"He switched to fraud. I'll be presenting evidence to Lords next week. In the meantime, the bishop will readily sever his guardianship. Fraud aside, the bishop is Inslip's cousin."

She frowned. "That should work in my favor," she agreed. "But I have no intention of letting Lady Inslip push me into society. I fully intend to set up my own establishment."

"We will discuss that later. For now, relax. In another hour we will stop for dinner. I can't ask the Oakhaven staff to feed us without warning."

\* \* \* \*

Georgiana laid down her fork and smiled. The food at the Yellow Oak was surprisingly tasty. Only the refreshments at Hawthorne House had been better – but they had been made for a wedding.

"Delicious," she said, wishing she had room for

more. "Do all inns serve food like this?"

Richard looked surprised. "Delicious? I would describe it as average myself. You *have* had a rough time of it, haven't you?"

"It is over."

He was opening his mouth to respond when a voice boomed outside the door. "Herriard! What are you doing so far from town?"

Georgiana gasped as all the blood drained from her head. "How—"

"Shhh!" Richard covered her mouth. He'd removed his gloves to dine, so his hand felt shockingly warm.

"Looking for my cousin." Herriard made his disgust clear.

"I didn't know you had a cousin."

"We don't talk about it much. My aunt married a tradesman."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter. The girl's a thief. I've tracked her this far, but..." The voices faded as the men moved across the hall to the taproom.

"Damn!" cursed Richard softly, dropping his hand.

"Who was that?" she hissed.

"Sir William Trent. He and Herriard are friends, though not close." He pressed his ear to the door, then frowned. "Herriard must have spotted Jacob returning to Hawthorne House. And he will have noted the carriage outside."

"I have to leave." She could barely choke out the words as her eyes searched frantically for another exit. Her thinking had been muddled in the church, but that was no longer true. Derrick was more devious than she'd thought. Branding her a thief gave him a huge advantage, for his oath alone would convince any court of her guilt. No one would accept a female's word over a lord's. Even worse, Richard would be prosecuted for helping her. Was that part of the plot? Derrick hated Richard. If he knew Richard meant to lay charges...

Hopelessness nearly overwhelmed her.

"Sit down and let me think." Richard paced to the window and back.

She sat, but her mind continued circling. She should have known that flight was useless. Unless she wed Stagleigh, Derrick would transport her for thef—

Dear God, but she was stupid. Transportation



wouldn't help him. But convicting her of grand theft would see her hung. As next of kin, he could then claim her inheritance. She might have to throw herself at Stagleigh to escape death.

She should have refused Richard's help the moment she'd realized his identity. He might be heir to a title, but for now he was a commoner. Even *his* word would be suspect when set against a lord's.

"I've got it." Richard's voice startled her. "Stay here while I speak to the coachman."

"I can't let you risk your reputation, or worse," she said, shaking her head. "This changes everything. He will see me hanged."

"No." He pulled her tightly against him, forcing her to meet his gaze.

Frissons of electricity rampaged along her nerves, making her dizzy. Rake, indeed. One touch could melt lead.

"You've done nothing wrong, Georgiana," he swore. "I will not let him abuse you. And Fate is clearly on your side. Witness Sir William's providential arrival. Gather your courage, my dear. I'll be back in a moment." He dropped a light kiss on her mouth and released her.

Before she could respond, he was gone.

Her lips tingled, muddling her thoughts. She could still feel his muscular form pressed against her. Was there really an alternative to Stagleigh or death?

She couldn't risk it. Nor could she believe anyone would risk his reputation – let alone his life – for a stranger. No man was that magnanimous. Richard must have an ulterior motive.

The most obvious one was her inheritance. Many aristocrats had invested in her father's ventures, to their benefit. And Richard admitted that he'd studied Derrick's family. It was possible that he'd not recognized her in the church – she rarely left the house. But he would certainly have known her father's name.

That she didn't want to believe he was driven by greed proved how dangerous he was. His charm was already affecting her. His every touch made her crave more. But succumbing to seduction played into his hands. Remaining with him also played into Derrick's. So she must leave. Maybe she could escape, or maybe Derrick would win. But either way, she must go now.

She limped to the door. As she reached for the latch, it opened.

Richard shut the door behind him and glared. "Where are you going?"

"I have to do this alone, Richard. Anyone who helps me risks prosecution. I couldn't bear to harm you."

"You don't trust me."

"It isn't a matter of trust," she insisted, cursing her delay. "I know Derrick. He won't back down. Charging me with theft will supersede my petition to the bishop. Charging you with abetting a thief will prevent your presentation to Lords and might well see you transported."

"And what will he claim was stolen?" Arms akimbo, he glared – and blocked the door.

"God knows. But his claims will convince any court that I'm guilty. He's a lord."

"I can produce a hundred lords who will testify that he is a liar and a cheat. I can also produce witnesses who will swear that he had nothing left to steal after last night's losses, and that you took nothing but the clothes on your back when you escaped his house."

"You don't know him."

Richard's face hardened. "I know him. Too well. Now, enough of this. He and Sir William are sharing a tankard of ale. We must be gone before they finish. Give me your cloak."

"Why?"

"It is leaving now. The bonnet, too." He handed her a black cloak and a man's hat.

"What are you doing?" she demanded even as she passed him her borrowed garments.

"One of Hawthorne's grooms is about your height. He will climb into the carriage and leave." A patterned tap sounded. Richard opened it to a man wearing the Hawthorne livery. "Here," said Richard, draping the cloak around the man's shoulders. He handed over the bonnet. "You know what to do."

The man tied the ribbons and left.

"I don't understand," said Georgiana. Her head was swimming.

"He now looks like you – that bonnet shields the face, which is why we chose it for you to begin with. The coachman will assist him inside, then address him by your name as he closes the door. They will continue to Oakhaven. The stable staff is too busy to watch

closely, so they will remember only that a lady drove off alone in the Hawthorne carriage.”

“But what about us? The landlord knows we are here. If we do not disappear along with the carriage, Derrick will find out.”

He ignored her. “How is your ankle?”

“It hurts.”

“Can you walk a hundred yards without drawing attention?”

“If I must.”

“Good. You will slip out the back and follow the stream to the spinney around the hill. It is out of sight of the inn. I will hire a horse and return to London, having seen you safely on your way to Oakhaven. I’ll pick you up by the spinney.”

“And return to town? I thought—”

“We will discuss that later. For the moment, we need distance between us and Herriard.” He tucked her hair under the hat, sorry to lose sight of those soft curls even for a few minutes. “Keep your head down and your skirts tucked in. No one should think twice about a gentleman slipping down to the stream to stretch his legs and take care of business. Just be grateful that Hawthorne’s footmen wear long cloaks.”

#### — 4 —

Richard waited until Georgiana reached the stream before heading for the stable. He could only pray she would be all right. Her face was several shades whiter than it had been earlier. He wasn’t sure if it was from pain or fear, but his only choice had been to watch her walk away. Alone. If they left together, someone would spot them.

He hired a horse and joked with the grooms, letting them know that his escort was no longer necessary. The lady could finish her journey alone while he returned to town for his usual evening activities – a wink hinted at what tonight’s activity would be. Then he rode back up the road. He’d known Herriard was in desperate straits. If Georgiana were not involved, he would let events play out on their own, for it was only fitting that Herriard’s own vices had been turned against him.

Last night had been the climax of a monthlong debauch during which Herriard had lost all the money

he'd taken in that fraud scheme, and then some. So he'd returned to what he knew best – cardsharpping.

The game had not gone according to plan, though. Herriard had been desperate and too drunk to think clearly. Watson was a known cheat who took his own brand of revenge against anyone who reneged on a debt. Smart men avoided him. Stupid men paid dearly.

Herriard might have thought he was the better cheat, but he hadn't even noticed when Watson replaced Herriard's deck with his own. Thus when Herriard made his move, Watson laid down a better hand. Herriard had signed vowels for ten thousand pounds. He had until Wednesday to pay.

Stagleigh was flush from recent wins, so he was the obvious choice to purchase Herriard's last remaining asset. And since Stagleigh enjoyed defiling innocence, he would pay a pretty penny for her. The situation made both men very dangerous.

Richard couldn't allow it, but he had no delusions about the lengths to which Herriard would go to regain possession of Georgiana. The only true protection he could offer her was his name.

Heat pooled in his groin.

He must wed soon if he wanted his mother to attend the ceremony. Assuring the succession would ease her mind at a time when fretting worsened her condition. With Emily now wed, marriage became even more urgent, for Emily had run the household for years. So he'd intended to use the remainder of the Season to find a wife.

Fate seemed to be helping him. Georgiana was much like his ideal wife. Marginal breeding. No fortune to speak of – merchants' dowries would hardly impress society. Excellent training. And after five years as Herriard's slave, even his modest circumstances would seem like heaven. As a bonus, her antipathy to society meant they could remain in the country much of the year, reducing his expenses.

He'd stayed in London after coming down from school because he'd needed freedom from his parents' scrutiny. And because liaisons were more difficult to arrange in Gloucestershire. But marriage negated both reasons. The Beaux had long since taken vows of marital fidelity.

This was no time to broach the subject, though. Despite that riding off alone technically compromised

her, he felt no obligation, for she was unharmed and would remain so. He had time to learn more about her, for they could not wed before her birthday. But soon...

He nodded as the spinney appeared around the corner. His immediate goal was to slip back into London without Herriard's knowledge. Once she was safely hidden, he could consider the future.

\* \* \* \*

Georgiana bit back a whimper as pain slashed up her leg, buckling her knee. Only grabbing a branch kept her upright. Walking a hundred yards had seemed easy when Richard had suggested it, but she'd barely made it.

She leaned weakly against a tree, praying that he could slip away without drawing Derrick's attention. She couldn't move another step. But at least Richard had revived her determination to escape. Giving up had never been her way. Even if Derrick won, she had to thank Richard for renewing her hope and her courage. She would not face her fate as a coward.

He'll win, whispered a voice in her mind. Derrick always does. No one can keep you safe.

Her newfound courage wavered, then collapsed entirely when hoofbeats approached along the road.

*Derrick!*

She tried to dodge behind the tree, but her legs wouldn't move. A sob escaped. When Richard appeared, she nearly swooned in relief.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, sliding to the ground. The horse stood dully behind him, showing no sign of spirit. A sluggard.

"Of course," she answered.

His eyes turned skeptical. "How bad is the pain?"

She sighed. "I can't walk another step."

He cut off a curse. "I shouldn't have—"

"There was no other choice."

"I know, but..." He shook his head, then lifted her across the horse, mounting behind her. Before she realized his intent, she was tight against his chest with his cloak encasing both of them. She had to work to keep from melting against him. His heat was too enticing, especially when his hand caressed her arm before taking up the reins. He was a rake to the bone.

"Relax, Georgiana," he murmured, letting the horse pick its way through the spinney. "I will take care of you. Herriard won't threaten you again." His mouth

nearly touched her ear.

“He won’t give up.”

“He will have no choice. So set aside your fear.” His arms pulled her closer against him. Her heartbeat quickened to match his.

She fought the warmth that spread from his touch. This sudden seductiveness – for how else could she describe his current behavior? – was suspicious, to say the least. Her fortune would tempt a saint, and God knew the Beaux weren’t saints, especially Richard. Now that they were alone, he might claim compromise, forcing her into marriage.

It wouldn’t be force.

Of course it would, she snapped at Temptation. She had no use for aristocrats and less for fortune hunters. Tying herself to Richard would destroy her.

They emerged from the trees and turned down a footpath between two fields, heading straight into the setting sun.

She stiffened. “I thought we were returning to London.”

“We are, but not by the Brighton road. Herriard’s carriage cannot follow us if we circle out to Richmond before turning back to town.”

“We’ll never make it before dark,” she protested. It would have been difficult anyway, but now they wouldn’t reach London for many hours.

“It can’t be helped. The ostler knows I am returning to town, which means that Herriard will also know. I hope he believes we parted company, but we can’t count on it, so remaining on the road is foolish.

She had to admit the logic of his argument. Riders could go anywhere, while drivers were restricted to roads. And even if Derrick left his carriage behind and hired a horse – which was unlikely, given his finances – he would have no trail to follow.

She relaxed, letting her head fall against Richard’s shoulder. She knew she shouldn’t, but she was tired and in too much pain to care. She needed to absorb his strength. There would be time later to plan the next step.

\* \* \* \*

Richard smiled when Georgiana fell asleep. She felt good curled against him. And maybe she finally trusted him.

But his smile soon slipped. The horse was a slug

that refused to move faster than a walk. He'd known the moment the groom led it out that it would be a problem, but raising a fuss would have drawn unwanted attention. And a better horse would have cost more than he had. His pride had turned down a loan from Jacob, which in retrospect had been stupid. He should have foreseen that plans could change, separating them from the carriage and Oakhaven.

Feeling far too exposed, he picked a path between fields and along rutted lanes, keeping hedgerows and stands of trees behind him. He also bypassed villages, for the fewer people who saw them, the more likely they would reach London undetected.

An hour passed before his fears waned. There was no sign of pursuit and no interest in their passage.

A second hour slid by. The sun dipped lower, playing peekaboo with the treetops and dazzling his eyes whenever it pierced the foliage.

Georgiana stirred in his arms.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Mmm." She stiffened as her eyes blinked open.

"Relax." He shifted her to a more comfortable position, ignoring what the motion did to his groin. "Are you thirsty?"

"Not quite."

"We should stop, though. London is still hours away. Most travelers halt at dusk, so seeking refreshments now will draw less notice than it would later."

"Are we at Richmond yet?"

"No. It's about five miles north of us."

"We could stop there."

An objection hovered on his lips, for he hadn't intended to go through Richmond itself, where he would likely encounter acquaintances – and not only his peers. Most of the innkeepers knew him, for he'd often eaten there with friends or liaisons.

Running into friends would settle the question of marriage, though. Georgiana would have to accept him, saving him from an argument. He could already imagine her objections.

But she had no idea how hard it would be to set up her own establishment. Nor did she understand how isolated she would become if she tried. It would sever any ties to society, of course. But her father's peers would also condemn her. Where would she find

friends? Marriage was clearly her best course. Even if a few brows lifted now, she would be ennobled when he inherited the viscountcy. That would terminate any doubts. The easiest way to assure that course was to be caught traveling together.

"Very well," he agreed. "Richmond it is. The Crown and Anchor has excellent ale and a meat pie that melts in your mouth." It was also the inn most likely to be jammed with acquaintances.

He turned north, following another footpath between two fields.

\* \* \* \*

Georgiana was appalled that she'd fallen asleep in Richard's arms. How had she relaxed so thoroughly? Her ankle should have kept her awake, if nothing else.

But this proved how dangerous he could be. One heated look from those brown eyes could seduce a statue, and those talented hands...

He'd carried her, held her, embraced her, caressed her. It was the first time she'd been touched since her father's death. She had never considered herself susceptible to male charm, so it was unnerving to realize how vulnerable she really was. A little kindness, a little warmth, and she melted into a pool of need.

It had to stop.

To divert her mind, she concentrated on her naïveté. Only an idiot would have thought Derrick would give up the income from her trust. He'd been living on it for five years. Losing it would force him to sell the town house and retire to his derelict country estate. He hated the country. And now that she understood his character, she had to admit that Margaret had saved her from an even worse fate. If Derrick had not already been saddled with a wife five years ago, he would have forced her to the altar much earlier. With him.

An intelligent ward would have run away long ago, slipping out when everyone was asleep. London was big enough so that he would never have found her. And proper planning would have turned up someone to help her. Someone besides a notorious rake.

Instead she had grown complaisant, thinking that caring for the boys made her indispensable. So while she'd dreamed of breaking free once she controlled her inheritance, she had done nothing to further that goal, not even consider the obstacles she would face.



Learning that unwed ladies required guardians had shocked her. It wasn't true of gentlemen, who were free when they came of age. But Derrick's guardianship would not have ended. Nor would he have stopped dipping into her funds. He would have found a way to confiscate everything.

What else had her ignorance overlooked?

Richard's arm shifted along her back, sending excitement rippling along her skin. Even his inadvertent touches burned her to the core. They felt nothing like her grandfather's pats as she'd cried on his shoulder after the funeral. Nor did they resemble her father's protective hugs – or even his congratulatory ones when he'd shared her excitement over a new accomplishment.

She banished the memories. Richard was not for her. No one was, least of all a fortune hunter.

To distract herself from his touch, she studied the sun as it dipped below the horizon, turning previously unnoticed cloudlets a brilliant orange. Lingered rays pierced the gathering night. "Pretty."

"Very. Are you warm enough?" He tugged his cloak tighter – forcing her closer against his chest.

"Quite."

"How is your ankle?"

"Much better. It no longer throbs."

"I wouldn't risk walking on it, though. The Crown and Anchor has a private parlor just inside the door, so I'll carry you."

"I can walk that far," she protested, not wanting to appear in public in his arms.

"We'll see." His tone made it clear that she would not walk, but she didn't argue. Time enough for that later.

He forded a stream, then turned down a narrow road. "We'll have to follow lanes from now on," he said. "Darkness makes it hard to see the footpaths. I don't want to ruin someone's crops."

His concern surprised her even more than his courtesy in stopping at the Yellow Oak so Hawthorne's staff needn't provide an unexpected meal. The aristocrats she knew cared only for themselves. Few would notice if they trampled a tenant's fields or disrupted a household. Fewer would care. Especially Derrick, who delighted in exerting his authority over underlings.

Richard's consideration was even odder, for it did not mesh with the Beaux' reputations as conscienceless rakehells. Which raised questions about Richard's character. Did gossip malign him?

"Why did you let your sister wed a rake like Hawthorne?" The question was out before she realized how rude it sounded.

"Jacob?" He sounded surprised. "He is one of the best men I know."

"But his reputation—"

"If you judge people solely on gossip, what are you doing with me?"

"I'm not quite sure," she admitted with a sigh. "I've had no time to think since fleeing this morning. It gave me a jolt to realize you were one of the Beaux."

"I suppose it was too much to hope you hadn't heard of us."

"Quite." She grinned. "People more isolated than I am know of your exploits."

"Not true. Oh, they've doubtless heard tales, but most rumors are exaggerated, and many are downright false."

"Really?" She twisted to look him in the eye.

"Really. Gossip loves scandal, so it twists anything out of the ordinary to make it more shocking. Events that contradict a scandalous image get swept under the rug. Virtues are ignored unless their owners are saints. Too boring."

"Are you saying that you didn't loose a bear in Lord Cardway's drawing room, where his prospective bride's father would find it?"

He laughed. "That one is true, I must admit. But a great many details disappeared in the retelling."

"Such as?"

"The girl had already refused Cardway's suit, but her father insisted she accept him – Cardway had offered a fortune for her. Very like Stagleigh's offer for you."

She gasped.

"Exactly. Cardway was obsessed with her – she is quite lovely. Convinced that she was just being coy, he ignored her refusal. Only after her father encountered the bear did the man reconsider the proposed alliance. By the time he learned that Cardway was not responsible for his scare, his daughter had accepted another suitor. Someone she loved."

"How did you become involved?"

"The man she loved is a friend."

"So why not tell people the truth?"

"Sometimes truth can do more harm than good. Cardway is a wealthy viscount, which makes him a marital prize. Her father was admired for negotiating such a good match. Had people known about her refusal, they would have ridiculed her, reducing her credit. Had they learned why the bear was there, I would have been roundly condemned for interfering. So I let people believe that a joke on Cardway had gone awry. Better for all concerned."

"Except Cardway."

"Actually, Cardway formed a new obsession within months. And the girl's father did not need the fortune Cardway offered. Neither of them was harmed by the incident. Both gained sympathy from society."

She fell silent, reflecting that the one who had been hurt was Richard, whose reputation had suffered from his presumed irresponsibility. Yet it didn't seem to bother him.

Perhaps he didn't know about her inheritance after all. She was obviously not the first lady he'd helped to escape an unwanted match, which explained Hawthorne's *lame duck* comment. Richard must make a habit of helping others. But such a virtue stood at odds with his reputation as a rake and prankster, so society ignored it.

Her heart warmed. There was more substance to him than she'd expected. He wasn't the malicious prankster rumor supposed. Was his reputation as a rake likewise exaggerated?

Before she could ask, he pulled the horse to a halt and backed up.

She glanced around, surprised that they were approaching an inn. Or had been. Richard whisked them around a corner, out of sight of the stable yard. His reason became clear when Stagleigh's voice cut through the night.

"...crested carriage with yellow wheels. A man and a woman. Both blond."

A coarser murmur was too soft to understand.

"My betrothed, damn him. Hughes abducted her. I must catch them before he ruins her."

Georgiana gasped.

Richard's hand slid up to cover her mouth. "Quiet,"

he whispered in her ear. "I underestimated Herriard. He is checking all the likely routes from London. This is another way to Oakhaven. And it's also the route to Gloucestershire."

"I cain't believe that, milord," drawled the ostler. Georgiana could almost see him shaking his head. "Master Hughes is a real gentleman, he is. Always 'as a kind word for us."

Stagleigh cursed. "The man's a villain. Have you seen him?"

"Not lately. Must be all of a month since he last drove this way. Part of a party, he was. Ten. Maybe twelve others."

"Today, man! Have you seen him today?"

"No, not today. Now Mr. Montgomery, he's in the taproom with a party of bucks. And—"

"Peter!" exclaimed another voice. "What are you doing out here? Thought you hated Richmond."

"I could say the same for you, Francis."

Francis laughed. "Sister's wedding next week. Dragged my feet so I could stop on the road – Mother is terrifying when she readies the castle for guests, and I've no use for my cousins. But you?"

"Chasing Hughes. He abducted my betrothed."

"Betrothed! I hadn't heard."

"I hadn't made an announcement. And if I don't catch the bastard—"

"That doesn't sound like Hughes," said Francis slowly. "Granted, he's a prankster, but he's never hurt anyone."

"But this is different." Stagleigh's voice grew fainter as he turned toward the inn. "Share a pint with me. My horse threw a shoe and won't be ready for a quarter hour."

"What is different about it?" Francis ignored the change of subject.

"The girl's an heiress. Hughes started sniffing around when he discovered her inheritance. Pounced whenever she poked her nose out the door. She complained, of course, to him and to me – we've been promised for years. But he must be in the briers again, for he snatched her this afternoon."

"Who is she?"

"Herriard's cousin. Father made a fortune in trade. All hers now—" A door slapped shut, cutting off their voices.

Richard's hand dug into her chin as he twisted her head to face him. "Heiress?"

"He exaggerates. The business went to Father's partner," she reminded him.

"He would hardly leave his only daughter penniless. I need facts, Miss Whittaker. How desperate is Herriard to find you?" Fury threaded his whisper. The combination seemed more ferocious than any of Derrick's rants.

But she refused to collapse. "Derrick demanded fifty thousand pounds. Stagleigh signed a contract to pay it."

— 5 —

*Fifty thou*— Richard nearly fell off the horse. "How much would that leave Stagleigh?"

"Nothing."

"You can't expect me to believe that. Stagleigh isn't stupid."

"But Derrick lied. He swore I was worth two hundred, but I can't be."

"Why?"

She sighed. "Papa left me thirty. There is no way the trustees could have increased the principle that much."

"It's possible."

"Not without investing returns. I've not seen a statement from the trust in five years, but Derrick has been living on the quarterly income. I would be shocked if anything was reinvested."

Richard gritted his teeth. He believed her, not that it mattered. Ten thousand made a girl an heiress. If Georgiana had thirty...

Dear Lord. He was squiring a damned heiress, not a waif. Why didn't she simply hire guards to keep Herriard away until her birthday? He had to get free of her before someone spotted them.

Stifling the attraction that had been growing all day, he kicked himself for not asking questions earlier. But at least he hadn't offered for her. Marriage was now out of the question.

Paying his own way was the only way he could live with himself and was how he'd retained his friendship with Jacob and Charles. He would never accept money from others. Nor could he keep Georgiana in the style

she'd enjoyed before Herriard. No one with her background would be satisfied with what he could offer.

Cold to the bone, he guided the horse around Richmond and headed for London.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"You should have mentioned your inheritance earlier. If I'd known how desperate Herriard was..." The man must be even more desperate than Richard had thought. Why else would he stoop to cheating his closest friend?

He kicked the horse into a reluctant trot. "At least the road to London will be clear. But we can't stop until we have you safely hidden."

"Where? Hawthorne House?"

"No. There is no way to hide you in Mayfair. Servants talk." How else did Lady Beatrice learn everything that happened? "But Charles owns a cottage that is currently empty. On Monday we'll speak to the solicitor. Insip can expedite your petition to the bishop. With luck, it will be decided this week."

He would have to stay with her, though, he admitted grimly. If Herriard was this desperate, he might find her.

Damnation! The last thing he needed was to live in a cottage with a damned heiress. But he would never forgive himself if Herriard found her before she was free.

At least Stagleigh would be easy to handle. Once he learned the truth, he would wash his hands of the affair.

But his earlier conclusion was truer than ever. Georgiana would never be safe without a husband. He must find her one. Immediately. Not him, of course. But only marriage would protect her.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they reached London, Richard was mad at the world and everything in it. Fate had played him a prank worse than any he'd ever pulled. Lust was driving him insane. Holding Georgiana in his lap for six hours had stretched his control to the limit. How the devil was he to remain aloof under the same roof with her for a week or more?

But he had to. Even if Herriard had dipped into her principle – which wasn't likely under most trust rules – she was far beyond his reach. He should have realized

it earlier. She might be uninformed about some things, but her merchant father would have taught her enough about finances that she would never try to live on the few hundred pounds he'd expected her to have.

He'd been unbelievably stupid. Even after he'd realized that her clothes did not match her breeding, he had not questioned his other impressions. He was too accustomed to people who hid empty purses behind the latest fashion to think an heiress would dress in rags. Now he was trapped.

He'd wracked his brains for a solution that would keep her safe without risking scandal or involving others. But there wasn't one. Until she was no longer Herriard's ward, he could not approach her trustees or anyone else who cared more for legalities than people.

So he was on his own. And the prospects were no better than they'd been earlier. He couldn't afford an inn – which would be dangerously compromising anyway. None of his many friends could house her. Which returned him to Charles's love nest.

Charles had dismissed his most recent mistress after proposing to Emily and hadn't yet replaced her. So the cottage remained vacant. Its staff was accustomed to ignoring whatever occurred under its roof. And it was far enough from Mayfair that gossip would spread slowly.

He would use false names, though, and wouldn't mention Georgiana to Charles.

"Where is this cottage?" asked Georgiana once they passed Hyde Park.

"A couple miles back. But I have to get permission to use it – which means finding Charles."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Probably White's. Pull that hat down to shade your face," he murmured into her ear. "You will have to hold the horse while I'm inside. Pretend to be a groom."

He turned up St. James's Street, his eyes searching the shadows for anyone he knew. So far they were in luck. It was after midnight, but the balls had not yet ended, and the farce was still under way at the theaters. In another hour the street would be mobbed as gentlemen converged on the clubs, but for now it was quiet. Only two carriages moved toward him, with another parked in front of Brooks's. The bow window at White's was empty, and the street denizens were not yet out in force. Most waited until they had their pick

of inebriated targets.

He ducked into a narrow passage between buildings and dismounted.

"Steady," he murmured, setting Georgiana on her feet. She was so stiff she nearly fell.

"What do I do?"

"Stay against the wall so the horse shields you from view. Don't talk to anyone."

She nodded, accepting the reins.

"I will be back as soon as possible." He strode away, praying that Charles was inside. The last thing he needed was to make a round of the brothels. Charles patronized several. Or he might have changed his mind and accepted one of the invitations that still arrived by the dozen every day. It would be another month before the Season wound down.

But his luck held. Charles was leaning over the hazard table – just as Richard had found him a week earlier. At least this time he wasn't drunk.

He waited until Charles lost the throw, then tapped him on the shoulder. "I need a moment," he murmured.

Charles raised his brows, but followed without a word.

"What?" he asked once they reached an empty corner of the reading room.

"Is your Kensington cottage still vacant?"

Charles nodded.

"May I use it for a few days?"

"Of course." But his eyes widened. Richard never begged favors.

"Thank you. When you write to the butler, please omit my name."

"Curious." Charles moved to a writing table and pulled out a piece of paper. "You've been odd all day."

"I'm avoiding Herriard."

"Ah. I thought I recognized that bellow in church this morning. What the devil does he want?"

Richard hesitated, but Charles was too stiff-rumped to risk the truth. "He may have learned about my meeting at Lords next week."

"So you found the evidence."

"And an unimpeachable witness. I've an appointment on Monday."

"If you live that long."

"Exactly. Herriard enlisted Stagleigh's help to find



me. I don't want them bothering Mother. She was ready to collapse by the time she headed home this afternoon."

"True. Should I mention that you've moved out of Hughes House?"

Richard nodded. "Casually. I've left town now that Emily is settled."

"Let me know if you need anything else."

"Of course." Not that he could involve Charles any further. He would demand marriage if he learned of today's escapade with Georgiana.

He couldn't wed her. Period.

But he couldn't help fretting over her, he admitted as he hurried toward the walkway. Not until he found her unscathed did he recognize the fear that had been knotting his shoulders.

Swearing under his breath, he shoved the letter into his pocket. In moments they were back on the horse and heading for Kensington.

## — 6 —

On Monday morning Georgiana sharpened a pen, hoping she could complete a letter to her trustees. But, as had happened all three times she'd tried on Sunday, her brain refused to cooperate. Richard dominated her thoughts, confusing her more with each passing hour.

When they'd fled the Yellow Oak, he'd been warm. Almost seductive. By the time they'd reached this cottage, he'd turned curt, barely controlling fury. At breakfast yesterday he'd been pleasant but aloof. At lunch he'd sent her into gales of laughter by describing mishaps he'd witnessed and pranks he'd played. His eyes had flashed with humor and camaraderie. Yet an hour later she'd heard him pacing and muttering in the next room, so irritated that his tension had seeped through the closed door to stifle her. And last night he'd blown hot and cold throughout dinner, then retired without even bidding her good night. So she shouldn't have been surprised that he'd been gone when she'd come down for breakfast.

Another oddity was that he'd stationed the maid outside her door both nights, as if he expected her to bolt at any moment. She didn't like the implication. It couldn't be for protection against Derrick – the maid

was all of sixty and quite dull-witted. So he must be keeping her fortune within reach.

She tried to force her mind back to the letter. It was time to remind her trustees that she was to take charge of her inheritance on her birthday. She must also warn them of Derrick's greed. Giving the money to Derrick to handle for her would not only break faith with her father but guarantee she never saw a groat of the funds. It shouldn't happen, of course, but she was rapidly learning that men too often twisted the law for their own benefit. And few believed females could be trusted with more than a few shillings.

She penned a salutation, then paused, mind blank.

Perhaps her problem was this sitting room instead of Richard. It was not designed to facilitate thought, being sumptuously furnished in red and gold, its satins and velvets blatantly sensual. A painting of naked nymphs cavorting in a garden hung above the fireplace. Several well-thumbed books sat atop a table, but she'd not dared examine them closely after one fell open to a shocking illustration. The memory had produced some very odd dreams last night.

Richard had seemed oblivious to the décor, proving his familiarity with such rooms – why this surprised her was a question she ignored. He *had* taken the main bedchamber for himself, though. Her one glimpse through the door had revealed some provocatively placed mirrors, so he did have some concern for her sensibilities.

Concentrate on the letter.

Yes, the letter. No purpose was served by imagining that illustration brought to life in front of a mirror, with Richard's hand on her—

She wrenched her mind back to business. How could she convince her trustees to ignore Derrick's claims? Derrick was a lord. She was an unknown who had met them only once, when she'd been fifteen. Why would he—

Richard pushed open the door. He was frowning.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Nothing you need to fret over." He smoothed his expression. "I met with Hawthorne's solicitor. He will present your petition to the bishop this afternoon. Insip's support should gain you a hearing tomorrow. A notice to that effect is on its way to Herriard."

"So fast."

"There are times when influence is useful. I also spoke with Inslip. He will call on you this afternoon and will accept your guardianship, if you approve. We can still find someone else if need be, but I believe you will suit."

She wasn't so sure, but he was in no mood to argue. So she must prepare to meet a marquess.

A glance at her gown made her cringe. Brushing had helped, but it remained unfashionable and shabby. It was also her only gown at the moment. She'd left her other ones in Hawthorne's carriage.

Shaking her head, she returned to her letter. Now that she had a willing guardian and a definite hearing with the bishop, her words flowed easily.

\* \* \* \*

Richard stood when Tester showed Inslip into the sitting room. Once the butler left, Richard performed introductions.

Arranging this meeting had been tricky. The staff did not know his name or Georgiana's. He hoped to survive Inslip's call with that situation intact. And inviting Charles's father into Charles's love nest was not done, so he'd not mentioned whose cottage he was using. If he wasn't careful, the half-truths would soon strangle him.

"Miss Whittaker," Inslip said, pressing her hand before taking the seat she indicated. He turned his gaze on Richard. "This tangle is worse than you implied, Hughes."

"What happened?"

"Stagleigh and Herriard returned to town this morning."

"Then Stagleigh should now be at Herriard's throat."

"Why?" asked Georgiana.

"I sent him proof that Herriard was cheating him."

"He hasn't received it," said Inslip. "They went directly to Herriard House. Half an hour later, Stagleigh rode north."

"Why?" This time Richard asked the question.

"Herriard claims you abducted his ward and are headed for Scotland."

"Absurd!" Georgiana snapped.

"So they've adopted Stagleigh's explanation," murmured Richard. "I'm surprised Herriard gave in on that point. Or perhaps not. He must know he can't prove theft."

"What theft?" asked Inslip.

"Yesterday Herriard claimed Miss Whittaker had robbed him. It was Stagleigh who swore I'd abducted his betrothed."

"Which is ridiculous," insisted Georgiana. "Even the groom at that inn didn't believe him, so why would they expect society to?"

"But it fits his reputation very well," said Inslip. "Many will accept the claim."

Richard's face heated as Inslip's gaze clashed with his own. "Not those who know me," he swore. "I have no use for heiresses."

"I know that. The Beaux know that. But most of society believes otherwise. This escapade has placed Miss Whittaker in an untenable position and destroyed what was left of your reputation."

Richard shrugged. He cared nothing for what society thought of him. Only his friends' opinions mattered.

"I won't be responsible for hurting you," said Georgiana. "Surely there is a way to counter these lies."

"They will die the moment Stagleigh realizes that Herriard tricked him into handing over your entire trust and then some," swore Richard. When Inslip raised his brows, he let Georgiana explain her cousin's perfidy, then added, "So there is no problem. Stagleigh will recant his claims. Herriard's credibility is already suspect and will disappear entirely once I present my evidence to Lords."

"Wasn't your meeting today?"

"I rescheduled for Wednesday. By then the bishop will have ruled on Miss Whittaker's petition."

"Maybe, but she should immediately move to Inslip House. That will—"

"No." Richard glared.

Inslip raised his brows.

"That would play into Herriard's hands. Moving her now would raise the question of where she has been for two days. Once you are officially her guardian, bringing her to Inslip House will seem natural. Few will wonder where she was previously."

"I don't see—"

"If anyone who deserves a response wants details, you are keeping her at another property until your status is official. You don't wish to burden Lady Inslip and your daughter with Herriard's temper."

"But I have no other property near town."

Richard gave in to the inevitable. "Charles does."

Inslip's gaze took in the décor. "I see."

Richard pressed his advantage. "Knowing that Herriard is greedy and vicious, you had to hide her until her legal status was settled."

"Your reputation will still suffer."

"I doubt it. Herriard must already regret mentioning her. People will demand to know who she is and what she's been doing these past five years. The barrage must fluster him."

"What are you planning?" Inslip's eyes gleamed.

"I will make the usual social rounds tonight, disproving his claim that I am headed for Scotland." It might make Charles seem curiously uninformed, but there was no help for it. "A few words to Lady Beatrice will raise the awkward questions that Herriard doesn't want to face – like why society knows nothing of his ward's existence though she's lived with him for years, what his arrangement was with Stagleigh, and how that arrangement relates to Friday's losses. Once he is exposed as a scoundrel, society will welcome Miss Whittaker with open arms. She will be feted for surviving his plots. If anyone asks where you met her, you were introduced at Emily's wedding breakfast. Upon hearing her story, you immediately offered your support."

"Perhaps that will work," he grudgingly agreed. "But don't wait to call on Lady Beatrice. Go now. Herriard's lies are already on every tongue. You want the truth out before evening. I will remain here and become acquainted with Miss Whittaker."

Richard nodded. The errand should take only an hour. Inslip would watch her until then.

His growing need to protect her nearly suffocated him. He beat it back, reminding himself that she was not for him. Never would it be said that he had feathered his nest with a lady's fortune.

## — 7 —

Richard inhaled deeply as he followed the butler to the drawing room. Lady Beatrice was not a woman he enjoyed confronting, especially when he was the subject of gossip.

She gestured him to a seat, her face the grimmest

he'd ever seen it. Even Emily's announcement that she had jilted Charles to wed Jacob hadn't made her this disapproving.

"Thank you for seeing me," he said, feigning calm.

"I trust you have an explanation."

He nodded. "The very fact that I am in London should tell you that Herriard is lying."

"Why?"

"To confiscate his ward's trust so he can cover Friday's gaming debts. To discredit me before I can present evidence to Lords accusing him of fraud. To—"

His tongue froze as her eyes widened in shock. He'd done a better job of hiding his investigation than he'd thought. Few people could surprise Lady Beatrice. No one surpassed her knowledge of society. She knew everything that happened almost before the participants did.

She stroked her chin. "Let's start with his ward. Who is she?"

"Miss Georgiana Whittaker. Her mother was Herriard's paternal aunt. Her father was a merchant – Whittaker and Metcalf Imports." Again her eyes widened. "Herriard has had the care of her since his grandfather's death."

"Five years?" Her face relaxed, thawing the air. She handed him a glass of wine, then poured tea for herself.

"Five years. Miss Whittaker's father died a week before the old baron's accident. His will named the baron as her guardian. Herriard inherited that duty along with the title."

"How old was she?"

"Fifteen. Her grandfather had planned to bring her out, but Herriard refused. He has used her as an unpaid governess while squandering her income on his gaming."

Lady Beatrice made a sound that in a less exalted person might be called a growl. "How long have you known?"

This was where he must be careful, Richard reminded himself. "Not long," he said calmly. "Herriard kept her well hidden, so even though I've been keeping an eye on him for some time—"

"Since he cheated you."

He nodded, not surprised she knew about it, though he'd kept the matter quiet. "Exactly. The Beaux dealt

with that incident and warned him what would happen if he fleeced anyone else. For a time he was careful to live within his income – at least, I thought it was his until recently.”

“How recently?”

“Last week. But Herriard is incapable of watching his purse. The next time he ran short, he fleeced Rothmore.”

“Precipitating his suicide.”

“Exactly. It was a private game that I learned about too late.” A mistake he still rued. “I dug deeper into Herriard’s affairs afterward, forcing him to abandon cardsharpping. The next time he needed money, he set up a railroad scheme that fleeced Jameson, among others.”

“Ahh.” Her eyes gleamed.

“It was out-and-out fraud – no rail company existed. So he’ll finally pay. I’ll present the evidence to Lords on Wednesday.”

“You’ve hidden your activities well.”

“I would not have succeeded if I’d talked about it.”

She nodded. “So how does abducting Miss Whittaker fit your plans?”

“I didn’t abduct her. She has long sought to escape Herriard’s abuse. When she heard him blustering about my investigation, she decided to seek my help once she came of age. Herriard’s losses last Friday forced her to act early. She heard him selling her to Stagleigh the next morning, so she fled. It was easy to find me. Everyone in town knew I’d be at St. George’s for Emily’s wedding.”

“True. So you helped her.”

He nodded. “I introduced her to Inslip, who will take over as her guardian, but she must remain hidden until the bishop rules on her petition tomorrow.”

“Herriard swears he tracked you to Oakhaven.”

“He did. I had to distract him while Inslip spirited Miss Whittaker away. One of Hawthorne’s grooms accompanied me, dressed in a cloak and bonnet.”

She shook her head. “Another of your pranks.”

“I wouldn’t call it that.” He kept his hands relaxed, but it wasn’t easy.

She ignored his protest. “This one went too far, Hughes.”

His eyes snapped together. “Should I have returned her to Herriard when she begged for help? No one

deserves that fate, especially Georg— Miss Whittaker. Her breeding is every bit as good as Lady Jersey's. And despite years of mistreatment at Herriard's hands, she remains sweet."

"You know her well."

Richard cursed himself for losing his temper. "My studies of Herriard made it easy to investigate her claims once I learned of her existence."

"Hmm." She pursed her lips for a long moment. "It's true about her breeding, and it's true that her grandfather accepted her parents' marriage. I remember the incident well."

She would.

"I can quash most of the stories, Hughes," she continued. "And I will, for I agree that Herriard is lying. But your little charade with the groom succeeded too well. People saw you, and now that Herriard claims abduction, they no longer think that jaunt was one of your affairs. Her reputation will suffer unless you wed her."

"No." He continued over her protest. "She has come to no harm, as you know full well. She is under Inslip's care and attended by servants." He almost offered to produce the groom, but didn't know if the man would back his half-truths. Or if Inslip would, for that matter. Any hint that Georgiana had accompanied him in truth would doom her. "I will not condemn Miss Whittaker to another situation not of her choosing. Nor will I be branded a fortune hunter."

"You would rather be branded a cad?"

"That is not an issue. If necessary, I will retire to the country. London is rapidly losing its charm anyway."

"Flight would imply guilt, raising new suspicions about her." She held his eyes. "You will wed the girl. If pride won't let you use her fortune, then put it in trust for your children."

"No. Do you want to lend credence to Herriard's lie?"

"I'll see that it won't."

"Even your power has bounds, my lady. You cannot force me, nor will your conscience let you malign her when you know full well that she is blameless. As for marriage, Inslip will bring her out next Season, though she may surprise him by refusing. She has a low opinion of men and a lower one of the aristocracy – not that I can blame her, given her experiences."

"You did not think poorly of my power when you



came here.”

“I don’t. Your word can expose Herriard’s lies in a trice. But I draw the line at accepting a marriage I do not want. Miss Whittaker is in good hands and will remain so.”

“Oh, you want her. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Balderdash!”

She smiled. “You haven’t changed a bit, Hughes. Just as prideful and touchy as when you came down from school. I won’t condemn you in public, and I’ll refute Herriard’s claims. But I urge you to reconsider. There is a spark in your eye whenever you mention her that tells me you are not indifferent. I suspect you know her better than you care to admit. Don’t let pride stand in the way of the best marriage you could find.”

Richard cursed himself, but relief was stronger than irritation. Lady Beatrice would expose Herriard, and she would let Georgiana prove herself worthy. One meeting would convince her of Georgiana’s character.

He needed to return to the cottage posthaste but kept himself in check for another quarter hour while Lady Beatrice related the news of the day. Then he excused himself and headed back to Kensington.

\* \* \* \*

Georgiana nearly followed Richard out of the sitting room. She knew nothing about entertaining lords – not even barons like Derrick. What was she supposed to do with a marquess?

The question was answered when Tester silently deposited a tea tray at her elbow and departed. It had been years since she’d presided over one, but she hadn’t forgotten how.

Inslip set her at ease with tales of her grandfather, who had been one of his closer friends. They were alike in many ways. While she suspected that Inslip could be ruthless when necessary, today he had chosen kindness and the same bluff camaraderie she had found with her grandfather. Perhaps she could be comfortable with his family after all.

“It would be best if you accepted invitations immediately,” he said once he’d explained how the guardianship would work. “All else aside, your appearance will go far to lay Herriard’s lies to rest.”

“You do understand that my governess left when I was fifteen.”

“It doesn’t show. And my wife will review manners

with you. Your most pressing concern will be learning the names and stations of those you will meet. And clothing, of course, though her dressmaker can remedy that soon enough.”

Her reply died when Tester returned, a round silver tray resting on one palm. “A message for you, my lord. Urgent, he said.”

Inslip accepted the missive and broke the seal. His forehead creased into a frown.

“Problem?” asked Georgiana as Tester departed.

“A small one, but it needs immediate attention. If you will excuse me, my dear? We will expect you by dinner tomorrow. Tell Hughes to arrange for a decent gown. Mademoiselle Jeanette dresses my wife. Let her know that Lady Inslip will return with you on Wednesday to order a complete wardrobe.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

He pressed her hand, then left.

Georgiana paced the sitting room, turning the meeting over in her mind. Richard was right. Not all nobles were venal. Her grandfather had been a loving man who had tried always to do the right thing. Inslip seemed the same – as did Richard, she admitted. He was kind and caring and nothing like his reputation. He might be a prankster, but he wasn’t callous or cruel. Even the bear had served a purpose and done no real harm.

She was guilty of judging without facts. Worse, her complaint that Richard blew hot and cold and held himself aloof applied a higher standard to him than to herself. She was doing the same thing – pushing him away for fear that he wanted her trust.

*I have no use for heiresses.*

It was true. He’d not turned cold until Stagleigh mentioned her inheritance. Then his eyes had flashed in fury – not because she’d withheld information, as he’d claimed, but because he wanted none of her money. If anyone had seen them together and cried compromise...

She reviewed everything that had happened since she’d entered St. George’s. He’d put himself out to help her, even during his sister’s wedding. He’d protected her from Derrick, made arrangements for an honorable future, and kept servants close at hand to guard her reputation even as Derrick was blackening his. Not once had he taken advantage of her. She wished he

had.

You are so blind!

She needed his arms around her. And not just because she felt safe in his embrace. He stirred her as no other man could, making her long for his touch, his lips, his—

It was only gratitude, she insisted, refusing to believe that she could fall in love so quickly – and with a rake, of all people. She'd been desperate to escape Derrick. Richard had stepped in to help. Of course she would feel grateful.

But her heart didn't believe it. Inslip's plan to bring her out did not interest her. She did not want to parade about London's marriage mart seeking a husband. The only man she wanted would walk through that door any minute.

So how could she overcome his antipathy to her fortune?

Pacing produced no ideas. Nor did leafing through those books. They merely raised peculiar sensations she didn't know what to do with. She was wondering if throwing herself into his arms might work when a commotion in the hall announced his return.

She sank onto the couch and raised the cup of now-cold tea to her lips.

Derrick strode through the door.

Tea splashed across the carpet.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded coldly. But her heart was already hammering in her chest. She'd seen that look before, though never directed at her. The last time, he'd beaten his heir badly enough to confine the boy to bed for a week.

"Returning you to the bosom of your family." His smile belied his cold eyes.

"No."

"I am your guardian, Georgie. You will do as I say."

"The bishop disagrees. Now leave. You are not welcome here."

He laughed, a dangerous sound. "The bishop won't rule until tomorrow. Today I'm your guardian and master of your fate. Did you really think to escape me?"

"How did you find me?"

"Followed Inslip. The minute I got that notice, I knew he would lead me to you."

"So you lured him away."

"Enough. It's time you learned your place, Georgie."

"Never!"

"You have no choice. My word is all that matters. The arrangements are made. You will be Stagleigh's wife by dinner."

"Not when he learns how badly you are cheating him."

"I have a signed contract. There is nothing he can do now." He jerked her to her feet.

She screamed, dragging her nails down his face before he could pin her arms.

"You'll pay for that," he grunted as she kicked him. His slap snapped her head sideways. Twisting her against him with an arm like a steel band, he dragged her toward the door.

Tester was sprawled in the hall, unconscious.

— 8 —

Richard spurred his horse toward Kensington, a growing fear that something was wrong urging him faster. It made no sense, but he had to make sure that Georgiana was safe.

He dodged through a narrow gap between two wagons and cut down an alley, grateful to have his own horse beneath him instead of Saturday's slug. It willingly broke into a canter.

Tension mounted as he considered the disasters that might befall her. He shouldn't have left her behind, even with Inslip. The man didn't understand how beastly Herriard could be.

Logic stepped in to point out that Herriard didn't know where she was. There was no need to ride *ventre à terre* to her rescue. But he didn't slow. Nor could he outrun Lady Beatrice's voice, which still hammered at his head.

She could not seriously believe that Herriard's lies could harm Georgiana. Not with both she and Inslip denying them. So she must mean to manipulate him into marriage. She smiled indulgently on young men sowing oats, as long as they played by the rules. But her indulgence ended at age thirty, by which time she demanded responsibility and an eye to the future. Since he was rapidly approaching that age, she would expect him to set up his nursery. Jacob's marriage had cracked the carefree image of the Beaux, encouraging

her.

He admitted that he needed a wife. Just not Georgiana. No matter how much he liked her – and two days in her company had made him like her a lot – she remained ineligible. His allowance let him live comfortably. Once he acceded to the title, he would have even more, though he hoped that day would not arrive for many years. He did not need to fill his coffers with someone else's fortune.

He turned a corner and nearly ran down a carriage headed toward Mayfair. Not until it passed did he identify the crest.

Inslip.

He kicked his horse to a gallop. There was no reason that Inslip's departure should portend disaster, but he knew Georgiana was in trouble. His dread increased when he spotted a strange carriage in front of the cottage.

Herriard. It had to be.

He tossed the reins over a bush, then charged through the door. Tester lay bleeding on the floor. Herriard was dragging Georgiana from the sitting room. His bloody face stirred Richard's pride that Georgiana had put up a good fight.

"Let her go," he snapped, leaping forward. His fist caught Herriard's shoulder.

Georgiana twisted free.

"You've annoyed me for the last time, Hughes." Herriard shoved Richard off balance.

Richard ducked a would-be facer, then landed a blow to the chest.

Herriard yelled for his coachman.

\* \* \* \*

Georgiana gasped as Derrick's coachman jumped down from the carriage, clearly visible through the open front door. She bolted across the hall to lock it.

"Bitch!" snapped Derrick even as his fist slammed into Richard's jaw.

The housekeeper rushed in and screamed when she spotted her husband.

Derrick sidestepped a punch, tripped on Tester's leg, and staggered.

Georgiana pulled the butler out of the way as Richard took advantage of Derrick's distraction to aim a kick at his groin.

"Foul!" cursed Derrick, twisting so the blow landed

on his thigh.

"Gentlemen's rules apply only to gentlemen," snapped Richard.

"Then counter this." Derrick pulled a long-bladed knife from his boot and charged.

"No!" Georgiana grabbed Tester's tray and spun it toward Derrick. It struck his wrist, deflecting the blow. She jumped on his back, ripping at his hair as Richard grasped the man's knife hand.

"I'll kill you!" choked Derrick.

"Never!" Richard's free fist plowed into his jaw. A second blow struck his temple.

Derrick crumbled, unconscious.

Richard kicked the knife aside, then pulled her into his arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? He hit you." His hand gently traced her cheek.

Sparks raced down her spine, weakening her knees. She hooked her arms around his neck to keep from falling. "It was only one slap, but thank God you arrived when you did." The memory set her whole body trembling.

"Steady, sweetheart," he murmured, pulling her head against his shoulder. "You acquitted yourself well. Don't fall apart now."

"I c-can't stop."

"Reaction. I should have realized..." He sat on the stairs, pulling her into his lap. "Put your head down. You'll feel better in a minute."

Rushing blood muffled all sound. Spots danced before her eyes, but closing them but made the world seem even vaguer. From a great distance, she heard Richard send the housekeeper for cord.

By the time the woman returned, Georgiana had pulled herself together, so Richard set her down and trussed Derrick, then bent over Tester.

"Is he all right?" she asked, irritated that weakness kept her from helping. But the thought of rising turned her stomach over.

"He's coming around. Can you get him to bed?" he added to Mrs. Tester as the butler shakily sat up.

The housekeeper nodded.

"Good. Send for a constable when you have him settled."

\* \* \* \*

Richard helped Georgiana into the sitting room, berating himself for leaving her. He should have postponed his visit to Lady Beatrice. Salvaging his reputation meant nothing compared to Georgiana's safety.

Seeing her in Herriard's grasp had put his pride in perspective. He loved her. The thought of her wed to someone else made his blood boil. No one would cherish her as he could – and would. The devil with what others might think of his choice. And the devil with whatever names they called him.

Instead of settling her on the couch as he'd intended, he pulled her against him, needing her warmth to convince himself that she was truly all right.

"Forgive me, sweetheart," he murmured in her ear. "I should have protected you better."

"You did everything you could."

"Obviously not. Herriard found you."

She pulled back to meet his gaze. "Richard, you have done more than anyone could expect. If not for you, Derrick would have caught me at St. George's. Or at Hawthorne House. Or the Yellow Oak. Or any other place we've been." Her hand cupped his cheek.

He turned to place a kiss on her palm. "I should have done more."

"Why?"

"Because I love you." When her eyes widened, he kicked himself for making the declaration sound like a curse. "I love you," he repeated, softening the tone. "I should have realized it earlier, but my pride refused to accept that Fate had offered me the perfect wife when I least expected it."

"Pride can be a problem," she agreed, sliding her hands into his hair. "I've enough of it myself. When I realized who you were, I thought you were helping me so you could take over my inheritance."

"I ignored my attraction because I didn't want your inheritance."

She nodded. "I finally realized that. Only then could I admit that I love you."

His heart swelled at the words. Bending, he kissed her softly, then with increasing urgency. Her taste exploded in his mouth, branding itself on his soul. Her hands explored his shoulders as she pressed closer against him. Love burned away the last fear, opening

the doors to a future he had never dared consider.

"I love you," he repeated, laying her on the couch.  
"You're mine. Forever."

## **Epilogue**

Four weeks later Richard stood before the altar at St. George's of Hanover Square and watched Georgiana approach. She was breathtakingly beautiful in a gown that showed off her glorious bosom and clung to her sleek legs. Her smile made him wish the service was over so they could be alone.

Totally alone. The past month had been too frustrating.

Herriard had escaped from the constable and fled the country. But he was no longer a problem. If he ever returned, he would be hanged, thanks to Stagleigh.

Stagleigh's fury when he discovered Herriard's deceit had forged an alliance with Richard. His revelations had not only supported Richard's charges but added new, more serious ones, sealing Herriard's fate.

Richard was content to give Stagleigh the credit. All he wanted was Georgiana. She had taken society by storm, becoming so popular that they could rarely steal a moment alone. But their betrothal was finally over. Tonight...

She reached his side, radiant in the light streaming through the stained-glass window beyond the choir. Thunderous organ music lifted his spirits higher than ever. As he raised her hand for a lingering kiss, the heat in her eyes nearly buckled his knees. Tonight...

The bishop stepped forward. "Dearly beloved..."

Richard kept his eyes fixed on Georgiana's. Only a month had passed since he'd last heard those words. Who would have guessed how much could change?

When it was time for his vows, his voice filled the nave. "I, Richard ... take thee, Georgiana ... for richer or poorer..."

Love was worth more than any fortune. Love and Georgiana.

## **THE ULTIMATE MAGIC**



## The Three Beaux, Part 3

Allison Lane

— 1 —

December 22, 1818

“How dare you call me foolish?” snarled Diana Russell. “Wedding Giles is a mistake, I tell you. There’s no magic when we’re together. He won’t even talk to me! I *won’t* tie myself to a man who ignores me. I won’t! So leave me alone!” She slammed out of the room.

Cursing, Edith Knolton followed. If Diana made it to the altar without scandal, it would be a miracle.

“Only four more days,” she reminded herself as she strode down the hall. Once the wedding was over, she could return home, celebrate a belated Christmas with her family, then relax while she studied the employment offers she was already receiving – but only if Diana avoided scandal. Who would hire a finishing governess who couldn’t control her charge?

The fear of scandal loomed larger every day. Diana was arrogant, selfish, and willful at the best of times. Now that doubts about her betrothal to Giles Merrimont had set in...

Nothing Edith said helped. Diana expected him to mimic the fawning cubs who formed her court – her blue-eyed, blonde loveliness had turned heads all her life. But Giles was a man in his prime, his temperament perfectly suited to the sober negotiations he conducted for the Foreign Office. Girlish whims annoyed him, especially Diana’s insistence on daily proof that she was the center of his world.

She wasn’t.

Edith shook her head. There was no ignoring that Giles was often called to his office with little advance notice. If Diana fell into hysterics every time the Crown disrupted her plans, no one would blame Giles for shutting her away. Such antics could jeopardize his position.

No footsteps clattered up the staircase, so Edith hurried toward the side door.

She should have followed her custom and taken a new post the moment Diana accepted Giles’s offer. Her

job was to prepare girls for their Season, then chaperon them until they made a match. This was the first time she'd agreed to remain through the wedding – and the last. Between Lady Russell's fragile nerves and Diana's megrims, what should have been another feather in Edith's cap threatened to become her first failure.

As Edith rounded the last corner, she saw Diana slip outside. Since fleeing Edith, the girl had donned her smartest cloak. What did she intend this time?

Edith hoped it would be a brisk ride to settle her nerves, but that wasn't likely. Diana wasn't wearing a habit. The girl would never climb on a horse without proper attire and an admiring audience.

Edith feared that Diana was headed for an assignation. This latest outburst seemed contrived, the petulance false, the tears feigned. That she'd stashed a cloak nearby before staging her little drama made it a certainty. She was probably meeting Mr. Jessup. Their flirtation last night had raised more than a few brows.

Even last week Edith would have trusted Jessup – he was Giles's cousin, best friend, and official witness for the wedding. But he'd been behaving oddly since arriving at Russell House four days earlier, as if determined to prevent this marriage. Giles's diplomatic mask revealed none of his feelings, but something was clearly wrong between the men.

Icy wind slammed into Edith's face when she reached the terrace, but she had no time to fetch her own cloak. Diana was already out of sight, probably in the wilderness walk that skirted the drive. Shivering, Edith ran after her.

The breeding that gave Edith access to society let her command a high salary. But the nature of her work meant that few posts lasted more than a year. Even a small smudge on her record could affect future employment. If Diana jilted Giles, many would blame Edith for the resulting scandal.

She'd known that accepting this post had been risky, of course, but Sir Waldo Russell had offered a huge premium for her services. One meeting had convinced Edith that Diana was as spoiled a beauty as walked the earth, but she'd felt up to the challenge. Hadn't she got the impish Bedford twins safely settled?

And she *had* managed until now, softening Diana's arrogance enough that the girl had caught Giles's eye.

He was the son of a viscount and had excellent prospects – many believed he would be Foreign Secretary one day – so it was an outstanding match for the daughter of a minor baronet. Edith should have left Sir Waldo's employ the next day. But she'd known that Diana needed further training in protocol and world affairs if she hoped to succeed as a diplomatic hostess, so she'd agreed to stay. Now...

"Four more days," she repeated as the path twisted through shrubbery so thick she could rarely see more than a dozen feet ahead.

She shivered in the icy cold, cursing her own stupidity. She should have spoken to Sir Waldo last night. Yes, he would have lectured Diana about responsibility and duty, putting the girl's back up and likely making her worse. And yes, his opinion of Edith's competency would have fallen, jeopardizing her bonus. But he would have designated a couple of footmen to watch his daughter. Edith couldn't do it alone, as this latest start demonstrated.

"Well, well. A delectable morsel rushing to join me."

*Not now!* Edith nearly snapped as she skidded to a halt. Diana's dissolute brother stood squarely in the path, drunk, though it was barely three. A mad dog could pose no more danger.

Peter grinned maliciously. "You've been avoiding me, my sweet."

"My duties keep me busy with Diana." She warily backed a step, then another. At twenty-two, Peter was a vicious bully who took what he wanted – which just now was her. Not that he liked her, but she had stupidly made her disdain clear when he'd tried to steal a kiss last week. He hated rejection.

"Your duties are whatever I say they are," he snarled, springing.

Even as she turned to flee, he slammed her into a tree.

A scream escaped. She clamped her mouth shut, horrified. If anyone discovered her with Peter, her reputation would shatter.

"Shout all you want," he panted, rubbing against her. "No one can hear."

It was all too true. Few would brave today's harsh wind, so she was on her own. "Leave me alone!" she spat, stretching until she could sink her teeth into his neck above his cravat. As he recoiled, she jerked a

hand free and gouged his face, drawing blood.

But there was no escape. His backhand snapped her head sideways. Fingers closed around her throat even as he hissed, "Claw me again and you'll die, bitch. But if you satisfy me well enough, I'll let you live."

*Live?* she wanted to shout. *How?* Without her reputation, she had nothing.

Closing her eyes, she again scratched at his face. Death was preferable to ruination. Even if she somehow escaped this encounter, she would be ruined. All he had to do was brag that she'd begged to be taken. No one ever believed a servant over a gentleman. Her life was over. Her mother—

She was suddenly free.

Peter roared in pain.

Her eyes flew open, but it took a moment to believe the sight. Peter stood six feet away, half bent over, one hand clutching his privates, the other twisted upward behind him. As someone inched the arm higher, Peter whimpered.

Edith shakily straightened. Only then did she recognize her savior – Lord Charles Beaumont.

She closed her eyes in horror.

She'd often glimpsed him in London, for he stood out in any crowd. The best looking of the Three Beaux – society's favorite rakehells, whose closeness made them nearly brothers – Lord Charles was six feet of glorious manhood. Broad shoulders. Trim waist. Muscular legs that were the envy of every dandy in town. His auburn curls framed an arresting face dominated by a full, sensuous mouth and the seductive emerald eyes that had lured half of society's matrons into his bed.

Today those eyes flashed with fury, she realized when she looked again. And his lips drew back in a snarl she suspected few had seen.

Mortification chased away her terror. Of all possible rescuers, why did it have to be him? He already thought her a clumsy fool. His droll account of their first meeting had amused society for days. His account of their second had raised suspicions of her competence. Now he would think her wanton as well. One word would destroy her, and she had no reason to think he would stifle that word. He entertained all of London with his exploits, so turning this encounter

into another hilarious anecdote was exactly like him.

Not that he seemed amused at the moment, she admitted as he murmured something that drained the last color from Peter's face.

"The Beaux will be watching," he continued, stepping back. "Make one false move in town, and I'll know. Set one foot wrong here, and I'll hear about it. Hawthorne lives across that hill, and Hughes just beyond him," he added, naming his fellow Beaux. "You haven't a prayer of avoiding them."

Peter fled.

Edith cringed as Lord Charles turned his sardonic gaze on her.

"You again." He shook his head. "Did he hurt you?"

The question was so unexpected, her jaw dropped. "N-no."

"Liar. He was choking you when I arrived." Before she realized his intent, he'd tilted her head back to expose her throat. "That will bruise. You'd best pin a ribbon around it until the marks fade. Adding a sprig of holly will forestall questions and let you wear it all day. 'Tis the season, and all that."

"Th-thank you." His touch burned clear to her toes.

"He won't bother you again," he continued, turning her so he could brush bark and moss from her skirts. "There. Nothing to raise eyebrows. Are you sure you're all right?"

She nodded, though if he didn't stop touching her, she would likely faint.

"Excellent." He backed away. "You'd best return to the house before you freeze. I'd lend you my coat, but someone would wonder how you came by it." He grinned. "At least it survived this encounter intact. Let's keep it that way. My valet will be most upset at another disaster. We brought only one trunk on this jaunt." He headed for the drive, adding, "Good job on Russell's face, but a hard knee to the groin is more effective. You might want to remember that."

And he was gone.

Edith collapsed against a tree, cursing steadily under her breath – at Peter for his attack, at Lord Charles for the reminder of her most embarrassing moments, at herself for her damnable infatuation... Thank heaven he didn't know about that, or he would roast her worse than ever – if he could stop laughing long enough to speak.

Why had he rescued her?

She frowned.

Gentlemen never interfered with one another's pleasures, especially when the sport involved servants. Yet he had been furious at Peter. Only Peter. His threats had terrified the younger man – itself a shock, for even Sir Waldo couldn't control his heir. And not once, by word or deed, had he suggested that she had enticed him. Everyone made that assumption when a servant was discovered with a gentleman.

Damn Charles anyway! How was she to be sensible now that he'd revealed the honor and compassion she'd sworn he didn't have?

Shoving the thought aside, she headed for the house. It was too late to follow Diana. All she could do was pray that no scandal erupted. In the meantime, she must hide evidence of Peter's attack. There was a chance it would remain secret after all.

\* \* \* \*

Charles remounted his horse, castigating himself for interfering. Yet what else could he have done? He hated men who forced unwilling women.

Russell would pay, he vowed as he trotted up the drive. For the attack. For abandoning honor. But especially for reminding Charles of the day he'd found his sister's governess broken and bleeding after a brutal rape. She'd died that night. He'd been barely ten.

At least this time he'd arrived before anyone was hurt. But why the devil did the victim have to be the annoying Miss Knolton, bane of his existence?

Oh, he'd known that she worked at Russell House. That was why he'd originally declined the invitation to this house party. But Castlereagh had ordered him to attend. Baron Schechler was another guest. Since Merrimont had failed to wrap up a trade agreement with the Prussian, the Foreign Secretary had sent Charles to deal with the matter.

He would have welcomed the assignment if it had taken him anywhere else, for it gave him an excuse to skip his family's Christmas gathering. They would present him with a bevy of suitable young ladies, but he wasn't ready to reconsider marriage. Six months ago Emily had jilted him practically at the altar. Not until he figured out how he'd misjudged her so badly would he try again – though he could hardly explain

his reluctance to others; no one must suspect that Lord Charles Beaumont's judgment was faulty.

But it was.

His spirits plummeted, for the problem could so easily destroy his career. He'd battled Schechler for years. The man was an uncompromising ass at the best of times, but Charles had previously held his own in their discussions. Or so he'd thought. Now he had to wonder. No one who missed fundamental truths could negotiate even a simple contract. Had Schechler taken advantage of his incompetence all this time? Would the wool fall from Castlereagh's eyes, revealing how incapable Charles really was?

Drawing a deep breath to settle his nerves, he passed between the columns of Russell House's massive portico and plied the knocker on the front door.

## — 2 —

That evening Edith retreated to a corner of the ballroom, hoping to escape further notice. Three men had already complimented the ribbon around her neck. Had Charles meant to draw attention to her?

Yet his suggestion had been sound. Bruises decorated her throat. Even the high-necked evening gown that marked her as an employee didn't cover them completely. But she wondered at the experience that could both recognize her problem and devise a remedy suited to her means and position.

Her eyes sought him out before she could stop them. He was murmuring into Lady Cavendish's ear, his words bringing a blush to the lady's aging cheeks. Edith could only pray she did not figure in his conversation.

She'd avoided him since coming down to dinner, an easy task since she always knew where he was. The air in his vicinity pulsed with energy, and people seemed more vibrant when he was nearby.

Pulling her eyes from the emerald winking in his cravat, she concentrated on her job. It had been Diana who had suggested informal dancing this evening – several neighbors had joined the party for dinner, so there was a sizable crowd. But the last-minute change of plans raised Edith's suspicions, for it had been Diana who had originally planned an evening of cards

and the games at which she excelled.

The girl was clearly up to something. She was avoiding Edith, deliberately separating from each dance partner on the opposite side of the room – which kept her close to Charles. People were beginning to notice. Not that Diana was flirting with him, but—

A footman dropped a tray in a crash of glassware, drawing all eyes. As Miss Parkes fled the scene, Edith whipped her gaze back to Diana in time to see the girl slip outside with Jessup.

*Damnation!* Miss Parkes was Diana's closest friend, so this was no accident. Diana must have asked her to create a diversion so she could leave unnoticed.

Edith glanced wildly around, wondering how to follow without drawing attention to Diana's misbehavior.

"What's wrong?" murmured a voice in her ear.

Edith sighed in relief. The Earl of Hawthorne might be one of the Beaux, but he claimed to owe her a favor. "Miss Russell slipped outside. Can you fetch her back?" He had recently made a love match, so Diana's reputation would be safe. No one would suspect him of trifling with her.

He smiled. "Miss Russell's betrothal removes many restrictions on her behavior. A turn on the terrace does no harm."

"If that was all..."

"What do you fear?"

She couldn't explain while they might be overheard, so she led him to the hall. "Miss Russell has become almost fey, flirting and carrying on until people are whispering about it. Mr. Jessup is encouraging her. He followed her outside."

"Does she disapprove this match, then?" He frowned.

"I don't believe so. She was in alt about her betrothal, and I honestly think she cares for Mr. Merrimont. But she is young and foolish – and accustomed to constant adoration."

"Ah." Hawthorne smiled. "My ward had the same problem. But Merrimont is not a man to fawn."

"No. Nor should he. I believe he cares for Miss Russell, but he won't spout nonsense or turn his back on duty when she demands attention."

"So she's trying to bring him to heel?"

"I fear so, and the excitement she derives from



clandestine meetings doesn't help. Her determination and Merrimont's stubborn pride are a dangerous combination – especially now. I can no longer trust Mr. Jessup. His eyes hold a desperation I neither understand nor like. I doubt he will stop with flirtation this time."

\* \* \* \*

Hawthorne nodded as her analysis increased his already high regard for her. He could rescue Miss Russell easily enough. Jessup would never dare counter the Beaux, who were known to punish those who crossed them. Men knew that one word from a Beau was the only warning they would get.

Normally, he wouldn't care a fig about Miss Russell's conceits – or about Merrimont, who was a stiff-necked prig with more pride than sense. But he owed Miss Knolton a favor for preventing his ward from causing a scandal last Season.

Yet rescuing Miss Russell from folly would not solve Miss Knolton's problems for long. Her next charge might be worse than Miss Russell. Or the one after that. What she really needed was a husband.

Charles would be perfect.

Hawthorne had vowed to find wives for both of his friends – payback for an incident last spring. He'd succeeded with Richard Hughes, but Charles was proving to be a challenge. Miss Knolton could meet that challenge, for there was something about her ... something beyond the beauty she tried so hard to hide.

"You are right to be concerned," he said. "I will see that no harm comes to her tonight, but I am not staying at Russell House."

"I can manage."

"Not alone." He flashed the smile that had brought countless women to his bed before his marriage. "Charles will lend a hand until the wedding."

She paled. "That won't be necessary, my lord. And he will be too busy, in any case."

"I hardly—"

"I appreciate the thought" –she actually interrupted him– "but he will never agree. He despises me."

*Charles despise a female? Impossible.* Yet now that he thought on it, there was some truth to her claim. He couldn't recall a single moment when the pair had kept less than the entire width of a room between

them. Such extreme separation could not be coincidence, for both mingled freely with the crowd.

Something must have happened after he'd left town last Season. Something Charles had not shared with his friends. And if it was still affecting him...

"You wrong him, Miss Knolton. He is perfect for the job. Your problem goes beyond tonight's escapade. I can see that you fear this betrothal might collapse. Charles works with Merrimont and can discover his thoughts. And if Miss Russell threatens scandal, Charles's diplomatic skills and family ties will be useful. His father is the very powerful Marquess of Inslip, you might recall."

Giving her no chance for further protest, he slipped away.

\* \* \* \*

Charles relaxed the moment Miss Knolton left the ballroom. Perhaps he would survive the evening without another embarrassing confrontation after all. How so clumsy a lack-wit held a responsible position was a mystery.

He made sure that Russell didn't follow her, then put her out of his mind. It was time for another try at the baron.

Their afternoon meeting had been less than auspicious. Schechler was as intransigent as ever, and Charles had been loath to push too hard lest he reveal his shortcomings by demonstrating an insufficient grasp of the situation. But perhaps these agreeable surroundings would make Schechler more amenable – or the quantity of wine the man had consumed at dinner. Charles had limited his own intake so he would be sharp if he managed to corner the Prussian.

Braying laughter drew his gaze to the punch bowl where Schechler was entertaining several ladies. As Charles watched, Schechler threw himself into his tale, broadening the gestures meant to clarify his heavily accented words – or so it might appear to innocent eyes.

But Charles was no greenling. He could have written the script himself, so it was no surprise when the contents of Schechler's glass spilled across Lady Frobisher's bosom.

Horried, the baron burst into apologies, producing a wholly inadequate handkerchief to daub the drips from her flesh before rushing her away, ostensibly in

search of her maid. Charles would wager anything the search would end in the baron's bedchamber.

He shook his head, wondering if he could use the incident to pry a few concessions from the man. Lord Frobisher was hot-tempered and very protective of his property. If Charles could confirm the baron's liaison—

"Don't frown in public."

Charles flinched, then cursed himself for betraying surprise. "Jacob! Why the devil are you sneaking about?"

"Sneaking? In a room packed with a hundred people?" Hawthorne grinned.

"Yes. Well..." Charles shrugged.

"If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you were planning a tryst. What is it this time? Negotiations going badly?"

"Schechler's an ass."

"That's hardly news. You've known that for five years."

"Handling him doesn't grow easier. But if I can verify that he and Lady Frobisher—"

"He isn't that stupid."

"I would have agreed if I hadn't watched him pour wine down her bodice."

"Really?" Hawthorne's eyes suddenly gleamed. "That does bear checking – but not by you," he added as Charles turned to leave.

"You?"

"Hardly. We need to talk, and you can't be caught prying." A gesture brought his wife to his side.

"Charles!" she exclaimed, offering her hand. "We've had no chance to speak this evening. You look well."

"As do you. Quite ravishing, in fact." He wondered if it was marriage that made her glow, or her advanced pregnancy. Probably both. And he was happy for her. She hadn't looked nearly this content when she'd accepted *his* proposal – which should have warned him that offering for her was a huge mistake. Jilting him to wed Hawthorne had been right for all of them – the two were wildly in love – but it had tossed them into a storm of gossip.

She laughed. "Don't look so appalled, Charles. You needn't fret. I shan't deliver for weeks yet, and I'm not carrying twins. The midwife insists that all Hawthorne heirs are large." She exchanged a glance with her husband that nearly set the room ablaze.

Charles thanked Providence that they'd discovered the truth before he'd married her, then raised a brow at Jacob. "Where is Richard? I'd expected him tonight."

"We were to drive over together, but one of their tenant cottages caught fire. He tried to send Georgiana anyway, but she insisted on helping."

No surprise there. Richard's wife was never content to play while others worked. Charles wasn't used to having his fellow Beaux married, though. Or to their staying in the country. London wasn't the same without them.

"We'll get together before you return to town." Jacob murmured something to his wife, who immediately left. "She'll discover the present occupation of your baron. Which means you are free to do me a favor."

"Anything."

Jacob smiled as he stepped into an empty alcove. "Since I knew I could count on you, I already promised the lady you would help."

Alarms jangled in his mind. "Lady?"

"Miss Knolton. She—"

"No."

"You haven't heard me out."

"No. The woman is a menace. I want nothing to do with her."

Jacob's eyes gleamed. "I wasn't aware that you were acquainted."

"We're not."

"Then do me the courtesy of listening instead of jumping down my throat." He rarely used that tone on his friends.

Charles snapped his mouth shut, cursing himself for losing control. He would still refuse, of course, but first, manners demanded that he endure the tale of the poor exploited Miss Knolton, who was being unjustly persecuted by the villainous Peter Russell. That it was true fanned his fury. But he had to stay away from her. She'd already made him the butt of gossip twice. He would be hard-pressed to maintain his dignity at the Foreign Office if it happened again.

"Miss Russell's flirting is out of control," said Jacob bluntly. "If something isn't done, her antics could jeopardize the wedding."

"Which is no more than she deserves," growled

Charles to cover his surprise.

"Probably. She is demanding attention, and Merrimont is ignoring her. They are both being ridiculous. If they don't suit, they should say so. I don't care what happens to their betrothal, but a scandal will hurt Miss Knolton. We can't let their idiocy destroy innocents."

"Are you sure Miss Knolton is innocent?" Inciting the girl to riot sounded more like her.

"Of course. Miss Knolton is the most levelheaded female I know, my wife excepted."

"Levelheaded? She causes trouble wherever she goes."

"You must have her confused with someone else."

"Hardly."

"What do you know about her?"

Charles shrugged. "Her baronet father died in debt. Her mother and sister now live in a cottage. Her brother perished in Spain – volunteered for the Forlorn Hope since he lacked the blunt to buy a commission." He kept his voice light, as if everyone knew the story, though it had taken him several days to discover that much. And once he had, he'd wanted to kill Sir Richard for the trouble he'd caused his family. "A sad tale, but hardly unique."

"Also incomplete. Her mother tries to support herself as a village dressmaker, but it is Miss Knolton who keeps a roof over the family's head."

"Which explains why people tolerate her incompetence. They feel sorry for her."

"Are you blind?" demanded Jacob. "She's worth every shilling she makes – and more."

"A clumsy fool?"

"You are absurd."

"Absurd! Who destroyed my best coat by smearing it with cream cakes in the middle of Lady Beatrice's drawing room? Who gave me a concussion that kept me in bed for a week?" He snapped his mouth shut as laughter sparkled in Jacob's eyes.

"O-ho... Sits the wind in that quarter, eh? Since I've never known you to hold a grudge, you must have a yen for the girl."

"Absolutely not! She's a menace, I tell you."

"The gentleman doth protest too much, methinks. You're in love with her."

"Impossible. I don't know her – and I don't want to. I

can't risk another concussion when I'm involved in negotiations."

"Keep repeating that, and perhaps you will come to believe it. In the meantime, you promised your help. Word of a Beau. I owe Miss Knolton a favor. Since I'm returning home tonight, I'm counting on you to help her. You know Merrimont well enough to do the job."

Charles cursed. Refusing after he'd agreed would strain a friendship that dated back twenty years. And he had to admit that his animosity was entirely personal and possibly overdone. He'd never heard a word against her, and so few people knew about her family woes that she would hardly win so many positions through pity.

"Very well. What does she want?"

"Nothing. She thinks she can handle Miss Russell herself. But the girl is too determined for a single guardian to keep her in line, no matter how competent. Then there's Jessup."

"Jessup?"

"He's behaving quite oddly. It isn't done to toy with a friend's betrothed."

Which was why Charles had had to resort to subterfuge to make Jacob and Emily admit their love. He raised his brows.

"They slipped away a quarter hour ago. I found them in a heated embrace on the terrace. Since I don't believe Jessup cares a fig for the girl, I put the fear of God into him – or at least fear of the Beaux – and vowed you would watch him closely. But I don't know why he's taking such risks. It takes a powerful motive to ignore both friendship and kinship. My ignorance bothers me."

"And me. I'll look into it. And speaking of the Beaux, I told Russell that you would watch him. I caught him attacking an unwilling female this afternoon."

"Who?"

Charles shook his head. If he was wrong about Miss Knolton's character, he could not risk harming her. Jacob would never mention the incident, but the ballroom was too near. One whisper could doom her.

Jacob scowled. "I'll deal with him. He's young enough to settle."

"I doubt he has the brains. It seems to be a family failing. How Merrimont can believe Miss Russell will suit, I don't know."

"Find out. If he's decided she won't and is trying to make her end it, you can help them avoid scandal."

Jacob slipped away before Charles could respond, but this explained why he hadn't just spoken with Sir Waldo, which would have settled the matter. If Jacob thought the betrothal should end, he would expect Charles to manage it cleanly. After all, he'd survived his own jilting virtually unscathed. He knew how it was done.

But he'd not done it alone. The Beaux had rallied around, shielding him from the most vicious gossip, showing their support, deflecting criticism... And Emily's immediate marriage to Jacob had blunted much of the talk. They were so obviously in love.

He doubted that he could arrange a similar disposition for Merrimont.

Shaking free of the memories, he returned to the ballroom to seek out Miss Knolton.

— 3 —

Edith relaxed when Diana returned barely a minute after Hawthorne had headed for the terrace. There was no sign of Jessup.

Hawthorne's warning should keep Jessup in line, but eliminating that threat didn't solve Edith's problems. Even the width of a candlelit ballroom couldn't hide the fury simmering in Diana's eyes. It was clear Hawthorne had put her back up. Pride would make the girl prove that she could do as she pleased.

It didn't take long. Within a quarter hour Diana was laughing with Mr. Tomling, her hand on his arm as she leaned far too close and whispered in his ear. Tomling flushed.

Edith started to join them, but she'd covered barely half the distance when someone whirled her into a waltz without warning.

"My dance, I believe." Charles's green eyes laughed down at her.

She ignored the sudden warmth. "My lord! This is most improper. I'm a chaperon."

"This is an informal evening at a country house party. You can do anything you like, Miss Knolton. Is Russell behaving himself?"

"I— Of course, he is. You threatened him with the

Beaux.”

He raised his brows. “You mean he actually understood the threat?”

“Everyone understands *that* threat.” She erased her scowl lest people notice.

“How unfortunate. I’d hoped for another encounter. You aren’t his only victim. He is no gentleman.”

“I know, but—”

“He will benefit from an extended trip abroad. I’ll see to it.”

“But—” She stopped, confused and more than a little dizzy as he spun her into a complicated turn. The dizziness had to come from the unaccustomed motion. Or maybe from surprise – his actions belied his reputation. It had nothing to do with laughing green eyes or the way his hand burned into her waist. Or so she insisted.

He grinned, twirling her faster. “I hear your charge is causing trouble.”

“No. I mean, I never—” She stopped, not sure what she was trying to say. Why did she always sound like a ninny around him?

But Diana *was* giving her trouble, and it was getting worse. Gathering her wits, she peered around Charles’s shoulder to see Diana dancing far too close to Tomling. If something wasn’t done – and soon – they would all be in trouble.

For the moment, people smiled indulgently, attributing Diana’s behavior to high spirits as she approached her wedding. But that wouldn’t last. Already Giles was glaring. Since gentlemen could not honorably terminate betrothals, he must see his future going up in flames.

Swallowing her pride, Edith sighed. “Miss Russell is an arrogant, spoiled peagoose. I fear she will never make it to the altar if she keeps this up.”

“Is that what she wants?” He twirled her onto the terrace.

Edith knew she should object, but they could hardly discuss Diana in a crowd. Hawthorne had insisted that Charles could help. The alternative was admitting her failure to Sir Waldo.

The moment they were out of sight, she stepped out of his arms so she could think. The darkness helped, for it kept her from seeing the green, green eyes that haunted her dreams far too often. “I suspect she wants



Mr. Merrimont's attention – according to Miss Russell, he has all but ignored her since their betrothal.”

“He has a job.”

“I know that. I've explained that. I've made sure that she knows her duties as his wife – duties beyond paying calls and hosting at-homes for society ladies. He will have to entertain often, especially if he stands for Commons.”

His face twisted into surprise. “Did he actually share that ambition with her? Few gentlemen know of it.”

“Of course not, but I was hired to prepare her for the future. That means finding out what skills she will need.”

He shook his head slowly, as if in shock. “Then why is she balking?”

Edith turned toward the yew tree overhanging the balustrade and brushed its delicate foliage. “Lord Hawthorne said I could trust you.” She glanced over her shoulder, waiting until he nodded. “Miss Russell has been the local diamond since the age of fifteen, so she is accustomed to men who fawn over her, accede to her every wish, and praise her at every turn. Her previous governess encouraged her.”

“Why?”

“I don't know the woman, so I don't care to speculate. I've tried to explain that contrived adulation is the fashion and thus means little. Mr. Merrimont lacks the temperament to indulge in excessive flattery. Nor does he waste his time in idle flirtation.”

Again she glanced back until he nodded.

“Miss Russell equates flattery with love. She thinks his reticence means he doesn't love her, which raises fears that her beauty is fading. That causes panic, which increases her determination to prove his love by forcing him to flatter her. I suspect tonight's goal is to make him jealous.”

Charles choked.

“I agree, but she no longer listens to me. She is a devotee of romantic novels and expects love to transform the world into a magical place. So far, it hasn't. We spent last month in town. When Giles refused to forego a Four-in-Hand Club outing so he could take her shopping, she snapped.”

“She expected him to escort her around the shops instead of driving out to Salt Hill?” He sounded appalled. “Merrimont's prowess as a whip is legendary.

I've never seen such light hands on the ribbons – or such absolute control. He can trot through a gate with less than an inch of clearance. Hell, he could turn through a gate that tight – at speed. Driving is how he relaxes after tense negotiations.”

“I am aware of that. I've explained it very clearly. But Miss Russell is spoiled – still very much a child in some ways. She needs constant reassurance.”

“No wonder Merrimont is making no progress with Schechler.”

It was her turn to raise her brows.

“I was sent out here because he can't keep his mind on his job,” he explained bluntly. “I expected to find him caught up in wedding preparations. Instead, he is so distracted that I'd barely greeted him before he treated me to an outburst on the insanity of females.” His glare made it clear that he shared that view, at least when it came to her.

Edith ignored it. Diana's future was more important than Charles's opinion. She faced him. “I fear he is close to walking away. On the other hand, if he truly doesn't care...”

Charles paused, then shook his head. “I suspect he cares too much. There was something in his voice... Hawthorne and Hughes use that same tone when speaking of their wives.”

“Then why doesn't he tell her?”

“Do you honestly suggest that he lay his heart on the floor for Miss Russell to trample?”

“She wou—” Edith bit off the denial, for Diana undoubtedly would, if for no other reason than to prove she could. “You have a point,” she said instead, sighing deeply.

“I have several points.” He ducked into the library to hold his hands over the fire. “This is not the weather for tête-à-têtes in the garden,” he explained when she joined him.

“No. But you were saying—” She shivered now that the air was warmer. Or maybe it was the dismal room, which qualified as a library only because one shelf contained a dozen volumes of old sermons. None of the Russells were scholars.

“Merrimont's reticence is more than protection against pain. He is a diplomat. We are trained never to reveal our thoughts.”

“That hasn't stopped *you*.” She glared, recalling the

names he'd called her after she'd slipped and knocked him into a suit of armor back in July. The clatter as he and the armor crashed to the marble floor had drawn a dozen spectators.

"That's different."

"Really?"

"We are discussing Merrimont," he snapped. "Most gentlemen are taught from birth that emotions are vulgar, thus indulging in them reveals inferior breeding. And love is the most vulgar of all, suited only to the lowest classes. Merrimont won't acknowledge such a feeling and won't admit he can't handle Miss Russell. Pride won't allow it."

"So it's all right to be emotional around inferiors, but not your equals?" she asked, suddenly angry.

"That's not what I said."

"Really? Mr. Merrimont, younger son of a viscount, can't tell Miss Russell, daughter of a baronet and his affianced bride, that he loves her. But you, who are a great deal higher, think it's permissible to attack, revile, and otherwise disdain a lowly governess."

"That's not true!" he snarled, slamming his fist on the mantel in a vivid show of temper. "I said *most* families eschew emotion. Mine doesn't. We're not quite respectable, if you need the truth, though we've enough power that all but the highest sticklers overlook our oddities. We don't deride emotion. We even champion fidelity after marriage. But that is not the point." He sucked in a calming breath. "Does Miss Russell want this marriage?"

"Yes, but on her terms. I think she's terrified that he doesn't care and that she might face living with a man who ignores her. Somehow I must convince her that compromise is necessary – and trust. That will be easier if Mr. Merrimont makes even a small show of approval. Can you convince him to abandon pride long enough to admit he wants this match?"

"I doubt it. If this has been building for some time, he will see any concession as a defeat. And while he is trained in the art of compromise, he never makes the first move."

"Damnation," she muttered under her breath. "Fools, both of them, standing on pride when they ought to trust each other enough to be honest. Why did he offer for her anyway? Surely he could see what she is."

"Which supports my contention that he loves her. It's the only reason he might abandon sense. But he won't admit it even in his mind, and he won't risk being hurt. Pain is never pleasant. A smart man learns to avoid it."

The pain in his voice halted her reply, for he'd been trampled rather badly himself not long ago. London had talked of little else for weeks after his fiancée jilted him. "Then we need another approach. What if he finds her in danger? The shock might break down his pride."

"No." His tone was final.

She stared. "Why?"

"I once arranged that scenario to force two other proud fools to admit the truth. Despite precautions, one of them nearly died. I won't risk it again."

"I see."

"I doubt it, but it doesn't matter. I swore then that I would never again meddle in other people's affairs. I'm already uneasy about involving myself in this. I won't tempt fate."

"Very well. What do you suggest?"

He paced to the window, stared over the grounds, then returned to the fire. "You said Miss Russell expects love to produce a magical transformation. How?"

"She is fond of romantic poetry, and her favorite novels always end with the characters transformed by love. So the idea that marriage will saddle her with a host of responsibilities and surround her with serious-minded diplomats instead of fawning suitors does not sit well."

"She is mad."

"You asked what she expects."

"Didn't she foresee this when she accepted him?"

"I doubt it. She was too caught up in the Season. Reveling in her success left little time to think about how marriage would change her life."

"Hmm." He clasped his hands behind him and resumed pacing. "Magical transformations... Does she believe in magic, then?"

"How should I know? I don't include magic in my lessons." But her irritation faded when she met his eyes. "What do you have in mind?"

"A magic amulet. Wearing it would force those around her to speak only the truth."

She snorted. "She won't believe anyone but Mr. Merrimont, and she won't accept anything short of capitulation to her demands."

"I wonder how true that is. Using an amulet might force her to see herself in a different light."

"How?"

"Suppose I encourage Merrimont to repeat today's outburst. Suppose Miss Russell overhears him." He sharpened his gaze. "If she's as selfishly arrogant as you imply, I doubt his words will contain much flattery. It will be up to you to control her."

"I'll manage."

"Good girl."

His smile pooled heat in her womb. Ignoring it, she concentrated on business. "When?"

"It will take a day or so to arrange," he admitted. "Not the amulet. I can cobble something together easily enough. But I need time to prime Merrimont so he'll talk, and you'll need time to convince her that the amulet is truly magic. Start tonight. Mention that I know Granny Gibbs."

"The witch?"

"She has that reputation, though I've seen nothing to warrant it. I know her as an excellent healer. She patched me up more than once when I was a boy."

"While you were visiting Hawthorne and Hughes, I suppose." He hadn't lived in the area himself.

"Exactly. Tomorrow morning I'll give Miss Russell an opportunity to ask me about it. I can produce the amulet the next day."

"All right. But don't speak with her alone. If I'm wrong and she's given up on this match, she may attach a replacement before jilting him – that's one lesson she would have learned from your imbroglio last Season. Only your betrothed's immediate marriage to Hawthorne mitigated the scandal. You are the greatest catch in residence just now. More eligible than Merrimont, if truth be told, and far more eligible than Jessup. If she's looking, she'll know that."

Shock flared in his eyes.

Leaving him to brood, she returned to the ballroom. Diana was waltzing with Jessup, much too closely. So much for Hawthorne's warning. Glaring in the earl's direction, Edith settled in for a long evening.

\* \* \* \*

Following her habit, Edith entered Diana's room as

the girl was preparing for bed. She liked to discuss the day while its events were still fresh.

"Did you enjoy the dancing?" she asked once the maid left.

"Mostly." Diana frowned. "But Giles is making me look a fool."

"How?"

"He ignores me! People notice. He's hateful!"

"I saw nothing to criticize. He led you out for the first set and again for the fourth, then spent the rest of the evening entertaining your relatives. It would be ill-bred of him to hang on your arm."

"Ill-bred! We are betrothed! He didn't even notice my new gown."

Edith sighed. "Men rarely notice appearance unless your attire is inappropriate. We've discussed this before."

"Mr. Jessup noticed. Mr. Tomling noticed."

"Because they have little to do beyond flirting with the ladies, so they need things they can praise. Giles has business to conclude before your wedding – business that is not going well from all accounts. He spent the afternoon in meetings with Baron Schechler and Lord Charles."

"At *my* house party? How dare they!"

"The Regent expects an agreement this week," she snapped crossly, then stifled her temper. "You know Giles has responsibilities. We speak of it every day. As long as he works for the Foreign Office, he will have little control over where or when he conducts business. And if you wish to leave on a wedding trip, you will cease disturbing him. Let him finish his negotiations so he is free to go." She wondered if the baron was taking advantage of Diana's antics to wring concessions from a distracted Giles. Not that Charles would let him get away with it, but—

"What business was Lord Hawthorne conducting when he decided to follow me about?" demanded Diana.

"I wasn't aware that he was," lied Edith.

"Though I suppose someone as beautiful as I must expect every man to watch her," Diana continued with complete illogic.

"Having seen the way the earl looks at his wife, I can guarantee that he has no interest in you, no matter how beautiful."

"Nonsense. Everyone loves me – except Giles. If you'd heard Mr. Tomling praise my eyes, you would understand."

"Diana!" Edith shook her head. "A man may enjoy looking at beauty. A young man may play at worshiping beauty. But a husband needs more than an ornament." She sighed. "If you are dissatisfied with Giles, perhaps you should reconsider wedding him."

"He's mine!" She flung herself across the bed. "He offered prettily enough, so why won't he even compliment my new gown."

"Because you treat any notice as a skirmish won in a war only you are fighting. Yes, a war," she repeated when Diana tried to object. "You have criticized him so relentlessly that he must conclude you are a shrew."

"I'm not!"

"Think, Diana. What did Giles see tonight? It wasn't your gown, lovely though it is. It wasn't your face, either. What he saw were flirtations that went well beyond propriety, vulgar laughter, abominable manners... In short, he saw a girl whose behavior will embarrass him at best and possibly harm his position with the Foreign Office. Slipping outside to kiss Mr. Jessup was not well done."

"How did you—" The words were out before Diana remembered that a denial might serve her better.

"I heard about it, which means that others might also hear about it. Especially Giles. Do you really believe that Jessup will remain quiet? He is working hard to discommodate Giles, so he will certainly trumpet his triumph. And if Lord Hawthorne caught you together, Giles can hardly doubt Jessup's word. Jessup may have arranged for Hawthorne's presence himself."

"What are you talking about? Mr. Jessup loves me."

"Jessup loves only himself. Haven't you noticed that he is most attentive when Giles is watching?" It wasn't strictly true, but she needed to penetrate Diana's arrogance. "His goal is to harm the man you vowed to marry, and you are helping him."

Diana was off the bed in a trice, palm extended to slap. "You wrong him. He loves me more than Giles ever will."

Edith caught her wrists. "No, Diana. Calculation fills his eyes. Determination stiffens his jaw. You are too young to recognize it and too determined to see only

what you want to see. But in truth, he is using you to further his own goals." That much was real.

"Why should I accept your so-called truth?"

"Because I am older than you, with more experience of the world." She shook her head to cut off another protest. "But if you don't believe me, then seek the truth for yourself. There are foolproof ways to discern it."

"Then use them and prove yourself wrong."

Edith nearly smiled, for the words played into her hands. "Only you can use such methods, Diana. The best way to divine truth is through magic, but magic only reveals truth about its user. It cannot uncover secrets about others."

"Magic?" Surprise threaded her voice.

"Exactly. I am not skilled in its use, but I overheard Lord Charles discussing Granny Gibbs this evening – he is well acquainted with the woman. She concocts amulets that reveal truth. Perhaps he can obtain one for you. But beware. Truth can be uncomfortable."

Diana surprised her by nodding. "I will think on it."

#### — 4 —

When Edith arrived at breakfast the next morning, Diana and Jessup occupied opposite ends of the table. It made her wonder if Charles had reinforced Hawthorne's warning to Jessup.

That hope died five minutes later when she intercepted an exchange of sly glances that left Diana nearly bursting with suppressed excitement. They were up to something.

Her fears increased when Peter slid into the seat on Jessup's right and murmured something into his ear. Jessup nodded briskly, then murmured a reply that brought a smile to Peter's lips.

Edith hid a frown. Jessup had ignored Peter since arriving at Russell House, so why did they suddenly act like the best of friends?

Peter rose to address the company. "The ice is finally thick enough to be safe. Anyone wishing to skate should meet in the hall at ten. We'll walk to the lake together."

Diana squealed in delight. Jessup started to smile, but a word from Peter pulled his face into a scowl.

Edith chewed thoughtfully. Was Peter warning



Jessup away from his sister – even the worse cads could be protective of family – or was he pressing Jessup to do something distasteful? She suspected the latter. Peter cared only for himself.

“More trouble?” murmured Charles, sliding into the vacant seat on her left.

She nearly jumped out of her skin, and not just from surprise. Heat sizzled along her nerves until she had to inhale twice to keep her voice steady. “Puzzles rather than problems, my lord. Jessup’s odd behavior extends beyond Miss Russell and Mr. Merrimont.”

“To whom?”

“Mr. Russell.” She nodded toward the pair.

“Did they arrive together?”

“No. Russell chose to sit there. Jessup doesn’t like him, yet he seems to be listening, almost as if Russell had some hold over him.”

“That sounds ominous.” His gaze remained on Peter.

“Very. Jessup is full of surprises today. Did you speak to him last night?”

“There was no need. Hawthorne had already done so.”

“With minimal effect. He was waltzing with Miss Russell when I returned, and holding her far too close. They’ve been exchanging secret glances this morning.”

“I’ll see that he—”

“No.” She grasped his wrist when he began to rise, keeping him in his seat. Electricity sparked. Her lungs tightened until she had to fight to draw her next breath. “Something powerful is driving him – why else would he ignore Hawthorne’s warning? *Nobody* defies the Beaux. I doubt he cares a fig for Miss Russell, and I don’t like that Mr. Russell can seemingly influence him.”

“Nor do I.” He paused to chew bacon. “Have you mentioned your fears to Miss Russell?”

“No. I only just noted the connection. And she swears that Jessup loves her.” She finished her coffee. “But she may have doubts she won’t admit aloud. My mention of magic last night intrigued her. On the other hand, the news that we can skate this morning produced excessive excitement. Jessup may have sent her a note. I hope she’s not planning something drastic – like eloping. She has become almost frantic for attention, and Jessup is supplying it. His

ministrations could easily scramble her wits. Will you be skating?"

"I'm supposed to meet with Schechler."

"I hear he is stiff-necked and refuses any compromise."

"Too true." He sighed.

"Then bring him along. The other guests are already caught up in the Christmas spirit, though the festivities won't begin until tomorrow. Perhaps their excitement will work some magic on him. It can't hurt. And be sure that Merrimont joins us."

"Is that wise? Watching Miss Russell flirt with Jessup is bound to irritate him."

"Good. They need to confront this problem, not ignore it."

"Do you want them to call off the wedding?" he asked softly.

"Personally, no. The scandal would make it difficult to find a new position. But neither do I want them to live fifty years in misery." She frowned as Jessup and Peter left together, heads bent in earnest conversation.

"Yes, that does seem odd," he agreed. "And eliminates my own suspicions."

"Which were?" She finished her coffee.

"That Jessup is obeying Merrimont's orders. If Miss Russell creates a large enough scandal, Merrimont could jilt her with impunity."

"Is that what happened to you?" The question was out before she could stop it.

"No." He scowled her into silence. "Russell's involvement cannot be good. I will postpone my morning meeting and join you at the lake."

She nodded, then followed the pair from the room, hoping to learn something useful.

\* \* \* \*

Charles watched her leave, grateful that she was gone. He was angrier with her today than he'd been after she'd cracked his skull. He knew it was unfair, but he couldn't help it. She was walking proof that his judgment was hopelessly impaired.

He'd assumed that Miss Knolton was incompetent, ignorant, and lacking common sense.

He'd been wrong.

Yet more than his faulty assumptions irritated him. Everything about her triggered his temper. He'd wanted to destroy last night's monstrous gown and

replace it with a fashionable creation that would show off her intriguing bosom. He'd wanted to slide his hands into her lustrous hair, loosening pins until that severe knot softened to dark waves framing her heart-shaped face. Silky waves that would draw attention to her silver eyes. Those eyes had haunted him since the day she'd fallen into his lap, smearing a plate of cream cakes all over his coat. They were mesmerizing, drawing him into depths he'd not expected. And her mouth! Sinfully red lips begged to be explored... Once he dressed her properly, he would drape rubies around her neck, bringing roses to her creamy cheeks and tempting—

He broke off the thought, appalled. Damn Jacob for planting ideas in his head! It was bad enough that she stirred lust. He didn't need—

"Good morning, my lord." The sultry voice shattered his thoughts.

"Miss Russell." He rose to execute the expected bow, then spotted the gleam in her eyes and sighed. Miss Knolton was right to fear Miss Russell's intentions. The girl was exploring her options and would jilt Merrimont in a trice if a better offer appeared. At least the breakfast room contained a dozen people.

His cold tone dimmed her gaze, but she quickly rallied, batting her lashes outrageously. "We were delighted that you could accept our invitation, my lord."

"My presence is purely a business matter, Miss Russell. If I didn't have to speak with Baron Schechler, I would be with my family."

"Oh." She'd obviously expected a compliment.

Laughter rippled from the corner where Riley was entertaining the crowd with the latest *on-dits*. A Home Office investigator, Riley was another of Merrimont's friends.

Miss Russell tugged on Charles's arm. "I need to speak with you, my lord. Privately."

"So speak. No one is paying attention. It is unseemly to slip away from the others."

She flashed a smile she must have practiced before a mirror. "But a gentleman of your high breeding can hardly care what others think, my lord."

"On the contrary, Miss Russell. A diplomat must always consider appearances. Merrimont certainly

does.”

“Hardly. Ignoring me cannot do his credit any good.”

Charles laughed. “You really are a peagoose, aren’t you?” He dismissed her indignation. “Don’t you know anything about society? Living in your pocket would reduce his credit – and yours, too, for doing so implies that he cannot trust you to behave.”

“How dare—”

“Surely your companion has explained the ways of the world. I pitied Merrimont last night. How he maintained his dignity is a mystery, for your antics would horrify the most broad-minded gentleman. I cannot imagine having a wife who makes such a vulgar cake of herself. If you don’t learn proper manners, he will never advance at the Foreign Office. Nor will he find supporters if he chooses to stand for Commons.”

Her mouth hung open in her first genuine show of emotion. “If that is how he feels, then he should let me find someone who appreciates me,” she snapped.

Charles suppressed a sigh at the arrogance that could twist criticism so far around. “I don’t know how he feels, Miss Russell. All I know is that your behavior affects both of you – not that you seem to care. But I don’t want to see Merrimont’s life ruined by an arrogant little witch. He’s a good man.”

“How dare you, sir!”

“I dare because accepting his offer made you part of him, so your misbehavior harms him – I know what Hawthorne found on the terrace last evening. I dare because I despise selfish girls who don’t care how their actions affect others. You are calling censure down on your family. You are branding Jessup a cad. Staying on this course will force Sir Waldo to turn Miss Knolton off without a reference, which will prevent her from finding a new position. All that damage just so one spoiled miss can soothe her sensibilities and flex her claws. I won’t allow it.”

She stepped back, all thought of flirtation gone. “You won’t allow it?” Her voice could have frozen a raging river.

“Exactly. Rather than let you destroy innocents, I will have your father lock you in your room until the wedding.”

“He would never do such a thing! Papa loves me.”

“Of course he loves you, but that won’t stop him

from dealing with this tantrum. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"This is Giles's last chance to prove he loves me. If he doesn't, I won't wed him."

"Childish." But when tears glinted on her lashes, he relented. "This is not the way to prove anything, Miss Russell. No man worth his salt will give in to blackmail."

"Blackmail!"

"What else can one call your threats?"

"I'm not threatening anyone. Since most men adore me, why should I tie myself to someone who doesn't?"

"The so-called adoration of cubs unready for marriage is but a game, Miss Russell. They pretend admiration and profess undying devotion, but anyone of intelligence knows it's all pretense. A pleasant way to pass the time. No more – as is obvious from the frequency with which they change idols. Those of an age to wed look beyond the color of your hair or the tilt of your chin. Gentlemen need a lady, a hostess, an heir."

"But I need someone who cares."

"Don't confuse caring with poetry. Are you a good person?"

"Of course." She glared.

"Are you beautiful?"

"Naturally."

"Then why do you need to be told twenty times an hour that it is true? Are you afraid it is false?" He held up a hand to prevent an explosion of temper. "Think about it, Miss Russell. If you don't believe it, then being told so will change nothing. If you do believe it, then it matters not what others might think. Compliments are nice – and they can make you feel better when things are going badly, as they always do from time to time. But they can't change truth, so demanding them with every breath makes you seem childish. And any compliment that you coerce is worthless."

"You are hateful." She twisted her mouth into a pout.

"I don't believe it, so your opinion doesn't matter." He drew a breath. "But if you are seriously questioning your betrothal, perhaps you should consult Granny Gibbs. She is quite skilled at helping people choose the right course."

"So I've heard. Does she really make amulets that reveal truth?"

"Yes." He paused, but though her eyes begged, she couldn't bring herself to ask. Perhaps she found the request too embarrassing. Or maybe his harsh words made it impossible to beg a favor. He finally took pity on her. "If you want one, I can call on her for you. But be wary of magic," he cautioned softly. "It can reveal things you don't wish to know."

"I'll chance it." She dimpled prettily, satisfied to have achieved her main goal. "Thank you, my lord."

\* \* \* \*

The skating party convened on a shallow cove half a mile from the house. Footmen carried benches and baskets of skates to the shore, then built a fire to warm frozen fingers and let an undercook prepare chocolate. Children shouted, weaving among their elders in games of tag and crack the whip. Laughter followed in their wake, as did gasps of feigned terror as young ladies sought steadying arms from favorite gentlemen.

By half past eleven, Edith had moved beyond the cove itself, gliding in random zigzags that let her keep one eye on Diana and the other on the rest of the company. Too many dramas were disturbing the carefree pleasure of the crowd.

Peter was clearly stirring up trouble. He wouldn't attack Edith with others nearby, but he'd spoken with Jessup, leaving the man white-faced. Then he'd paused by Schechler, who had speared Charles and Giles with glares the moment Peter skated away. A quarter hour later, he'd cornered Giles.

Perhaps he was seeking revenge for Edith's escape yesterday. Disrupting Diana's marriage would hurt Edith, and turning the baron against Charles would repay him for interfering. But that didn't explain why he could influence Jessup.

A short time later Schechler had surprised her by inviting her to skate. As a chaperon, she should have refused, but she'd taken his arm, hoping to discover what Peter was saying. Diana was skating with Tomling, a picture of propriety this morning.

"The Russells you know well, *nein*?" Schechler asked once they were moving.

"I've been with them for eighteen months."

He nodded, then maneuvered around several slow-

moving couples before continuing. "I know it is not done in your country to speak of certain matters, *fraulein*, but I have heard a disturbing tale. If true, it could affect my business."

"Who told you this tale?"

He seemed surprised by her question. "Herr Russell. The son."

"I see." She spared a moment to thank Fate that Schechler was less credulous than Peter thought. Schechler might be an incorrigible, stiff-necked ass, as Giles had once described him when he'd thought himself alone, but at least he checked claims before accepting them. "When I hear gossip – and what can one call tales about others if not gossip? – I first consider the source, asking myself if that source has reason to lie. Who was this tale about?"

"Lord Charles Beaumont. Herr Russell brought it to me because we engage now in delicate negotiations. The charges are quite grave."

She smiled. "I'm sure they are, but I am equally sure they are false. As you say, I know the Russells quite well. I know that Mr. Peter is a dishonorable cad and that he hates Lord Charles. I also know that Lord Charles is an honorable gentleman with a gift for finding equitable solutions to any problem."

"But his reputation!"

"You speak of the Three Beaux, I presume?"

He nodded.

"The Beaux make exciting drawing room chatter, but they have never drawn true censure. And since society scrutinizes their every move, we would all know instantly if they behaved badly."

"I do not understand your country."

"I doubt that it is much different from your own," she dared. "People abhor dishonor, cruelty, and vulgarity. But they love scandal, as long as it does not touch them personally, and discussing rogues makes them feel dashing. One reason the Beaux are so beloved is that they are larger-than-life men who often flirt with scandal yet never cross that final line. The gossips can exaggerate their exploits, fan themselves furiously over their reputed prowess, and recall every hint of impropriety, but everyone knows the Beaux never abandon honor, so it is a harmless pastime. If you want my advice, share Mr. Russell's claims with Lord Charles and ask for the truth. He will give it."

Then put it behind you and finish your business so you can enjoy the remainder of your holiday.”

Giving him no chance to argue, she'd turned the conversation to the differences between English Christmas customs and those he knew, particularly those that dealt with peace, good will, and the burial of old quarrels.

Diana had still been with Tomling when Edith left the baron, but Edith had intercepted another glance between the girl and Jessup. So when Jessup headed for the thicket covering a spit that protruded into the lake just beyond the cove, Edith had positioned herself where she could keep an eye on him. She didn't think Jessup had noticed her. Nor had Diana, who had begun picking a fight with Tomling.

Diana shoved Tomling away and left, ostensibly to be alone.

Jessup practiced a lazy spin behind the spit, pointedly ignoring Diana's tantrum.

Edith knew better. They had planned this interlude well. Miss Parkes, undoubtedly following Diana's orders, chose this moment to fall in a flurry of skirts. While everyone else rushed to her aid, Diana headed straight for Jessup.

Edith caught Charles's eye, nodded toward the spit, then picked up speed, flailing her arms as if fighting for balance. As she neared Jessup, she screamed.

Jessup whipped around so fast he tripped.

Edith flattened him.

“Oh, my. Oh, my,” she squeaked, scrabbling along the ice to his side. “Oh, dear. Are you all right, sir? Oh, I'm so terribly sorry. I don't know what happened. I must have caught the blade— Are you hurt?”

He cursed, tried to sit, then fell a second time when her attempt to help him knocked him over, slamming his head against the ice.

She ignored the thud, keeping to her role. “How awful. You're bleeding, sir! Let me look. We need help. Yoo-hoo! Over here,” she called, noting that several skaters were following Charles around the end of the spit.

“What happened?” demanded Jessup shakily.

“I'm not sure. I was skating – slowly, so I wouldn't fall. I am not very accomplished, you understand. Then my toe caught on something. I think it was my toe, or maybe it was the heel. But I lost my balance.



Falling is so embarrassing that I tried to catch myself, but that just made my feet move faster, and I couldn't control anything, and then there you were, so I tried to turn, but you turned, too, and I couldn't help it, but I ran into you, and you fell so hard, and that awful thunk when your head hit the ice, and now you're bleeding. Did I kill you?" She finished this artful mishmash by tugging on him until she managed to fall across his chest.

His breath whooshed out.

Charles arrived, closely followed by Diana, Giles, and Miss Richland.

"Mr. Jessup!" squeaked Diana, shoving Edith aside.

Charles caught Diana's arm so she couldn't throw herself atop Jessup. "Control yourself, Miss Russell. I know he's a guest, but you could cause more damage if you aren't careful. Are you all right, Miss Knolton?"

Edith let Charles pull her to her feet. "Just a tumble. But Mr. Jessup cut his head."

"I can see that. Have you other injuries, Jessup?" His censorious look struck Jessup square in the eye, raising the hair on Edith's arms and blanching all color from Jessup's face. For the first time she understood the Beaux' power.

"Dizzy," murmured Jessup as Giles squatted beside him.

"I'm not surprised. Head injuries have that effect." Charles winked at Edith, then shifted his gaze to Giles. "Take Miss Russell to the fire, then send a pair of footmen to help Jessup to his room."

"Right." Giles grabbed Diana's elbow. "Time for chocolate," he announced to the growing crowd.

Miss Richland turned to Charles. "Miss Knolton also fell. Escort her to the house. I will see that Mr. Jessup avoids doing anything silly – like trying to rise before the footmen arrive." Miss Richland was a formidable spinster who could keep the devil himself in line. She'd been supervising the children who had joined the skating expedition.

"An excellent suggestion," he agreed, offering Edith his arm. "Are you hurt, Miss Knolton?"

"Merely clumsy," she said as they moved away.

"Hardly." He chuckled. "I've seen you when you were clumsy. This performance was a work of art."

She didn't know whether her blush arose from mortification or gratitude. Probably both. "They'd

planned an assignation behind the thicket – or so it seemed. I fear Mr. Russell might be involved in some way.” She shared her observations, including her conversation with Schechler.

“Your fears are well founded,” he agreed when she finished. “Russell is clearly stirring up trouble. I will have to deal with him sooner than I’d planned.”

She raised her brows.

“I’d hoped to put it off until after the wedding, but now...” He shook his head. “I don’t believe he would ruin his sister merely to spite you, though. There is something we don’t yet know. Once you are settled, I will speak to Riley. He hears news that escapes even the gossips. In the meantime, Jessup’s head will keep him in bed for the day and give you a chance to divert Miss Russell. I doubt she planned to elope.”

“Elope?” While she had suggested the possibility that morning, she hadn’t thought Diana was ready to abandon Giles just yet.

“After our conversation, I asked my groom to keep an eye on Jessup’s horse so I would have notice of any unusual plans – he has no carriage. My groom sent word an hour ago that Jessup had ordered two horses to wait for him beyond the lake, one with a sidesaddle. He also ordered a carriage from the village. I made sure the horses remained in the stable.” His satisfied smile warmed the air. “Since Miss Russell still seemed undecided when she asked me to procure an amulet, I doubt she had plans to leave with Jessup. And I’m certain that someone of her character would never forego the spectacle of a lavish wedding in front of an admiring crowd.”

“Abduction, then. He must be desperate. But why?”

“I’m hoping Riley will know.” He seated her on a bench and removed her skates, his fingers warm as they unaccountably wandered above her ankles.

Edith tried to ignore the heat blazing up her leg, but she couldn’t control her tremors.

“Are you sure you didn’t hurt yourself?”

“Quite sure. I landed on top of him.”

He grinned. “Deliberately, I suspect. Miss Knol— What is your name anyway?”

“Edith.”

“Good. If we are to work together, I prefer less formality. You can call me Charles.” When she nodded, he led her toward the house. “As for diverting

Miss Russell's attention, I heard a rumor that Jessup lost at cards last week. Perhaps you should mention it – or even exaggerate it. She must know that gamesters make bad husbands."

The blood drained from Edith's face as his words revived old horrors. Before she could slam the door against them, memories engulfed her, encasing her in fog. She barely felt Charles pull her into the walled garden beyond curious eyes.

"Forgive me," he begged. "That was an abominable suggestion. I'd forgotten—"

"—that Papa killed himself after losing everything at cards?"

"That you found his body. I should not have reminded you."

She turned away to hide the face she could no longer control.

He pulled her back. "Since I've already walked into this bumble broth, why don't you tell me about that day? I suspect you've never discussed it."

"I c-can't," she admitted, fighting tremors, though his touch soothed some of the horror.

"Talk to me, Edith. If you hoard the images, they will never fade."

"You sound as if you know."

"I do know. I was first on the scene of a rather bloody horror myself. I was ten."

"So young." She sighed. And maybe he was right. She hoped so, for she couldn't refuse him. Besides, nothing she said would lower his opinion of her... "Finding Papa was only the first shock. We'd had no idea that he was a gamester – he'd apparently flirted with ruination before. And the timing hurt as badly as the loss itself. I was supposed to come out in London only a week later."

He murmured something soothing, though she couldn't make out the words. His hands warmed her back.

"When I entered the library that m-morning—" She gritted her teeth until they no longer chattered, then shook her head, hoping to dislodge the images. When that didn't work, she forced her tongue into motion. "There was so much blood. And then his note... He'd lost everything. We had two days to vacate the house. Mama collapsed. Jaimie was nearly as upset. My brother," she added, shaking her head. "In the end, I

had to take charge. I'd salvaged my pearls, but even frugality couldn't make them support four of us for long. Jaimie tried to help, but he was barely sixteen, and without patronage he had no hope of obtaining any sort of post. He finally accepted the king's shilling, hoping to make a name for himself in the army. He died in Spain."

"I understand you've been supporting your mother and sister ever since."

"Who else will do it?" she demanded. "Mama tries, but her clients use her mostly from charity, for she never was much good with a needle. Nor is my sister. She is a dreamer every bit as bad as Papa and still thinks wishing will somehow restore our former life." Her control snapped. Before she could stop herself, she was weeping on his shoulder.

His arms pulled her close. She should have protested, should have backed away, but she couldn't. For once in her life, she let down her guard long enough to accept the comfort he offered. That it was Charles himself who held her...

The tears flowed faster.

\* \* \* \*

Charles let her cry even as he cursed Sir Richard for leaving her with so many responsibilities at so tender an age. If only the fool were alive so Charles could call him out.

He eased her closer, stroking his hand down her back. She fit perfectly against him, triggering a ripple of desire, though he felt no need to act on it. Most unusual.

Her sobs finally slowed.

"Forgive me, my lord," she murmured, trying to push free.

"Charles." He let her pull back just far enough that he could see her eyes – silver disks now rimmed with red. "We agreed you would call me Charles."

"Charles." She sighed. "My apologies for subjecting you to that."

"I expect you needed it. Have you ever let yourself grieve?"

She shook her head. "There was never time, but that's no excuse for discommoding you."

"You haven't."

He cradled her head between his palms, his thumbs wiping the last tears from her cheeks. Then he

dropped a comforting kiss on her mouth. Sparks kindled, burning clear to his toes. Her eyes widened in more than shock...

His own closed as he kissed her again, dragging her close enough to plunder, to savor, to revel in discovery.

*Not dragged*, insisted the corner of his mind that still functioned. *She isn't fighting*.

It was true. Her arms closed around his waist. Her mouth opened to his darting tongue. Heat burned him to a crisp, igniting the familiar lust. But unfamiliar sensations also raged. Trying to identify them awakened him to reality.

He was assaulting a well-born innocent without invitation. Just like Russell.

"Forgive me," he begged, praying her eyes would not hold condemnation when they opened. "That was not well done. You should have used that knee I mentioned yesterday."

She inhaled twice before finding her voice. "There is nothing to forgive, Charles. It's an unusual approach to dissipating tears, but quite effective." She pulled against his grip, reminding him that he still held her.

He thrust his hands into his greatcoat pockets, speechless from her interpretation – and thoroughly irritated. No one ever dismissed his kisses.

Edith blew out a long breath, then turned the subject. "We were discussing Jessup's gaming. You suggested I inform Miss Russell of it, but that is not a good idea. She would either ignore the news or assume that her devotion would cure him of the habit."

"Is she mad?"

"She is young. And she dotes on romantic novels in which love resolves all problems, if you recall. If she thinks her dowry would remedy a financial crisis – serious losses might explain his current course – then she would expect a lifetime of gratitude in exchange."

Charles choked. "Throwing that in his face every day would likely earn her a beating."

"I know, but she believes herself irresistible and refuses to hear anything to the contrary." She headed for the house.

"Merrimont might be better off without her," he mused, catching up so she would not appear to be fleeing him. "I wonder if they settled anything just now."

"I will ask."

“Do that.” He clasped her wrist so she had to look at him. “And I’ll talk to Riley. Meet me in the library after lunch.” Schechler was again murmuring into Lady Frobisher’s ear, so there would be no negotiations today.

Edith held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded and slipped away.

He headed for the billiard room, still shaken by that kiss. It was unlike anything he might have expected had he ever considered kissing her – and nothing like Emily’s kisses. Edith’s were far more seductive, and thus very dangerous. Her sensuality frankly astounded him. How had he missed it? Was he too blind to see beyond the surface trimmings of a governess’s garb? It did not say much about his wits.

She was intriguing in character as well as in looks. Quick-witted. Logical. Competent. It was something else he’d missed. She’d been in London with one charge or another for several years, yet he’d not even noticed her until the cream cake incident. Now he couldn’t get her out of his head.

— 5 —

The library was empty when Edith slipped inside. At least she needn’t fret over Diana for the moment. The girl was shepherding the ladies to tea at the vicarage. Sir Waldo had taken most of the men out shooting. Jessup remained in bed.

But Edith found it impossible to relax. Charles’s kiss had left her so shaky that she’d barely managed to speak lightly afterwards then walk away as if nothing had happened. He was amazingly skilled, raising sensations she’d not known existed.

*Stupid!* she castigated herself. She should have followed her instincts and stayed far away from him. Harboring a *tendre* for a notorious rakehell was bad enough. Now that she’d discovered a host of virtues beneath his public façade, he was even more desirable. And his touch was more incendiary than she’d thought possible. If his auburn curls had burst into flames, he couldn’t have scorched her more. And the way he’d comforted...

She was more than stupid. She very much feared she’d fallen in love with him.

Nothing could be worse. She’d locked away dreams

of love and marriage eleven years ago, then built a satisfactory career, first as a companion and then as a finishing governess. Pride in her accomplishments helped overcome any lingering regret for her family's fall.

Now Charles had revived those dreams. Worse, he'd pushed them beyond girlish fantasies by evoking adult passion. How could she ever be satisfied squiring silly young girls now that she knew how much she'd really lost? She should never have stayed with Diana this long. Christmas with her family would have kept her world intact.

As footsteps approached, she unclenched her fists.

"Did Riley know anything useful about Jessup?" she managed with credible calm when Charles appeared in the doorway.

"More than useful. Nothing of a financial nature slips past him." He closed the door and joined her by the fire, raising the temperature in the room. "Jessup's recent losses landed in Russell's pocket."

"What?" The information dissipated her nervousness. "Why doesn't Merrimont know that?"

"Keep your voice down. Even the walls have ears." He dropped his own to a seductive murmur. "Merrimont probably never asked. And the Foreign Office doesn't hear about Home Office investigations. They've been watching Russell since autumn."

"Why?"

"That isn't relevant, but they know a great deal about him."

"Such as?"

"Because Sir Waldo keeps him on a tight financial leash, Russell turned to gaming to increase his income. Stupid," he agreed, overriding her protest. "But he's made it work, for though he loses as often as he wins, he has never lost a large wager, whether at cards or dice."

"That doesn't sound honest."

Charles smiled. "You go straight to the point. No one wins all their large wagers while losing most of their small ones. He has to be cheating."

That smile melted her knees, so she toyed with a vase of spills to avoid meeting his eyes. "If Mr. Russell holds Jessup's markers, it would explain why he can command him."

"Exactly."

When he stepped closer, she circled the terrestrial globe, placing it between them.

He leaned against the mantel. "According to Riley, Jessup lost everything he owns and more. Russell gave him until Twelfth Night to redeem his vowels. The total exactly matches Miss Russell's dowry. Ten thousand pounds."

Edith bit back a curse. "So that's it. I couldn't explain why Jessup might wish to harm Giles, but Peter resents Diana's extravagant dowry and hates that her husband will wind up with money Peter considers his own."

"I wish you had mentioned that earlier."

"That argument began before Diana even met Giles, so it did not seem relevant until now. Did Peter suffer any setbacks last week?"

"Why?"

"Something must have pushed him to cheat Jessup. It's been six months since Diana accepted Giles. Why wait until the last minute?"

"Good question." He frowned. "I'll ask Riley."

"Do that. Something prompted him to act."

"Maybe he only recently discovered his sister's ambivalence."

"Maybe he's responsible for her ambivalence. But there has to be more. If his goal was to wrest a fortune from his clutch-fisted father, he could have cheated someone months ago – an elopement before the Season would not have jeopardized the family name."

"Sir Waldo might have canceled the dowry for an elopement. That is still true, for he has no contract with Jessup and thus no obligation to pay anything."

Edith was surprised she hadn't considered that possibility. Perhaps she should remind Diana that Sir Waldo could keep her dowry if she jilted Giles. Without a dowry, she would never find another suitor. Beauty might draw second looks, but there were plenty of well-endowed beauties on the Marriage Mart. "I doubt Peter would think of that. He's rather stupid."

"But Jessup should know." He frowned. "I wonder how he can assure that the dowry is paid."

"It doesn't matter, because we'll stop him. The only question is how."

"Let Sir Waldo do it. Once I tell him about the card game and the Home Office investigation, he will send Russell abroad. And he can forgive Jessup's debts on



the grounds of fraud, which will prevent Jessup from plotting further, though I doubt his friendship with Merrimont will survive.”

“And just as well. No one needs that sort of friend. In the meantime, this doesn’t address Miss Russell’s arrogance. Sir Waldo can force her to the altar, but I can’t in good conscience subject Merrimont to a life of misery. She has to grow up and start thinking of more than herself. Are you still making her an amulet?”

He nodded. “I will give it to her in the morning, then try to arrange a frank discussion with Merrimont. I’ll signal you when I succeed, so you can see that Miss Russell overhears.”

The timing couldn’t be worse, Edith admitted. Christmas festivities began tomorrow. Everyone would be caught up in decorating the manor. It could take Charles all day to corner Giles. In her present mood, Diana would not welcome Edith as a constant companion. But they could not postpone it for even a day. The wedding was too near.

Footsteps jolted her from her thoughts. She slid into the shadows lest she be discovered alone with a gentleman, but they passed the door without pausing.

Charles stared at the door, then moved to Edith’s side so they would not be overheard – or so he told himself. But the words no longer rang true. Something about her drew him, as if she could supply the answers to all of life’s riddles. Her scent enveloped him, weakening his knees. When he leaned down to whisper in her ear, she jumped. He nearly smiled.

“Use Miss Russell’s desire for truth to convince her to listen when I’m speaking to Merrimont,” he murmured, stroking her arm, his bare hand against the warmth of her bare skin. “I doubt she’ll admit she has a magic amulet, but after all her complaints, she can’t be surprised that you know what she seeks.”

“That will work. And perhaps I can weave some Christmas magic into our discussions – peace on earth and the like. ’Tis the season to dismiss old grudges and start anew in the spirit of good will. You might try that with Giles, too. He and Diana must either accept their differences or part before it is too late.” Silver eyes stared up at him, limpid pools sparkling in the sunlight streaming—

He pulled himself together. “You make parting sound easy. It isn’t.”

“You would know.”

He waited for the inevitable questions, but she said nothing, merely staring into his eyes. Perhaps that’s why he found himself sharing thoughts he’d not even told the Beaux. “Ending a betrothal is never easy, even when everyone agrees. And it leaves lingering questions. I still can’t understand my stupidity. How could I have thought us suited?”

“Everyone makes mistakes.”

“I know that!” he snapped, then strode to the window so he could tighten the reins on his temper. “Mistakes happen every day – walking into Tattersall’s when the one man you need to avoid is standing just inside the door, or misplacing your favorite hat, or not suspecting that an unusually spicy sauce is hiding bad fish. But that betrothal was more than a mistake. It was a case of atrocious judgment. Why didn’t I see it? How many other ways am I blind? How the devil can I stay in a job where faulty judgment can cost the Crown so dearly?” Not until she grabbed his wrist did he realize he was tearing at his hair.

“Sit down, Charles. No one expects you to be perfect.”

“My father does.”

“Then he is stupid.”

He was so surprised, he let her push him into a chair. “Stupid?”

“Exactly. He must know that no one is perfect. If he holds you to a higher standard than is humanly possible, then he’s an idiot. I don’t care what his motive is. Comparing people to impossible ideals never works.”

“But he doesn’t consider his standards impossible,” he snapped back. “He adheres to them himself, so why shouldn’t others?”

“That has nothing to do with perfection,” she countered. “That is demanding that you make the same choices he does – which is absurd. There are many acceptable choices in life. One is no more right than another.”

“It is when it creates scandal. That damnable betrothal—”

“Surely a man of his background cannot expect you to wed someone who would make you miserable.”

“No, but he had plenty to say about my judgment. I should never have jumped into that betrothal to begin

with. And I certainly should not have done so without discussing it with him first. To prevent a recurrence, he is taking matters into his own hands by choosing a wife for me. Thank God duty keeps me here instead of at home this Christmas.”

“Which proves he is stupid. A man who teaches that marriage should encompass love and fidelity cannot expect an arranged match to work. And denigrating your judgment proves that his own is flawed.”

“What—”

She swept on. “I’ve heard no tales that suggest your judgment is faulty, Charles. If there was any evidence, you can be sure Lady Beatrice would notice,” she added, naming London’s most prominent gossip, who prided herself on knowing everything. “Everyone takes a wrong step at times. Competent men recognize those wrong steps. If their characters are strong, they immediately retreat – as you did last Season. If they are weak, they freeze, bemoaning Fate or blaming others until everything collapses onto their heads. Stupid men never recognize that they are wrong. They forge ahead even after it is obvious to everyone else that they will fail. You are intelligent enough to recognize that a misstep you rectified months ago cannot mar your otherwise excellent judgment.”

“You’ve a unique perspective.” His head was whirling.

“And a forward tongue. Lecturing you is impertinent, so I must beg forgiveness. I have been instructing people too long, I fear.” She shook her head.

“That wasn’t a criticism. You are making me reconsider ideas. No friend could do more.”

“You claim your betrothal was a case of bad judgment. Since I’m already guilty of hopeless impertinence, I’ll ask what you mean.”

He shrugged. “I let lust blind me.”

She waited silently until he again felt compelled to continue.

“Emily was my best friend’s sister, making lust inappropriate. So I convinced myself I loved her.”

“A reasonable assumption, given your family’s history.”

“A stupid assumption. Just because she’d turned into a lovely lady since I’d last seen her didn’t change that I’d treated her as a sister most of her life. When

push came to shove, she remained more Richard's little sister than anything else."

"You blame yourself for twisting attraction into love." It wasn't a question.

"Of course. I should have recognized the truth far sooner – I didn't offer for her until a month after she reached town."

"But you did recognize the truth, and in time to rectify your mistake. I see nothing odd about you tumbling into such an imbroglio. A rake of your renown must be attracted to many women. Only friendship pushed you to twist the attraction in that case. Now that you recognize the trap, it won't happen again."

"My friends have no more sisters."

"See? The problem is gone."

His head whirled faster, for she'd somehow twisted his stupidity into a minor irritation rather than the earth-shattering dilemma that had plagued him for months. He opened his mouth to question her further, but she again surprised him by turning away.

"If you'll excuse me, I have several tasks to see to before Diana returns. Lady Russell will be unhappy if they are not done."

He wasn't sure if he wanted her to leave or stay, so he merely nodded. "Very well, Edith. And I'll take care of Russell."

The moment she left, he paced to the fireplace and back, pondering the past half hour. He felt as though she'd torn him apart then pasted him back together in a totally new way.

All his life Inslip had loomed just over his shoulder, watching every move he made. Though he loved his father with a devotion he accorded no other man, that constant watchfulness had never been comfortable – probably because Inslip had never been satisfied with his behavior. No matter what Charles did, Inslip found fault. Knowing that his best was never good enough stripped most of the enjoyment from his achievements and kept him in constant fear that others would note the same faults Inslip saw so clearly. He had never considered that Inslip himself might be wrong...

Until now.

He cautiously reviewed their most recent clashes in light of Edith's interpretation, fearful that he would discover a flaw in her reasoning. But she was right.

Inslip wasn't all-knowing or all-seeing. He was merely a man who, believing his own ways were best, expected his sons to follow precisely in his footsteps. But striking out on his own did not mean Charles was wrong.

Relief flooded him. And the return of confidence. He *was* competent. He *was* intelligent. He *could* negotiate with Schechler to a mutually satisfying end.

And he had Edith to thank for it. She had a knack for seeing past the surface to the core of a problem. And she had a knack for convincing people to reveal more than they considered reasonable. He'd actually shared his fears with her. If she told others—

But she wouldn't. He didn't know why, since she was nothing like he'd expected, but he trusted her.

He shook his head over the impressions he'd formed last Season. He should have recognized that her stammering had arisen from embarrassment rather than stupidity. Thrusting her into the public eye with his droll recounting of the cream cake affair would have revived memory of every cut she'd received after her father's death. She'd made one small mistake by tripping on the carpet and landing against him. If she hadn't been carrying a plate of pastries, the incident wouldn't have rated more than passing notice. But her squirming as she tried to rise had literally plastered him with cream cake. To divert attention from his embarrassment, he'd figuratively rubbed her face in the incident instead of letting her recover her poise.

His guilt increased when he realized that his ridicule might have directed Russell's attention to her. Had that attack been his fault?

Recalling how shaken she'd been when he'd pulled Russell away revived his fury. Russell deserved more punishment than mere exile. Perhaps he should personally escort the cad to the docks...

He went in search of his host.

But Sir Waldo was nowhere to be found. An emergency had demanded personal attention. No one knew when he would return.

— 6 —

Christmas Eve dawned colder than ever, though that didn't stop everyone from gathering to collect greenery. Excitement mounted as people filled the hall

and spilled into adjacent rooms. For the moment, the magic of Christmas pushed all other concerns aside. Wedding plans, negotiations, even grudges didn't matter today.

Or so Charles hoped as he pushed through the crowd. He wasn't up to facing trouble. Though he'd gone to bed full of hope for the morrow, dreams had plagued his sleep, leaving him groggy. The lascivious ones of Edith hadn't surprised him – he often dreamed of women who stirred his passions. What disturbed him was the jumble of Inslip's worst lectures overlaid with crashing thunder and ominous fog. Threats seemed to hover just out of sight. He'd no idea of their form, but they promised a disaster he couldn't escape.

*Enough!* He shoved the images aside. He faced too many real problems to waste time fighting imaginary ones, especially when the imaginary ones did nothing but rehash old pains.

He finally spotted Edith and drew her into a corner. "I gave Miss Russell the amulet after breakfast," he murmured. "She must wear it next to her heart if she wants it to work. The magic disappears at midnight."

"I hope you can maneuver Giles into talking today, then." She sighed. "Diana was so sullen this morning, I fear it is too late."

"We will see. Sir Waldo was gone yesterday, so I couldn't talk to him about Russell, but I'll see him as soon as possible. Until I do, take care that Russell doesn't find you alone. I don't trust him."

"Nor do I, but he would never stoop to notice underlings when he is surrounded by his equals, so I'm safe enough."

"Humor me. He is not behaving normally at the moment. Stay in sight. If I can speak with Merrimont, I'll tug on my ear so you can lead Miss Russell close enough to hear."

\* \* \* \*

Edith stayed with Diana as the group headed for the woods, wondering at the girl's odd humor. Not only was Diana content with Edith's company, but she avoided every man in the party. Edith hoped the amulet was responsible, but she couldn't trust the change.

Jessup remained in his room, turning away all visitors. She'd meant to ask Charles about the man's condition, but his sudden appearance at her side –

and the heat of his fingers on her arm – had made her dizzy. She'd been too busy hiding her reaction to remember her questions. And too dull-witted, she admitted. Sleep had eluded her much of the night.

Now she feared that Jessup might have caused Diana's malaise. Had he sent her another note? If he'd heard about last evening's high spirits, he might fear losing his chance to redeem his vowels.

Edith gripped her basket harder and stayed with Diana when the guests scattered. Charles had already followed Giles in another direction, so it was too late to warn him that Giles was reaching the end of his rope.

Diana had thrown herself into charades last night, laughing immoderately, flirting with every man in the room, and executing her pantomimes with so much sensuality that Giles had drawn Edith aside.

"Do something about her unseemly exuberance," he'd hissed.

"Do you want her in hysterics?" She'd been too irritated to temper her words.

"This frivolity has to stop. She'll ruin herself – and me."

Edith had sighed. "I agree, but controlling her will be difficult. It was a mistake to combine your wedding with Christmas. The excitement has gone to her head."

He'd blinked. "Is that what it is?"

"What else? She is only seventeen, too young to completely control the most turbulent emotions. By next week, she should again be levelheaded. Another year will see her firmly settled."

"If you say so." He clearly didn't believe her.

"I do," she'd insisted, praying it was true. "In the meantime, she needs support from both of us. For all her seeming poise, she lacks confidence – a common problem with longstanding beauties. They've been taught that their appearance defines their worth, yet they can't truly trust that the accolades are sincere." She'd wanted to add that Giles's silence increased Diana's fears, but Riley had drawn him away. And perhaps that had been good. She had given him something to think about without triggering his defensive pride.

"Ah, Miss Russell!" Mr. Tomling bowed theatrically before Diana, pulling Edith from her thoughts. "Beautiful, as always. A golden rose blooming in a sea of gray."

Not quite accurate, decided Edith as Diana simpered. While some of the trees were gray, more were evergreen, and the guests wore cloaks in every color of the rainbow. But the compliment restored Diana's spirits – probably because of the amulet, which would give it more weight than it deserved.

She was still wondering how to deal with this new problem when Diana sent Tomling off to cut mistletoe from a distant oak, then continued into the woods, making no protest when Edith followed.

"There!" the girl said five minutes later. "My favorite holly tree. It always has the best berries."

"It's lovely." The ancient tree grew against the rear of an empty woodcutter's cottage. Had Diana arranged to meet Jessup inside? Yet she invented no errand for Edith. Instead, she set down her basket and began cutting.

Their baskets were brimming by the time the cottage door creaked, alerting Edith to danger. To avoid overhearing a tryst, she reached out to draw Diana away, but Sir Waldo's voice arrested her hand.

"Is this private enough for you?" he demanded.

"Quite." It was Charles. "This subject is too delicate to risk being overheard." He paused as if gathering his courage. "I dislike meddling in your affairs, but if I remain silent, your family's name will be dragged through the mud."

"Impertinence, sir!" snapped Sir Waldo. "How dare you malign my daughter's high spirits? Is this how you repay my hospitality?"

"Miss Russell's high spirits are another matter entirely and not my business. Hear me out, then judge for yourself. When I am done, I will depart Gloucestershire if you so desire." He waited until Sir Waldo grunted agreement. "Last week your son Peter fleeced Jessup of a great deal more than he owns. Peter is pressing Jessup to abduct Miss Russell – her dowry matches the debt, which is at least a thousand more than he can raise."

"Never!" The denial was automatic. "You cannot mean it."

"Quiet," whispered Edith when Diana opened her mouth. "They will be furious to find you here. Come away."

Diana shook her head, then clamped her lips firmly shut and put an ear to the wall.



"I do mean it," continued Charles. "Fortunately, the abduction failed, thanks to Miss Knolton's vigilance. But the setback will not make Peter abandon his scheme. This is not the first time he has cheated, as Riley can attest – the Home Office has received complaints. But this time Peter is determined to hurt all of you. He hates Merrimont, who refused him a loan the day before that fateful card game. He despises Miss Russell for being your favorite. And he is still smarting over your latest refusal to increase his allowance. So he means to steal some of his inheritance."

"Does Diana—"

"No. She knows nothing of his plot – even the most reckless high spirits would not push her to dishonor. Yes, she's a hoyden," he added as if speaking over a protest. "But she would never seriously consider wedding Jessup – he's a well known here-and-therean."

"I'll wring his neck!"

"People would ask why. So far, few know of the plot, and Jessup is not your greatest danger in any event. Riley also revealed that the Crown is poised to arrest Peter on other charges. A trial will blacken your family name. The best way to avoid scandal is to send him abroad. Have you property he could manage?"

"A small plantation in Jamaica." He paused. "I knew he was wild, but I hadn't wanted to believe— I will speak to Riley immediately. Thank you for bringing the problem to my attention, Lord Charles."

The door creaked, then slammed shut. Footsteps moved away, shuffling leaves and snapping twigs.

Diana turned as if to follow.

"No," whispered Edith. "Sir Waldo will be furious if he finds out you overheard."

"How—" Her chin quivered.

"No tears. You know they leave your eyes red."

Diana nodded, inhaling deeply several times. She was opening her mouth to continue, when a voice rang out.

"Sir Waldo! Are you out here?" Jessup.

Again the door creaked. Someone had remained behind. "What do *you* want?" growled Sir Waldo.

"We have business to discuss," said Jessup pleasantly, though the desperation underlying his voice made Edith fear he might ignore yesterday's clear warning from Charles. Surely he wouldn't demand

Diana's hand in marriage. She tensed, wondering if she should draw Diana aside. But Diana again had her ear pressed to the wall.

"I've no business with a cur," snapped Sir Waldo.

"Yes, you do." Jessup must have shouldered Sir Waldo inside, for the door slammed shut, bringing the men closer to the rear wall and making it easier to hear. "I need a thousand pounds to meet a pressing debt. Unless you supply it, I will tell Lady Beatrice about my assignations with your daughter."

"Scoundrel!" Flesh thudded against flesh.

"I may be a scoundrel, but I have no choice," Jessup growled painfully. "Without the money, I'm ruined."

"Then marry the chit. Merrimont has eyes like a hawk and will know of any assignations. He won't wed soiled goods, so she'll be free to entertain an offer."

"It is true that Giles would be appalled, but he's been too busy with Schechler to notice. I don't want a wife, especially this one. Her petty demands would drive me to distraction. So you have a choice. Pay me, and she'll live respectably as Giles's wife. Refuse, and she'll become an outcast. Can you tolerate having her under your roof for the rest of your life?"

Tears flooded Diana's face, but she remained silent. Edith pulled her close.

"You won't say a word," said Sir Waldo ominously. "No, stay in that chair. It's your turn to listen. You are alive only because I know Diana has done nothing wrong. She might flirt more than is seemly, but she would never ruin herself."

"Truth matters not," countered Jessup. "Society believes the worst of anyone, and I can supply that worst."

"I told you to listen!" Another thud reverberated through the cottage. Jessup must have tried to rise and been forced back. "You're a weak fool, Jessup, but I will overlook it this once because I've been just as weak. For years I denied that Peter is a villain, blinding myself to all evidence. That is no longer possible. Peter cheated in that card game, so you owe him nothing. I will incarcerate him when we return to the house, and he will leave on the first ship I can find. You have no debts, sir. But neither are you welcome under my roof. Use this reprieve to embrace honor. And never forget that I'll be watching. If you bend honor again, I will destroy you."

Edith pulled Diana away, tiptoeing so they would not be heard. The girl was too distraught to remain quiet much longer.

"H-he lied to me," Diana wailed when they were alone.

"Yes, he did."

"And he lied to Papa." This time anger threaded her voice.

"True."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing." She forced Diana to look at her. "You will do nothing. Sir Waldo has settled the matter, and Peter cannot hurt you again. Rejoin your guests and behave like the innocent lady you are."

"Truth." Bitterness dripped from the word. "I wish I had never sought the truth."

"Truth is often painful," Edith agreed. "But it is better than lies, for lies invariably come to light in the worst possible way. And if you think about it, you will admit that you never cared for Jessup. You were using him to make Giles jealous, just as he used you to seek his fortune." She lightened her tone, hoping her explanation was close enough to the truth that it would not cast doubt on the amulet. "Wedding preparations often drive people a little mad. It is unfortunate that you let excitement push you into hysteria, but people will forgive your exuberance if you henceforth present an image of perfect propriety – something that should not be difficult now that you know how an unscrupulous man can twist the slightest slip into scandal."

"I'm confused," admitted Diana. "I thought Jessup was a gentleman. He wooed me constantly, yet he doesn't even like me. All he wanted was money. How can I trust that Giles isn't the same? He's made no effort to please me since our betrothal."

"Giles is nothing like Jessup. Nor does he need to wed money. He has enough of his own. If you've learned anything, it should be that truth is more important than pride. Why don't you swallow yours long enough to ask *him* these questions, calmly and without recriminations? Tell him your fears, then judge by his response."

The last of Diana's color fled, leaving her white and shaking.

Charles hid his irritation as he tromped through the woods in search of a suitable Yule log. So far his newborn confidence had achieved nothing. He'd expected to make progress with Merrimont that morning, but it hadn't happened.

Unlike Inslip Manor, where the groundskeeper maintained a special grove to provide holiday decorations, Russell House boasted only a half-wild wood spread over an entire hillside. When the party had scattered in search of greens, he'd quickly lost sight of Merrimont. Miss Russell had led Edith in another direction entirely, so he'd abandoned his plans and dealt with Sir Waldo.

At least that had gone well. Sir Waldo had lured Russell away while everyone was busy in the woods. No one yet realized that Russell hadn't returned.

But Charles was still kicking himself over losing sight of Edith. Miss Russell had seemed strained when the group had gathered around the fire for chocolate and carols. Edith had looked worse. Something had clearly happened, but he'd been unable to get her alone to ask about it.

Now he faced another delay. Schechler had refused to resume negotiations. Charles couldn't get near Edith, who was with the ladies, plaiting garlands and making kissing boughs. So he'd had no choice but to join the gentlemen fetching the Yule log – and if Sir Waldo kept everyone too busy to note Russell's absence, hours could pass before they actually *found* the log that had been drying since midsummer for just this occasion.

Perhaps he should talk to Merrimont and convince him to confront Miss Russell directly. Not that he wanted to, of course. If he failed to break down the man's rigid pride, it would be impossible to resurrect the original plan. But they could at least talk about the negotiations. Schechler's latest ploy was probably meant to bring pressure on Merrimont. They all knew the man was under orders to sign an agreement before the wedding.

"Here's a log we can use," shouted Sir Waldo with false jollity.

"It's too small," complained his cousin. "That won't burn more than three hours."

Insults flew from all sides, denouncing the log with such fervor that Sir Waldo held up his hands in mock surrender. "All right. All right. We need something bigger," he conceded. "Let's keep looking." And they were off.

Charles worked his way through the crowd, which straggled badly. Half an hour passed before he admitted Merrimont wasn't there. Had he bolted?

"Damnation," he muttered. He'd not checked to see who was going before they'd left the house. Hunting the Yule log traditionally required every able-bodied gentleman in residence.

This had to be Jessup's fault.

Edith had paused before lunch long enough to report that Jessup was gone after trying to blackmail Sir Waldo. They'd been interrupted before she could supply details, but maybe Merrimont was following his erstwhile friend to find out what had happened.

He hoped not. Merrimont might blame Miss Russell.

"Here's a log that's big enough," called Sir Waldo as they reached a clearing. A massive trunk fifty feet long and nearly four in diameter lay along one edge. Years of exposure to the elements had stripped off all the bark.

"It's *too* big," someone shouted. "It won't fit in the fireplace."

"We'd need a hundred men to carry it," cried another.

"I do not understand this custom," complained Schechler as the crowd happily insulted the behemoth.

"The Yule log?" asked Charles.

Schechler nodded.

"It is a symbol of warmth and good cheer, bringing luck for the new year. Choosing the right log is important, for it will be lighted tonight and must burn through the end of Christmas if the luck is to hold. The last brand is used to light the next year's log, carrying the luck forward."

"The good cheer I can understand," he said, gesturing toward their companions, most of whom had partaken liberally of wine at luncheon and many of whom were staving off cold with nips of brandy. "But how does the burning of this log bring luck?"

"Why do people in your country drag whole trees into the house at Christmas?"

"Tradition." Schechler shrugged.

"So is this."

Schechler sank into contemplation, so Charles let his mind drift to the jolts Edith had given him yesterday – and to the kiss he couldn't forget. She was far more than a clear-minded friend...

Sir Waldo led them on another lengthy circuit of the woods, finally arriving at the real Yule log. Cheers rose from all sides.

"Perfect!" shouted the cousin.

"Excellent size."

"Easy to lift."

"We will have a prosperous new year after all."

"What luck to find it so near the house!" As if the groundskeepers hadn't dragged it that far so the gentlemen wouldn't have to exert too much effort carrying it inside.

Schechler unexpectedly laid a hand on Charles's arm. "What do you know of Herr Russell the younger?"

"You mean Mr. Peter?" asked Charles.

Schechler nodded.

"He is on his way to the Caribbean to avoid arrest for fraud. Why?"

"His word is not to be trusted, then?"

"No. He speaks only the words that will serve his own dishonorable purposes. This past week he has been pressing at least three separate feuds, spreading maximum ill will about each of them."

"Ah. She was right, then." Smiling, he stepped up to grasp one of the stubby branches left to make carrying the log easy. "We will carry this lucky log indoors, then perhaps we can complete our business."

Charles helped hoist the log. "I'm sure we can." He blessed Edith for her advice to Schechler yesterday. She'd made the man think – just as she'd made *him* think. It was a talent he wished he'd recognized sooner...

\* \* \* \*

Edith kept a close eye on Diana as they left the church that evening. She wasn't sure the girl would make it home without bursting into tears.

Christmas Eve was usually a day filled with excitement as the company decorated the house, shared fond recollections of previous holidays, tested the kissing boughs, sampled wassail and a host of special treats...

But Charles's amulet had turned it into the worst

day of Diana's life.

She believed in its magic. Believed that everything she saw or heard today would be true. So for the first time in her life, she had focused her attention beyond herself, noticing much that she would usually have ignored – Giles riding down the drive with Jessup, deep in conversation, then retiring to his room without a word on his return; a cousin's parody portraying Diana as an arrogant queen who demeaned her suitors with frivolous demands; a gossip's speculation that Giles's mistress would offer him a refuge from his shrewish wife so, of course, he would keep her on...

Diana had been close to tears twice, but she'd kept a smile on her face and remained cordial. Not until Giles arrived late for Christmas services and remained in the back of the church had she cracked. So public a cut was impossible to ignore.

Edith caught Charles's eye, silently pleading with him to do something. He tugged his ear, then pulled Giles aside when the others headed for the path that twisted through the woods to the manor. It skirted the dense thickets that crowned the low cliff formed when the stream had cut into the hillside.

"Let everyone get ahead of us," murmured Edith as Diana's fists clenched. "This is your chance. You and Giles must talk honestly. Tonight. Share your truths, then listen to his. Only then can you decide what to do."

Diana nodded. Her hand clutched at her bosom as if drawing strength from the amulet.

"Good. Stay in control. Hysterics will make it impossible to learn anything useful." She nodded toward the vicar, who remained outside the church. "Since you don't want an audience, we will wait just beyond the first bend. When the men catch up, I will accompany Lord Charles to the house. Just make sure you and Giles return before we light the Yule log."

"Thank you." Diana relaxed, giving Edith hope that she would approach the coming scene calmly. Now all she could do was pray that Charles could draw some concession from Giles that would give this discussion a starting point.

\* \* \* \*

"You seem oddly subdued for a man approaching the altar," said Charles as he and Merrimont left the church behind. With Edith waiting barely a hundred

feet away, he didn't have time for subtlety. "Problems?"

"Schechler is an ass. Jessup has betrayed me. Diana—"

"Schechler is no longer a problem. We reached an agreement this afternoon. You can look it over tomorrow." Charles had gained more concessions than he'd expected. He owed Edith for puncturing Schechler's stubbornness, but in retrospect it was her effect on himself that had made the real difference. Now that he no longer feared that he was a fake, the wariness that had protected him from exposure was gone – which had turned their session into an exchange of ideas instead of a battle.

"Good work. Are you off, then?"

"I'll stay for your wedding."

"If there is a wedding."

"Why wouldn't there be? Jessup is no loss – the man is weak, making him a useful tool for those who would harm you. You have better friends."

Merrimont hesitated as the woods closed around them, blocking the moonlight. But perhaps the dark removed the barrier that had been holding his frustration in check, for he suddenly burst into speech. "But that's the point. I trusted him! I didn't see his weakness or understand how it might affect me until he told me about Russell's plot. Diana has been so odd lately that I fear she's another I can't trust."

"Odd?"

"She's a demanding shrew one minute and a spoiled brat the next. Hoyden. Flirt. Harpy. Wanton—" He fisted his hands. "How am I supposed to live with her? If I take her to London, she could destroy my reputation without a second thought. What did I do to deserve this?"

"She is young yet," Charles reminded him.

"Young! She is the veriest infant. I can't believe I overlooked such faults. I need a wife, not a daughter. It is not my place to teach her how to go on in the world."

"Her training is all that you could want," said Charles firmly. "Miss Knolton is an exceptional teacher."

"Which means nothing if the student refuses to learn." Merrimont slashed a shrub with his cane. "Can you imagine Diana at a diplomatic dinner? Her pouting will make me a laughingstock. And demanding



that all eyes remain on her insults every other lady in the room.”

“I can’t believe she will be that bad. Granted, this house party is making her frantic, but she should settle quite well once you are wed. She has too much pride to embarrass herself.”

“But what if she doesn’t settle? What if she turns into another Lady Seaton?”

Charles had no response to that, for he could too easily imagine it. Lady Seaton was notorious for her liaisons – her husband had finally shut her in the country under guard until she produced an undeniably legitimate heir, then washed his hands of her, refusing even to share the same roof. But Merrimont was too sensitive to gossip to survive such a scandal.

“I was a fool to offer for her,” Merrimont continued sadly. “All she cares about is herself.”

Miss Russell let out a muffled shriek. Footsteps rushed away. Moments later her terrified scream slashed the night.

“Diana!” shouted Edith as the crack of breaking branches ended in a loud thud.

Merrimont shoved Charles aside and sped toward the ominous silence.

Charles followed to find Edith clinging to a tree. No one else was in sight. “What happened?” He grabbed her shoulders to make her look at him.

“She fled his truth. By the time I remembered the cliff...” She pointed to the edge, only ten feet away.

Merrimont’s voice slashed the forest. “Diana! Wake up. Oh, God! Wake up! I need you, love.”

Edith held Charles back when he would have followed. “Giles is with her. He’ll call if he needs help, but I doubt she’s dead. It can’t be more than six feet down, and the shrubbery broke her fall.”

Words tumbled from Merrimont’s lips. Promises. Pleas. Vows of everlasting love. Eventually Miss Russell’s voice responded.

“Did she fake this?” demanded Charles.

“No. Call it Fate. Or perhaps your amulet is more powerful than you thought. Fleeing one truth has led her to another. We can let them settle this themselves. Finally.” She turned toward the path and stumbled.

“Are you all right?” He pulled her against his side.

“Of course. Why?”

"You also screamed."

"What did you expect? When she disappeared over the edge... That cliff is a dozen feet high in places, with jagged rocks along the base. It took me a moment to recognize where we were."

"I see. Stay," he added when she picked up speed.

"Why?"

"My heart hasn't quite settled. Nor has yours," he added, feeling her tremors.

"I will be fine, my lord. And I should be there to cover Diana's absence."

"They will think you are with her. Are you afraid to stand in the dark with me?"

"Should I be?"

He wished he could see her expression, but no light penetrated the shadows beneath the trees. If that tremor meant what he hoped it did...

He wanted to wait until he was sure, but perhaps he should trust his judgment one more time, as he'd done with Schechler and Merrimont. It had been sound then...

He kissed her.

It was better than the first time. Much better.

"Charles?" she murmured as he nibbled her ear.

"Hmm?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I need to."

"Oh." Her hands moved under his coat, stroking his back as he pulled her closer. "Since you've been away from town for several days, I suppose you do."

He scowled. "That's not what I meant."

"It isn't?"

"I'm leading up to a marriage proposal. You deserve more out of life than parading chits through the Marriage Mart every year. Your family deserves more than struggling in a cottage."

"I'm not a charity case, my lord." She tried to pull away. "Nor am I a convenient way to thwart your father's matchmaking."

He refused to let go. "That isn't what I meant."

"You are saying a lot you don't mean tonight."

"Damnation!" He released her to drag his hands through his hair. "I'm making a thorough muck of this."

"That you are." Her voice sounded suspiciously light.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"A bit. I've not seen you this flustered since Lady Beatrice's drawing room."

He kissed her again – thoroughly – then led her out of the woods so he could see her face. It didn't improve his composure, for it was as impassive as the most accomplished diplomat's. "Let me start over, Edith," he said, laying his heart out for her to trample if she chose. "This has nothing to do with Inslip. I love you."

"You're serious!" She stared.

"Very. I don't believe in magic amulets, but I do believe in you. I need you, Edith."

"But you could have anyone."

"I want *you*. Is there any chance you want me too?"

"Of course, but—"

He stopped her protest in the best way possible – with another long kiss that nearly set the grounds on fire. "Satisfied?"

"Not entirely." When he raised his brows, she sighed. "Are you sure, Charles? We've spent the day wrapped in the Christmas spirit and surrounded by good cheer, then finished with a scare. It is bound to affect your thinking."

"No. You forced me to trust my judgment, and I've discovered that it's as sound as you claim. It's love I feel for you, Edith. Not lust. Not infatuation. Not Christmas spirit. Love is more powerful than any of those. And far more lasting. I've lived around people in love all my life. They've always described love as the ultimate magic, and now I know what they mean. This is right, as nothing was before. You are right – right for me. Do you understand?"

She nodded, her hand lifting to stroke his cheek in wonder.

He pulled her into another heady embrace, his desperation easing when she joined him wholeheartedly. He nearly wept when he had to end it.

"More," she murmured huskily. "You stopped too soon."

"The rest will have to wait. One month, love. Long enough to gather my family and yours. Then we will wed."

Edith stared at him, speechless, still barely believing her ears. He loved her. He wanted to marry her. Her, a dissipated gamester's penniless daughter who had worked as a companion and governess for eleven

years.

"You haven't said yes." His tongue flicked her nose.

"Yes." When he pulled her hard against him, she repeated it. "Yes, Charles. Yes."

"You're sure?"

"I've had a disgusting *tendre* for you since the first time I saw you. That tumbled hopelessly into love yesterday. Stupid of me, or so I thought."

He smiled. "Jacob was right. I think I've been in love with you since the day you ruined my favorite coat."

"I thought I would die of embarrassment, though it was your own fault."

"Mine?" He turned toward the house, keeping one arm firmly around her.

"Yours. I'd no idea you would be making morning calls that day – it isn't your habit. If you hadn't been suddenly in front of me in all your blinding elegance, I would never have tripped. Then I was so flustered, I couldn't get up again."

He laughed. "That's a story you can tell our grandchildren, love." Merrimont was embracing Diana under the kissing bough hanging from the portico, so he stopped, pulling Edith closer as he gazed up at the heavens. A falling star blazed a trail toward the Christmas star, its radiance adding to the joy bursting through his heart. "There's the Christmas star, Edith. Can you feel its promise? We belong together. Until the end of time."

She laid her head on his shoulder, raising a hand to cup the star's light. The night was so clear that it seemed to hover just beyond her fingertips. "It's beautiful, Charles. And you're right. Love is the ultimate magic. I'm yours. Forever."

"As I'm yours." Merrimont still blocked the door, so he pulled her closer. "Let's indulge in that magic one more time before we go inside."

His lips found hers and lingered...

## PROMISES TO KEEP

Allison Lane

-1-

London was huge and full of people.

Maggie Adams stared at the crowds as her hired carriage rounded a corner. Even knowing that London was the largest city in the world had not prepared her for its immensity.

It had taken two hours to reach Mayfair from the docks, though they had crossed only a portion of the city. She had seen areas of unimagined squalor, streets so elegant that her breath caught, and more people than she could count. A market square had seemed to hold the entire population of Halifax, yet even more women had bustled along the next street than had huddled outside the mine after last spring's disaster. Every corner they rounded revealed more – piemen vying for a workman's custom, maids scurrying about on errands or flirting with handsome young footmen, horses jamming the intersections, delivery boys, shoppers, crones, pickpockets...

Never had she felt so insignificant – or so helpless. She'd already been turned away from every hotel Captain Harding considered suitable for ladies. What if the Grand Regent was also full?

"I still think we should go to Adams House," said Alice stoutly.

"No. I promised Father to heal the breach with his family, but he warned me to remain cautious. Arriving on their doorstep without warning will put me at a disadvantage. I must learn more about the family before making demands." To begin with, she must find out whether her grandfather was still alive. It had been twenty-eight years since her father had left home.

An altercation outside the window distracted her attention. Half a dozen men cheered on two youths, who were pummeling each other as they rolled about on the ground. A matron glared, then berated a gentleman collecting wagers on the outcome.

"You know how your father would feel about patronizing a second-rate hotel," Alice said, returning to their ongoing argument.

"The clerk at the Clarendon swore that the Grand Regency is an excellent house."

"The clerk at the Clarendon thought you a rustic colonial with little money and less consequence."

Alice was right – not that she'd had any choice. Hiding her circumstances was another promise she'd made to her father. If she failed to heal this breach, she wanted no further contact with her English family.

The only way to assure that was to hide her home and give them no incentive to look for her.

Yet dressing shabbily had been a serious mistake today. She had not understood how rigid the English were about class – far more than anyone at home. So at this hotel, her demeanor must convince the clerk that she was aristocratic despite her provincial gown.

The carriage pulled to a stop.

“It’s impressive enough,” conceded Alice as the door opened. Columns punctuated the facade, which overlooked a broad street divided by a tree-studded garden.

“Let’s hope they have room.” Maggie accepted a footman’s hand down, but did not utter her usual thanks. She must radiate power.

Ignoring the elegant lobby, she stiffened her spine and marched to the desk.

“Good day, Mr. Simmons.” She prayed the nameplate was his. “Mr. Louillier at the Clarendon believes you have a suite available – all he could offer was a single room. I trust you can accommodate me.”

She glared in the way that usually cowed her employees, giving him no chance to assess her gown. It worked.

“Of course, madam.”

She nodded regally. “Margaret Adams, of Halifax.” This lie had little to do with promises. She could hardly admit being an American. War had raged between England and the United States for two years.

She signed the register and paid a week in advance, then sent Alice to deal with their driver. Exhaustion swept over her in a debilitating wave. The journey had been grueling – jolting along corduroy roads, canoeing down rivers, leading pack animals through dense forest. Eventually she’d caught a fishing boat to Halifax, where she’d boarded a ship for England.

But now that she was finally here, the uncertainty she had been ignoring returned. How was she to approach her family?

Deep in thought, she headed for the stairs and promptly ran into a gentleman.

“Pardon me, madam,” he said stiffly, grabbing her arm to keep her from falling.

Flames burned her cheeks. “It was entirely my fault, sir. Are you all right?” Odd sensations radiated from his hand. “I should have been paying attention –

though it could have been worse. I might have sent you sprawling." She winced at her babbling, for the words were embarrassingly true. She had been beset by clumsiness since leaving for England. Only last week, she'd nearly knocked the first mate overboard.

"Am I supposed to be grateful?" he asked coolly.

"That wasn't what I meant!" New heat flushed her face. She shook her head in an effort to restore wits scattered by his touch. Where had her sangfroid gone? He was only a man.

But *what* a man! His clothes were more fashionable than evening wear in Pittsburgh. A striped waistcoat peeked from under a dark blue coat stretched across powerful shoulders. Gray pantaloons showed off muscular thighs and impeccably polished boots. His eyes were an odd shade of green – something between old moss and a pale stone she'd once found along the river. Only his hair countered his elegance, framing his face in a riot of dark curls. She suppressed a ridiculous urge to test its softness.

"The accent is American," he said after quizzing her from head to toe. "But from neither Philadelphia nor Boston."

"Canadian," she countered, meeting his gaze in a test of wills.

He blinked, his eyes lightening with laughter. "Intelligent."

"What is your point, Mr.—"

"Widmer. Marcus Widmer. Forgive me. Your nationality is your own business, though this demonstrates why I resigned from diplomatic service. My tongue sometimes runs on its own."

"Maggie Adams, from Halifax." She offered her hand as if meeting a business acquaintance, then chided herself as he gravely shook it. "What can you tell me of the Grand Regent? I had expected to stay at the Pulteney or the Clarendon."

"You and half the aristocracy." He offered his arm to escort her upstairs. "All the better London hotels are crowded because of Napoleon's abdication. In June, we entertained a host of foreign dignitaries, including several heads of state. In July, innumerable dinners honored Wellington. Now London is holding the public festivities. They will conclude tomorrow, but you should be careful when you venture out. Excitement often leads to rowdiness, and this heat has done

nothing to soothe tempers.”

She nodded, though London was cooler than August at home.

“As to your question, I’ve lived at the Grand Regent since it opened last month. The service remains what Americans call spotty, but the prices are reasonable and the food is outstanding. Would you dine with me this evening?”

“My companion and I will be delighted,” she replied without thinking.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie shut the door to her first-floor suite, leaving Mr. Widmer to continue upstairs. What had possessed her to accept an invitation from a man to whom she had not been introduced? Recklessness was alien to her nature, but something about him scattered her wits. She still felt uncomfortably warm.

Or was it merely exhaustion?

She frowned, turning the encounter over in her mind. She’d spotted a flash in his eyes that usually denoted avarice, though that was unlikely. His examination would have convinced him that she was beneath him socially and probably naïve. Thus the only thing he could covet was her body. This invitation was probably the first step in a seduction.

The idea hurt. “Take care, Maggie,” she murmured aloud. No one had ever piqued her interest so quickly. He exuded a powerful masculinity, which made him dangerous. If she hoped to keep her wits sharp, she must rest before dinner.

But first, she had promises to keep. She found pen, ink, and pressed paper in the sitting room’s writing desk. Moving aside an oil lamp held aloft by a Greek maiden, she addressed a brief letter to her grandfather. With luck, he would be in London for the festivities.

Alice arrived as she was sanding the page. “What a wonderful hotel,” she exclaimed. “They even have a dumbwaiter to haul the heavier luggage upstairs. I must include one when I build.”

“Don’t introduce too much ostentation,” Maggie warned. “The Grand Regent would overwhelm Pittsburgh. Most of those passing through cannot afford luxury.”

“I know. I intend to start small, but I’ve every intention of serving the affluent. Pittsburgh has grown



large enough to need a quality hotel, and mine will be the best.” She ran her fingers over a black lacquer cabinet decorated with chariots and swans. “Mr. Simmons was soothing an irate dowager just now. He has a knack for knowing exactly what to say. I wonder if he would share information on hotel management with a mere female.”

Maggie sealed the note, listening to Alice’s chatter with half an ear. She doubted that the stiff Mr. Simmons would help, though if anyone could convince him to do so, it would be Alice Sharpe. Her former governess was the most persistent woman she had ever known.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus berated himself all the way to his third-floor room. What was it about Maggie Adams that had prompted him to act the fool? Quitting the government had nothing to do with any lack of diplomatic skill. He had been a valued member of delegations to several countries. Never had he revealed any fact without purpose. So why had his tongue run away with him today?

*Wrong question*, his conscience announced.

The problem had not begun today, he admitted. He had behaved recklessly since quitting his position two months ago – arguing with his family, taking up residence in a hotel, allowing a pleasant flirtation with the maid to grow into a lusty liaison...

What a stupid idea that had been. Betsy expected him to set her up as his mistress, so breaking off the affair would invite retaliation – not that he’d considered doing so until half an hour ago, but one look at Miss Adams had banished any desire for others.

Maggie Adams. American, despite her denials. She was magnificent – tall enough to reach his nose, blue eyes, dark hair. Her manner might be almost masculine, but it formed a piquant contrast to the most delectable body he’d seen in years – his mouth watered at the image of cradling her breasts, of caressing her hips, of—

“Down!” he ordered his unruly passions. They were another change since quitting diplomacy. During the years he’d slaved to earn his superiors’ respect, he’d been too focused on business to bother with more than an occasional encounter. Now he could rarely go a day

without needing a woman. Yet Miss Adams was unobtainable. He could neither seduce an innocent nor court a foreigner. Inviting her to dinner had been stupid, but the words had emerged without thought – another new trait, and one he would rather do without. Now he must spend an entire evening lusting after someone he could not have.

Pushing the problem aside, he reviewed his afternoon meeting with Trevithick.

He was fascinated by inventions, especially those newfangled machines his grandfather derided. Diplomacy had never stirred his senses like the thought of operating his own business. Unfortunately, his talents lay in organization and oversight, so he needed a creative partner.

His family was appalled. Gentlemen did not dabble in trade. Nor did they display vulgar interest in things mechanical. Never mind that as the younger son of a baron's younger son he had no hope of achieving the title. Never mind that his interests did not run to agriculture, the church, government service, or even the military. As a gentleman, he was expected to emulate his ancestors.

"No," he vowed, pacing the floor. A large legacy from his maternal grandmother and a smaller one from his Great-aunt Margaret allowed him to follow his dreams. Change was inevitable, despite the hidebound thinking of men like his grandfather. A new order was coming. He must be part of it.

He had encountered progress wherever he'd gone. In Italy, Volta was producing electricity by immersing metal plates in a chemical solution. In Russia, a tinker had raved about his French cousin, Appert, who could pack meat in metal cans that kept it fresh for months. In the United States, he had watched gins separate cotton from its seeds in a fraction of the time slaves needed to do the job.

All had spurred his enthusiasm, but he was proceeding cautiously. He had so many interests, it was difficult to decide which to pursue, and his inheritance was not large enough to recover from mistakes. He knew too many men who had lost fortunes by backing unworkable schemes – like that canal venture Rutherford had embraced last year. If he decided to build transportation systems, he would avoid canals. Trevithick's engine would one day prove

faster.

Of course, Stephenson was also working on an engine, which rumor claimed was superior to Trevithick's. Which inventor had the most practical design? Was it realistic to think people would accept miles of unsightly rails? At least canals appeared natural.

Maybe he should consider steam-powered ships instead of land vehicles. They were closer to becoming economically viable. Or perhaps he should look at manufacturing instead of transportation.

It was a daily argument that always made his head spin.

Setting aside Trevithick's proposal, he pulled out others and reread their claims. But for once, his mind would not stay on business. It kept drifting to a certain blue-eyed American.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie ignored the dining room's ostentatious decor and concentrated on Mr. Widmer. She still wasn't sure what to think of him. Why was he escorting her to dinner? Seduction didn't fit his demeanor this evening. His warmth did not exceed propriety. Nor was he showering her with false flattery, as did those seeking her influence with her father. Could he possibly wish to be friends?

Her heart turned over. It was an insidiously attractive idea, but one she must suppress. Even if it were true – and no one had ever approved her outspoken manner – friendship would lead to sorrow when she returned home. And risking a deeper attachment was stupid. She could never remain here, nor would he consider leaving. One day in London confirmed that the English considered themselves superior to everyone else.

"Have you ever seen such huge mirrors?" asked Alice, nodding toward the oval mirrors that flanked the dining room's entrance, each taller than a man. "I wonder if the fabled mirrors at Versailles can compare."

"I suspect so." Maggie bit back a sigh. Alice was constantly comparing her various heritages – she'd been born to an Irish indentured servant and French trapper, then married an English baron's younger son, who had tutored her in reading, writing, and social graces. But at least Alice felt connected to the past.

Why had they come to England if not to find something similar for herself?

"I've read descriptions of the Hall of Mirrors," said Widmer. "If I had not resigned government service, I would be in Paris now and able to see it for myself."

"So why resign? Did you not enjoy the work?" asked Maggie.

"Rarely." He smiled. "But it taught me much. Your accent, for example. It is not from Halifax. Nor does it match our former colonies. Where is your home?"

"Inland." His curiosity hinted at a different explanation for this invitation. Perhaps he considered her a spy.

He frowned.

She tried a partial truth. "I came to England to heal the breach between my father and grandfather, but if that proves impossible, I want no further contact with the family."

A waiter interrupted to describe the evening's dinner choices. But when he departed, Widmer resumed his probing. "You sound so uncertain of success that I am surprised you are trying. Or are you driven by curiosity?"

"That is part of it, for I know very little about my ancestors," she admitted. "But what are you doing now that you no longer work for the government?"

This time he accepted her change of subject. "Creating unconscionable scandal." He grinned. "My family has not decided whether to disown me or lock me in Bedlam."

Alice gasped.

"He is teasing," Maggie assured her. "What have you done that is so shocking, Mr. Widmer?"

"I wish to establish my own business, but trade is not a proper pursuit for gentlemen."

The waiter served plates of soup.

"Delicious." Alice tasted and sighed with pleasure. "Give my compliments to the cook."

"Monsieur DuPré is a *chef*, madam," the waiter insisted.

"He is more than a chef," said Widmer, laughing. "He is a temperamental *artiste* with a penchant for confronting anyone who disparages his creations. Only yesterday he brandished a knife at Lieutenant Forrester when he dared request that the sole not be smothered in DuPré's tarragon lemon sauce."

"Then we must do justice to his food." Maggie sipped a spoonful of the best soup she'd ever eaten, then resumed the conversation to keep from gulping the rest. She had not eaten since breakfast aboard ship. "Why does your family condemn honest business?"

"Tradition. I should derive income only from those activities approved by centuries of Widmers – land, investments, or service to the church or the crown. Never trade."

"Forgive me, but farmers sell their products, and investing gives one a stake in the business. So what is the distinction?"

"Distance. A steward oversees the fields, which are worked by laborers and tenants. Investing is likewise an aloof activity."

"Ah. A gentleman keeps his hands clean, relying on the labor of others to pay for his life of idleness." She could not keep the bite out of her tone.

"I take it you were not raised to idleness."

"Hardly." She smiled. "And you are rebelling against it."

He nodded. "I must do more than finance other men's schemes. Even if I cannot create something myself, I want to oversee its production."

"What sort of business are you considering?" Despite her resolve to eat like a lady, she had already finished her soup.

"I am not sure. I've been meeting with inventors, hoping to narrow my interests, but so far everything is fascinating."

"Which means you've not yet found your niche. One of our—"

The waiter returned to lay out the next course. And just as well. Describing the industries near Pittsburgh would reveal her home. "Who have you approached?" she asked, renewing her resolve to be mannerly after tasting the sauce coating a delicate fish. When she spotted Alice's gleaming eyes, she could almost read her friend's mind: *How can I entice this chef to Pittsburgh?*

"You would not recognize the names," he said with a shrug.

"You might be surprised. Are you interested in products – a better carriage spring or mechanical harvester? Or do you want to improve the

manufacturing process itself – adapting steam engines to practical use or reinventing products using interchangeable parts? Whitney has done wonders with muskets. Since every weapon is identical, spare parts can be kept at hand, making repairs simple.”

He stared, as if she had started speaking in Greek. “What do you know of such things?”

“Women are allowed to think where I come from. And we frequently discuss ideas.” At least, she did. Her father had trained her to take over his business. But that was a topic she must avoid. She gestured to her plate. “Delicious birds. What are they?”

“Grouse,” he said shortly, ignoring her diversion. “My interests are varied. Now that I have time to meet inventors, I feel like a starving child thrust into a room filled with sweets. When I speak to Trevithick, I can see networks of rails moving goods and people across vast distances. When I talk to Cayley, I become enthralled by his gliders.”

“Gliders?”

“Birdlike devices that soar from cliff tops.”

“How far?”

“A few hundred feet.”

“That doesn’t sound very practical.”

“Few things are in the beginning,” put in Alice. “But imagine how it would feel to float through the air.”

“Imagine how it would feel to land on one’s head,” countered Maggie. Widmer laughed, drawing her eyes to his sensuous lips. His green eyes raised images of sunbeams sifting through young leaves.

“There are other possibilities,” he continued. “Two years ago a company began installing gaslights on London streets – they’ve been used in mills for some time. Koenig is designing steam-powered printing presses. Steamships are plying Scotland’s Clyde River, and one will soon serve on the Thames.”

“America has had steamships on the Hudson for years,” said Maggie in challenge.

That began a competition that lasted nearly an hour as they feasted on the best food she had ever tasted. She described the safety equipment added to the coal mines near her home. He countered with Davy’s latest experiments on the nature of matter. She demanded details of how gas lighting worked in factories. He asked about Whitney’s muskets and the machines that made interchangeable parts possible.

Fate was taunting her, she decided, scraping the last of the venison from her plate. Widmer was the most attractive man she'd ever met, reminding her of her father – the same quick mind, the same odd assortment of knowledge, the same fascination with diverse topics. Why couldn't she find someone like him at home?

A disturbance jerked her attention toward the door just as a huge man burst into the room, brandishing a cleaver. Flour dusted his golden hair.

"Imbecile!" he roared. "Who has dared to insult my sauces?"

"The gentleman is gone, Monsieur DuPré," said Simmons, producing a soothing tone despite his undignified dash into the dining room.

"Enjoy the farce," murmured Widmer, keeping his face neutral, though his eyes were dancing with laughter. "He entertains us at least twice a week – often better than the actors at Drury Lane."

"Why?" she whispered.

"He is French." He shrugged. "And he is determined to win London's acclaim. It infuriates him when anyone praises Jaquiers – the chef at the Clarendon. He doesn't understand that no one would dare disparage Jaquiers's food after paying such exorbitant prices for it."

Simmons might have been invisible for all the effect he was having on the volatile Frenchman. DuPré ranted. He gesticulated. He called the wrath of heaven down upon anyone who dared suggest a better chef existed in the world.

Without warning, he lunged at Alice. "Why ignore you zees work of art?" he demanded, pointing to her plate, where two mushrooms carved to resemble flowers graced a slice of venison. "Ze sauce, she is smooth, and rich with wine. And ze meat!" He kissed his fingertips.

"Truly perfect," agreed Alice, fluttering her lashes. "It begs to be savored, bite by delicate bite, not inhaled in a gulp like a dog would a stolen chop."

His laugh filled the room. "Ah, *chérie*, how delightful. A woman who knows food is above rubies."

"Above diamonds and rubies," insisted Alice in French, sending him into new transports in that language.

His hands punctuated his words, as did his

shoulders and hips, providing a vivid contrast to the stiff English gentlemen in the room and reminding Maggie of an Italian family who had recently moved to Pittsburgh. His deep voice drew every eye, as thick as honey and as smooth as one of his sauces.

Alice matched him claim for claim, gesture for gesture, flattering his artistry and vowing to puff his talent to the highest in the land. She even thanked fate that the Clarendon had been full, for otherwise she would have missed the most exquisite meal of her life.

Simmons slipped out, his face sagging in relief now that the cleaver rested harmlessly on the table.

Alice kept DuPré talking until he had revealed his recipe for the venison's sauce. The moment he left, she laughed. "I haven't had that much fun in years."

"I cannot believe he gave you a recipe," murmured their waiter, staring at Alice in awe. "DuPré *never* reveals his secrets."

Maggie laughed. Alice's eyes had gleamed at the word *never*, for she loved a challenge. Their stay at the Grand Regent should prove quite interesting.

"Only because those asking don't know how to handle him." Alice cut a bite of venison. "He is just like my father, using emotional outbursts to cow those around him. But he revels in flattery and will do anything to elicit praise."

"Recipes?" asked Widmer curiously, returning his gaze to Maggie.

She nodded. "Alice plans to open a hotel."

"I like good food," Alice explained. "I could never entice DuPré home with us, but at least I can duplicate his dishes." She cocked her head. "What was it you said about prices when he first burst in?"

Widmer smiled. "The Clarendon charges three or four times as much for a meal as the Grand Regent, though DuPré's food is better. But the price gives Jaquiers a cachet no one dares deny."

"I prefer to decide for myself what I like and dislike," said Maggie bluntly.

"As do I," said Widmer, catching her eye with a look that pooled heat in her stomach. Maybe he was a rake after all...

The rest of the meal passed quietly, though DuPré returned to serve them a magnificent dessert with his own hands. Alice had obviously enslaved him. But a flirtation promised to keep them well fed.



Maggie stared at the note – the same one she had sent to Adams House yesterday. Someone named Robert had crossed her lines, denying any connection to her father, John Adams. A postscript informed her that her grandfather was dead.

“How dare they disown Papa,” she spat, crumpling the letter. Pacing the room, she muttered imprecations against her English family. She should never have promised to approach them. But who could deny a dying man his last wish?

The memory formed a lump in her throat.

A tunnel had collapsed at the mine, killing four men and burying her father. Rescuers had dug him out, but he was too badly injured to recover. For a week, she’d hovered at his bedside as his delirium gave way to a coma and his life slipped inexorably away. Then he’d unexpectedly awakened.

“I’m dying,” he’d whispered, his fingers clasping hers.

“No.” The denial was automatic, though she knew he was right. Already his skin seemed transparent.

“Don’t argue, Maggie,” he continued in a stronger voice. “I haven’t time. I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“You won’t. I have Alice and Harry and Mr. Franco and—”

“That’s business.” His grip tightened as he fought for breath. “A person needs more.”

“I won’t wed Jeremy,” she swore, naming the latest fortune hunter to come calling.

“He is no good. But you need family, Maggie. You need to know where you came from. I want you to heal the breach with my father.”

She stared, for the request made little sense. “What breach?”

“We parted in anger.” He shook his head. “Catherine was promised to my brother.”

“Why did Mother accept him when she loved you?”

“It was arranged when they were children.” He met her eyes, his own full of pain. “That is society’s way.”

“Boston society?”

“London. Father is a viscount.” He paused to catch his breath.

She could think of nothing to say. He’d never hinted

at such a background, though she had often envied his ease with powerful businessmen. But this was no time to discuss the past. His face was gray with fatigue.

"Family is important," he continued before she could urge him to rest. "Learn about yours. Go to England." Another pause. "My only crime was eloping." His voice softened. "But I cannot regret it... William hated Catherine. He hates everyone, so be careful. He won't welcome you."

"Where are they?"

"Adams House ... London. Or Fielding Court ... Kent. George Adams."

"Rest, Father," she said, stroking his frail arm. His gasps for breath tore at her heart. "We can discuss this later."

"No time ... look for ... box of papers ... desk ... prove your birth..."

"Father—"

"Promise, Maggie."

"Father?"

"Promise ... but don't trust ... hide this ... until you know." He gestured weakly at the room.

"I promise." Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Love yo—" His hand went limp as he slipped back into the coma.

Five months later, she brushed away new tears. He had died that night. The doctor could not explain how he had awakened, but the fact that he'd roused himself long enough to extract her vow gave it added weight. So she had come to England.

The box had held a packet tied with string. She'd been too grief-stricken to examine the papers then, but with this stinging rejection in her hand, she could postpone the task no longer. George might be gone, but the rest of the family remained. Pulling the papers from her writing case, she spread them across the desk.

Her father's will.

A statement of baptism, describing her as the daughter of John and Catherine Adams of Halifax, signed by her parents and a pastor.

A letter dated April 1783, addressed to Andrew Adams at a hotel in Paris.

"Andrew?" she muttered, opening it. Penned by Andrew's father, it referred to Andrew's recent week at

the French court. Four more letters followed, all addressed to Andrew in Paris and mentioning social events Andrew had attended.

"Who is Andrew?" she murmured, setting the last one aside.

The next document was marriage lines, written by the captain of the *Mariner Queen*, who had united, on the high seas, Andrew Jonathan Franklin Adams and Elizabeth Catherine Anne Widmer. An accompanying note explained that they were listed on the ship's roster as John and Catherine Smith, immigrants.

She laughed. She had meant to ask George about her mother's family, for her father hadn't mentioned them. Now there was no need. Unlike Adams, Widmer was an uncommon name. Marcus Widmer must be connected.

The packet also contained a statement of death from the doctor who had treated her mother's final illness, documents related to her father's estate, Uncle Peter's will, and other papers that had nothing to do with her English families. It had not been assembled for her use, then. Separating the marriage lines, baptism record, and letters, she returned the rest to her writing case.

No wonder she had felt attracted to Marcus. Somehow she had recognized a tie. Perhaps she'd heard the name as a child.

Half an hour later, she took a seat in the hotel lobby. Marcus was out but would return shortly – or so Simmons claimed. She wasn't so sure, for if he was meeting another inventor, he might easily lose track of time. But she was too impatient to rely on a note, which he could set aside if he was rushed.

After ordering coffee, she distracted herself by watching the comings and goings of other guests.

A pale blonde wearing the entire contents of a large jewelry case swept down the stairs, accompanied by three men speaking what sounded like German. When Simmons addressed her as "your highness," Maggie stared. She would never have guessed the buxom woman was royal. In fact, she bore a striking resemblance to the Bavarian barmaid at the Riverboat Tavern, who required no assistance to oust rowdy drunkards.

A man with the blackest skin she'd ever seen burst through the door and hurried up the stairs, knocking

a descending brunette into the banister. Obviously neither slave nor servant; he was too confident. But what was such a man doing in London? And in so elegant a hotel?

He was followed by a mother and son returning from the royal menagerie. The boy pounced on a design woven into the carpet, emitting ferocious growls.

"I'm a lion!" he shouted as the street door again opened.

A lapdog wearing a diamond-studded collar rushed in, barking ferociously.

The lad screamed.

Maggie jumped up to help, but the dog halted inches from the boy's face, looking pleased with the reaction it had provoked.

"Lady Augusta Mountrail! Can't you control that animal?" the mother snapped.

"Prince Theodore would never hurt a soul," declared Lady Augusta, scooping him against her bosom so she could press her face against his neck. "Would you, my sweet Teddy?"

Maggie regained her seat and gulped coffee to steady her nerves.

"One day that beast will go too far."

"He is not as unruly as Julian." Lady Augusta scowled at the lad, who was already feigning a new attack on a footman. "That boy deliberately tripped me yesterday. Teddy has much better manners."

Both women had hopelessly spoiled their charges, decided Maggie as they moved upstairs, their voices drowned out by a couple arguing over an invitation to a ball.

Marcus finally returned, deep in thought. When he failed to respond to her cheerful greeting, she stepped in front of him.

He nearly ran her down. "Miss Adams! But where is Mrs. Sharpe?"

"Shopping. I must speak with you."

"I have an appointment in an hour."

"I will be brief." She moved closer to the fireplace, away from Simmons's ears. "I need information about my mother's family."

"Your mother?"

"Elizabeth Widmer. She and my father eloped twenty-eight years ago."

Shock exploded through his eyes, dulling their green

to gray. A surge of betrayal followed. She was too surprised by his reaction to question why she could read his eyes so easily.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus stared at Miss Adams, suspicion tingling along every nerve. And lust, damn his uncooperative body. If only he hadn't recognized the awareness in her eyes last night. Knowing that she felt the same tug of attraction had made it difficult to sleep.

But he must set all feelings aside. Ever since *Life in London* had printed an exaggerated story about the Adams family that included all the old scandals, both they and the Widmers had been beset by pretenders. They had already exposed two men and a woman claiming Andrew Adams as their sire. At least this one had chosen a novel approach.

"Why did you say nothing last night?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I knew her as Catherine Adams, wife of John Adams. She died fifteen years ago. I only examined Father's papers this morning after his family swore that John was not related. Their marriage lines name Andrew Jonathan Franklin Adams and Elizabeth Catherine Anne Widmer."

"He sent you to meet his family, yet told you nothing about them?"

"He was dying. He begged me to visit England, said his father was George Adams, viscount, and that the papers in his desk would prove my identity. There was no time for more."

Clever or truthful? It was too early to tell, and he wasn't about to lay his own cards on the table until he learned considerably more about Miss Maggie Adams, late of America. She had already told him one lie. "What do you know of the Widmer family?"

"Only what you mentioned last evening. I had no inkling I was connected until now – assuming that we are speaking of the same Widmers. I did not even know my parents were English until the day Father died. He claimed Mother had been promised to his brother, but chose to elope. I suppose that's why they moved to Halifax." She shrugged.

"Andrew fled after stealing a fortune in jewelry and banknotes to cover yet another gaming debt," he said flatly.

"You lie." Her fingers curled, and for a moment he thought she would strike him. "Father was a hard

worker, who abhorred any waste of time or money. A more honorable man would be difficult to find.”

“Hard worker?”

“In Halifax, he worked on the docks, loading and unloading cargo. I don’t recall those days, but I remember his years as a trapper, and those he spent cutting timber. There were other jobs as well. He died of injuries suffered when a tunnel collapsed in the mine.”

“When was that?”

“The seventeenth of March. I only wish he’d died outright, like the others. He lingered for several days.”

He pressed her hand in sympathy, sending another wave of desire rampaging through his groin. Andrew was innocent of the theft, though it was too soon to admit it. Mentioning the charge had been a test to see how much she knew. They had exposed one impostor by convincing him that Andrew’s heir must repay that stolen fortune. “You say they never spoke of England?”

“Why should they? Our life was nothing like this.” She gestured at the ornate lobby, with its frieze-covered cornices, Greek statues, and gold-leaf adornment. “We looked forward, not back. Father claimed that clinging to the past made it difficult to plan for the future – you should understand, for you said much the same thing at dinner. I can only recall two references to their youths. When Father was teaching me to ride, he mentioned his own teacher, Frank. And Mother claimed that the portrait in her locket depicted her mother, for whom I’m named.”

“Maggie.”

“That’s what she called me, but my full name is Margaret Anne Hartley Adams.”

He hid his surprise. It was unlikely that she would have known Margaret’s family name, unless she’d uncovered a copy of Debrett’s *Peerage* in the American wilderness. But he must investigate before accepting her. “Your father wished to renew ties with his family?”

“No. He had no interest in returning. But he did not want me to be alone in the world, so he asked me to heal the breach with his father and learn about my ancestors.”

Unless he had heard...

Marcus suppressed the thought. March was too early for news to have reached America. Yet an impostor would know that. Miss Adams had sailed

only a month ago.

But grief saddens her eyes every time she mentions her father...

"What other papers did he leave you?"

"Proof of my birth and their deaths. A note from the captain who wed them that mentioned their name change. Several letters from his father, written while he was in Paris in 1783." She shrugged.

She was hiding something. Ice formed in his stomach, confirming how much he wanted her to be real. Maggie was nothing like the other impostors. They had radiated greed from the first contact. "May I see them?"

"Of course." Rising, she led him upstairs.

The documents seemed genuine. He had seen George's hand often enough to recognize it now. The marriage lines were scrawled on letterhead from the *Mariner Queen*, captained by Joseph Barnsley.

"You mentioned a locket?"

She pulled it from beneath her bodice.

His doubts fled. He had seen that locket a thousand times, in the family portrait commissioned to celebrate his grandfather's marriage. The group had included his great-grandparents, his newlywed grandparents, his Great-uncle Henry, Great-aunt Margaret, and Henry's firstborn. His grandmother had worn the family rubies, but Margaret had eschewed the family emeralds, insisting on the locket Henry had designed to enclose her betrothal miniature. This locket. Elizabeth had taken it with her when she'd eloped.

For the first time, he stared at the miniature itself. The face was identical to the one in the family portrait.

"It would appear that we are cousins, Maggie," he said, shaking his head.

"Cousins?"

"Second cousins, to be precise." He pointed to the miniature. "She married my grandfather's brother."

"Good heavens!" She laughed. "I've never met a real relative before. So tell me about my family."

He complied, offering humorous anecdotes of various Widmers, though he refused to divulge more until he could swear he had verified every fact. The family would demand absolute proof before accepting her. Only after she was fully acknowledged as a Widmer would he approach the Adams family on her behalf.

Maggie waited until the footman finished laying the table before she sat down. She'd not seen Marcus in three days, but he had given her much to ponder. Her mother's parents were both dead – Margaret barely a month ago. If only she hadn't delayed two months before starting this journey. Yet travel would have been even more difficult if she'd left before the weather cleared. It had been hard enough as it was.

Her mother had been the youngest of six children, so there were numerous relatives on the Widmer side. Marcus had asked her not to contact them until he could speak with his ailing grandfather, the current Lord Widmer. She assumed that was where he'd been.

But she'd made no such promise concerning the Adams family, who already knew of her claims. So she'd written to her Uncle William and to his heir, Robert, explaining about her father's name change and asking to meet his English family before she returned home.

Now she smiled. In addition to breakfast, the footman had brought replies from each of them.

But William's response triggered her temper.

My brother forfeited his place in the family when he embraced a life of crime, he'd written in a slashing hand. Even if you are not an impostor, I would never acknowledge his whore's brat. Should you set foot on my property or solicit others to support your claims, I will see you arrested.

She frowned.

*Life of crime...* Marcus claimed Andrew had stolen a fortune in jewelry and banknotes.

*My only crime was eloping...* She believed her father, but he'd known that he would be arrested for the theft. Thus someone must have arranged evidence against him.

The past no longer mattered. William's antagonism proved he had not forgiven Catherine's defection. To remove the sting, he'd convinced himself that she was unchaste. So he would never heal the breach.

She blinked back tears. Though she had only promised to make peace with George, William's rejection hurt.

Sighing, she opened Robert's letter.



He apologized for his brusque response to her first note, then invited her to dine with him at the hotel. Shortly before his death, Grandfather searched for Andrew so he could beg forgiveness. Life is too short to cling to grievances. Perhaps in time, my father will also set aside his pique and welcome you. He concluded with three pages describing the original rift.

She frowned. Robert could be no older than she, yet he wrote as if he had known Andrew intimately. His depiction bore no resemblance to her father. This Andrew was a rakish dandy and gamester, who was always in debt. He'd created further scandal by publicly insulting a powerful arbiter of fashion while in his cups. After George confined him to the estate in an attempt to reform him, Andrew had turned to thievery to support his excesses, then stolen his brother's bride.

Maggie snorted. The claims were patently ridiculous. Why would George have sought forgiveness if they were true?

Rereading both letters raised other questions. William obviously believed the charges, for he considered his brother a criminal. Since George had sought forgiveness, he must have found evidence that seemed to exonerate Andrew. Both men reacted logically.

But Robert's behavior was strange. Like his father, he believed Andrew guilty of every crime short of murder. Yet he applauded his grandfather's decision to seek forgiveness for driving Andrew away. Even blood shouldn't be *that* thick. If one of her managers embraced such irrational logic, she would fire him.

Marcus had said little about Robert, his reticence proving his skill as a diplomat and adding to her suspicions. Now that she thought about it, he had said little about any Adams, though he must know them well. The two family seats shared a boundary.

The only way to learn the truth was to accept this invitation. At least the dining room was public. And Robert would be easier to handle than most of the gentlemen who called on her. He knew nothing of her situation. Whatever his faults, he was no Patrick Riley.

Patrick had been her first serious suitor. His charm had captured her imagination, spawning dreams of an impossibly Utopian future. But when he'd failed to win her father's support for his suit, he'd tried to abduct

her. She had learned a valuable lesson that day. Never again had she disregarded her father's advice or believed any man's compliments. In the ten years since, she had become adept at looking beyond the surface to the avarice that always lurked beneath.

As she was doing now. Robert's welcome did not ring true. Perhaps he was befriending her merely to annoy his father – in which case, he was harmless. But maybe he wanted something.

"My cousin Robert has invited us to dine with him this evening," she said when Alice joined her. "We will meet him in the lobby."

"Why?"

Maggie shrugged. "I don't trust him. Why would he heap flattery on the daughter of someone he considers so vile? Most people believe the adage about the sins of the fathers." She handed over his letter.

"But how would he know about Pittsburgh?"

"Perhaps Grandfather's agent traced Father." She frowned, tapping the other letter against the tabletop. "No. In that case, Uncle William would also know."

Alice examined both missives. "I see what you mean. Robert's flattery does not match his opinions – unless he admires Andrew's supposed excesses. We must be cautious."

"So I thought. And it would be best to wear our oldest gowns."

Memories of Patrick still prodded her mind, so she stopped ignoring them. Her intuition had served her well in the past. Now it was convinced that Robert was a fortune hunter.

\* \* \* \*

They arrived downstairs a quarter hour early, taking seats in the first parlor. Robert found them barely five minutes later.

No one would suspect they were related, Maggie decided, taking in his appearance. He might share her father's dark coloring, but his physique was nothing alike. Nor was his taste. Satin pantaloons and a gaudy waistcoat encased his slight frame. A blatantly padded jacket with enormous buttons emphasized his narrow shoulders. The ribbon on his quizzing glass was so long that it was tangled in the forest of fobs at his waist, so he fumbled bringing the glass to his eye.

He had greeted an acquaintance outside the parlor with studied ennui, but the moment he identified her,

his manner changed.

"My dear Maggie," he exclaimed, dropping his glass as he bent to clasp her hand to his breast. The glass bounced painfully on her knee. "Had I suspected such beauty, I would have rushed to your side days ago."

She bit back a scathing response. Her intuition had been right. Not only was he lying, but he was doing it poorly. Patrick had delivered his flummery with far more conviction. But at least this proved that her attraction to Marcus had nothing to do with being second cousins. Robert shared even closer blood, yet she already wished herself elsewhere.

"Mr. Adams," she replied coolly, retrieving her hand. "May I present my companion, Mrs. Sharpe."

"Charmed." He did not even glance at Alice as he reclaimed her hand, gripping it so tightly that only a struggle would free her. "Shall we dine?"

Annoyance flashed in his eyes when she stood, for she was taller by at least an inch. And temper tensed his arm when she deliberately stumbled, nearly tripping him. But he suppressed it, flashing another false smile. "I would have recognized you anywhere," he claimed, heading for the dining room. "You've the look of your father."

"Nonse—" She strongly resembled her mother, but scrabbling claws interrupted her protest, drawing all eyes to the grand staircase. Teddy jerked the lead from Lady Augusta's hand and hurled himself at Robert, barking loudly.

"Ignore him," Maggie said quickly. "He won't bite."

Robert ignored her instead. His foot struck, tossing the dog against a chair several feet away. "Quiet, you stupid beast!"

Lady Augusta screamed.

"What did you do that for?" demanded Alice.

Robert ignored her.

Teddy backed toward his mistress, snarling.

"That animal should be shot for insulting a gentleman," snapped Robert as he strode toward Lady Augusta. For a moment Maggie thought he meant to strike the woman, but again he kicked at the dog.

This time Teddy was ready. He ducked the foot, sinking his teeth solidly into the other ankle.

Robert lost his balance and crashed to the floor.

"Serves him right," muttered Lady Augusta, scooping up Teddy. She stalked off, murmuring

soothing sounds into the dog's ear.

Maggie let Simmons help Robert to his feet. The incident had been illuminating. Robert's eyes had revealed fury and arrogance, but no fear. Even if Teddy had been attacking, he was too small to inflict serious damage. Most people would have tried placating the animal, but Robert had treated him like an annoying insect.

Nor did he hold her in higher esteem. By the time they reached the dining room, he had added condescension to his incessant compliments, ignoring every attempt to correct his false assumptions. He considered her a brainless rustic, and Alice might have been one of the lobby's statues for all the attention he paid her.

"London will seem overwhelming after living in the wilderness," he said, patting her hand, "though escaping America must be the answer to your prayers. I cannot imagine being trapped in a country overrun by savages."

Nor could she. It was too late to avoid dining with him, but she could at least discourage further contact. She had no wish to pursue this connection. Yet he was too arrogant to believe she found him boring, so her best approach would be to give him a disgust of her.

"I would hardly call them savages," she protested sweetly. "We lived with a tribe for a time, and I've several Indian friends. They are quite charming and more honorable than many settlers."

He gasped, fanning himself with his handkerchief. "What was Uncle Andrew thinking to expose you to such horror? The experience has clearly muddled your brain."

"Really? You sound shockingly narrow-minded. There are many ways to live."

Unfortunately, he interpreted her words as an attempt at humor. Making another condescending remark about untutored colonials, he welcomed the soup, not noticing that they had placed no order.

She described her winter with the Indians, embellishing because she had been only five at the time, so remembered little of it. An early snow had caught them in the wilderness the year her father had tried his hand at trapping. Unfortunately, her tale had less effect than she'd hoped. Either Robert was not listening or his motives for seeking her out were

unusually strong. A half hour later, he was still dumping the butter boat over her head.

When three waiters arrived to lay out a new course, the lady at the next table snorted. "Shocking service," she snapped loudly. "We arrived at the same time, but have yet to see the soup."

Robert glowered at the woman, then administered a direct cut. "The problem with public dining is that one must share the room with encroaching mushrooms," he proclaimed. "Money will never overcome such obvious lack of breeding. As heir to a viscountcy, I will always be served first."

"Such arrogance," said Maggie, referring to Robert, though he assumed she meant their neighbor. The wait staff answered to DuPré, whose temper was legendary. His infatuation with Alice resulted in better food and service every day.

But she said nothing as she sampled a lobster patty. Meeting Robert had been a mistake. He talked incessantly, but she could not believe anything he said, even about the family. He exaggerated other people's faults to make himself appear saintly and shamelessly puffed his own consequence. Yet he ignored even blatant rudeness in his effort to convince her that he was hopelessly smitten.

She finally gave up. She'd met too many determined suitors to mistake his purpose, though why he would seek her hand was beyond understanding. Perhaps he was under pressure to wed and thought an insignificant colonial would be easier to control.

Yet that seemed unlikely. Two hours of acquaintance should have proved that she was rude, argumentative, and unwilling to change – she'd insisted on using a fish fork for the beef even though he'd corrected her twice.

Their waiter presented Alice with a frothy confection of fruit-filled meringue topped with sugared violets. "All day Monsieur DuPré has exerted himself for you," he said, bowing over Alice's hand. "He calls it Henri's Delight."

"Thank you, Matthew," said Alice. "Give him our compliments. This was his best meal yet. And the service was exceptional."

"He will be charmed," said Matthew, winking.

"He will puff himself up until those nearby cower for fear that he'll burst," she countered, making him

laugh. "But this time he deserves the praise – yet I shan't utter a word until I have the recipes."

Maggie choked. Not at Alice, for these exchanges had become a nightly ritual – DuPré believed she had the ear of society's most powerful arbiters of fashion. But Robert looked like someone had just thumped him on the head. He had seemingly forgotten Alice's presence.

"I am appalled," snapped the lady at the next table. "There is no excuse for catering to that popinjay! I swear the service is worse now than when the hotel opened."

"Then why are we eating here?" her husband demanded, draining his glass. "Give me my club any day. Never did like fancy plaster and all those foreign statues. Waste of good blunt. I'd wager Sir Michael cut corners on the construction to pay for such fripperies."

"Do you think so?" she asked, peering suspiciously at the ornate ceiling as a waiter set a platter of squabs on her table.

"Sure of it. No need to cover sound building with gilt. Take my club – good solid walls with sensible paneling." He shoved a pigeon breast into his mouth.

"Hardly elegant, though," said his wife, nibbling her trout.

"The fellow who designed this place was the same one who did the Ipswich Gardens Hotel. Hiding deficiencies under plaster frills did not work then, and it won't work now." He gulped another chunk of squab.

"Kitchen fires are common."

"Faulty construction. The wall behind the ovens was too thin. If the chef had been slower, the whole building would have burned."

Robert snorted. "That fellow should keep his mouth shut about things he doesn't understand. I was staying with friends in Suffolk when that fire occurred. Despite the rumors, it cannot have been more than a grease fire or the place would have burned to the ground – like Billings Hall. A single spark ignited a fire that spread so fast the family barely escaped. Generations of records gone." He sighed. "The paneling dated to Elizabeth's reign."

After hundreds of years, even thick beams would have been dry as tinder, but arguing would serve no purpose. It was time to end the evening. Yet curiosity

prompted one last question. "Why does Uncle William refuse to see me?"

"He will come around," he said, frowning when she moved her hand out of reach. "But you remind him of Andrew's insane jealousy."

"Jealousy?" What lies would he repeat now?

"Andrew despised being the younger son. He hated knowing that Father would have the title one day, so he lashed out whenever he could." He shrugged. "The final straw was forcing himself on Father's betrothed, then abducting her. Father never recovered."

"Instead, he twisted the facts. My mother never wanted William, but no one listened, so her only option was to flee."

"A lady never contradicts a gentleman," Robert said, finally giving in to the anger she'd seen whenever she'd tried to provoke him. It was the first true emotion he had shown since confronting Teddy.

"I prefer truth."

"Females are incapable of comprehending truth." He held up a hand to halt her words. "Do not prattle about things you don't understand. Your father would never have admitted his crimes to you."

"Nor would yours. Heed your own advice, Cousin. You weren't there, either."

Robert took a deep breath, then donned another false smile. "I must take you firmly in hand if you are to go on in society, Maggie. Your barbaric upbringing will have you ostracized in a trice. I warned you about contradicting a gentleman. It is never acceptable."

\* \* \* \*

Marcus stared at Robert's back as he placed his dinner order. He should have warned Maggie to avoid her Adams relatives until he could introduce her, but he'd assumed that she would leave the matter in his hands.

*Idiot!* She was no helpless maiden. The fact that she had come to England by herself proved that she was a determined woman who rarely relied on others. He should have known that she would shove the Adams family's rejection back in their faces.

So now she was at the mercy of Robert's charm. He hoped she was experienced enough to see through him. Robert's debts must be larger than anyone knew. Why else would he court a woman so different from his usual tastes?

He absently drained his wineglass.

If only it had not taken so long to authenticate her papers. Robert was dangerous. More than one innocent had fallen victim to his charm.

But he relaxed the moment he caught Maggie's eye. Her face lit up, the contrast making it obvious that she was barely tolerating Robert's company. To make sure she understood her danger, he scowled at Robert, shaking his head in warning. She nodded agreement, her eyes sparkling with suppressed laughter.

Relieved, he winked. He could almost read her mind – which was rather disconcerting. He'd never felt so attuned to another person.

Robert noted her inattention and glanced over his shoulder. "Be careful of that one," he warned her, administering a direct cut as he turned back. "He can never introduce you properly to society. Look at that insipid jacket and that dull waistcoat. The man understands nothing about fashion."

"But I have no interest in fashion," Maggie said, pulling on her gloves. Her eyes now held only irritation.

Robert laughed as if she were joking, though Marcus knew she spoke the truth. She would return home as soon as she had carried out her father's wishes – which meant he must act immediately. At least explaining the Widmers was straightforward. Discussing the Adams family was another problem entirely.

-4-

Maggie frowned. Alice had not yet returned from her morning visit to the kitchen, and breakfast was growing cold.

She had declined to accompany Alice today, though she had done so two days ago, creeping down the servants' stairs into the bowels of the building. The kitchens were cavernous rooms kept uncomfortably hot by numerous cooking fires and four huge ovens. The smell of baking bread had made her mouth water, reminding her that she'd not yet eaten.

Assistant chefs had scurried about in apparent disarray, though they actually worked in concert to prepare a vast array of food. DuPré was a master of organization.



“Ze trick is in ze wrist, *chérie*.”

His voice had cut through her study of the tricks he used to keep the kitchen running efficiently. Startled, she’d realized that he was teaching Alice how he introduced lightness into his creams.

“Hold ze spoon like so.” He’d stood behind Alice, his hands covering hers as he demonstrated how to beat air into the cream. Several of his minions had stared in amazement.

Maggie grinned at the memory. DuPré had continued the lesson for nearly an hour, flirting outrageously the entire time. His voice had resembled honeyed velvet as he led Alice through the motions, nuzzling her neck between words. They were undoubtedly sharing another lesson today, but Maggie would not join them again. She did not belong there, as one of the maids had made clear. The girl had been so shocked to find her belowstairs that Maggie had felt obliged to apologize. Clearly, her standing as a lady would be in jeopardy if she indulged her curiosity again. Service would suffer.

Now she picked up the two letters that had arrived with breakfast. Robert’s arrogant scrawl adorned one. The other had been penned in a precise hand that revealed nothing of its owner’s character, so it was probably from Marcus.

A glance at the signature verified her guess. *Forgive me for ignoring you these past days*, he’d written.

Recalling that astonishing moment of mind-sharing in the dining room last evening, she blushed. She had lain awake long into the night, torn between awe that he understood her so well and regret that she must leave soon. They would never meet again – a fact she must not forget. She returned her attention to the page.

Margaret Widmer’s solicitor wishes to see you. I will call for you at eleven, if that is convenient.

She frowned. What might her grandmother’s solicitor want? No one in England had known she existed until a few days ago. And why now?

There was only one way to find out, she admitted, reaching for a pen and stifling a burst of excitement over spending the afternoon with Marcus. This was business.

After sealing her response, she poured chocolate and opened Robert’s missive. He began with an entire

page of compliments that ignored her curt dismissal last evening. Nor did he mention her rude and uncouth behavior. His persistence raised all sorts of alarms.

"Why the long face, Maggie?" asked Alice, hurrying in to claim her chair at the table.

"Robert wants to tour London with me this afternoon."

"Why?"

"An interesting question. He reminds me of Patrick Riley, though I can't imagine why he wants me. Did you ever hear such fustian?"

Alice read the letter, then smiled. "Not recently."

Maggie accepted the pages back. "We will decline this invitation. Marcus wants me to meet Grandmother's solicitor."

"Perhaps she left your mother something."

"That is hardly likely after twenty-eight years of silence."

"Love endures." Alice poured coffee. "It has the power to move mountains and link hearts, even after twenty-eight years apart. Your grandmother loved your mother deeply."

"How would you know?"

"Shortly after I became your governess, John drank too much and cried his eyes out over losing Catherine. He mentioned their elopement and admitted that her mother had preferred his suit to William's. Catherine had always been her favorite – perhaps because she was the youngest."

"Why did they cut all ties to England, then?"

"That wasn't clear, though I think John feared William. And after Catherine died, he expected her mother to blame him."

"What?"

"He had dragged her off to an uncivilized land."

"Nonsense! She could have died anywhere."

"True, but beware of your uncle, Maggie. If John feared him, he cannot be a good man." She disappeared into her room.

Maggie had no further interest in her Adams relatives, but Alice's warning reverberated through her head as she ate breakfast. By the time she dusted the last crumb from her fingertips, she had revised her plans.

"I think we should leave London for a time," she

announced when Alice returned. "William is not a problem, for he refuses to meet me, but Robert might become a pest. He seems the stubborn sort."

"Ask Marcus what to do," Alice advised as she left to go shopping. "He is clear-thinking and must know Robert's purpose."

\* \* \* \*

Marcus rested his hand on Maggie's back, absorbing her heat as he escorted her into Frankel's office. Touching her eased the tension in his shoulders.

They were late because of Betsy – again he cursed his stupidity. Since he'd broken off their liaison, she had plagued him with endless petty revenges – rearranging books, shuffling papers, spilling ashes in the wardrobe. Yesterday, he'd nearly sliced his throat because she'd chipped his razor. The cut would chafe under his cravat for at least a week.

Today, the papers supporting Maggie's claim had been missing. He'd finally found them under his mattress, but it was the final straw. He must demand a different maid when he returned.

He forced his mind back to business. Margaret Widmer had hired her own solicitor after her husband's death. Her marriage settlement had left her in control of her dowry, which had irritated her husband no end. And her will had shocked the entire family. Soft-spoken, docile Margaret had been hiding secrets for years.

"This is Margaret Adams, daughter of Elizabeth Widmer Adams," he said in introduction, then produced fair copies of the *Merchant Queen's* sailing roster and log, which mentioned the wedding and explained the discrepancy in names. He'd also found official reports written by Captain Barnsley on identical stationery to that used for the marriage lines. Since years of dust had covered these records, he could swear that no one had looked at them since they'd been stored.

"Is Elizabeth living?" asked Mr. Frankel.

"She died fifteen years ago." Maggie pulled the doctor's statement from the documents he'd asked her to bring.

"Well before Mrs. Widmer." He steepled his fingers under his chin. "Your visit is well timed, Miss Adams. Only a fortnight ago, I sent to Halifax for your direction. Mrs. Widmer left five thousand guineas and

a small estate in Somerset to her daughter Elizabeth, naming you as residual beneficiary in the event Elizabeth predeceased her. It was her hope that you would use the legacy to assume your rightful place in London society.”

Maggie frowned. “Is the bequest contingent on my doing so?”

Marcus jolted to attention. It was a reasonable question for anyone versed in the law, but why would a lady from the wilds of America think to ask?

“No. The bequest is final, but she left a letter of explanation.” Frankel handed her a thick packet wrapped in velum. “You may read it in the next room. I will be available to answer questions in half an hour.” He gestured toward a door behind him.

Marcus led her into a small sitting room. She had been surprising him ever since he’d called for her, starting with her cool greeting and lack of questions. At first he’d assumed it was pique – after ignoring her for days, he’d arrived late for this appointment – but that no longer seemed reasonable. She’d glared when he’d produced his proofs, almost as if he’d betrayed her by verifying her claims. Maybe he should have mentioned this legacy earlier instead of leaving the job to Frankel.

He seated her in a comfortable chair. “Shall I leave?”

“No. I suspect you can answer most of my questions.”

He nodded, turning to stare out the window as she broke the seal. A quarter hour passed in silence broken only by rustling paper. He wondered what she was thinking. Would this change her plans? His groin grew heavy at the thought of having her permanently in England. He had been fighting the urge to let her hair down and run his fingers through it since helping her into his carriage.

“Poor woman,” Maggie murmured at last. “Alice was right. She truly loved my mother.”

“No one knew how deeply she mourned the separation until after her death.” He took a chair facing her.

“She never spoke of it?”

“The family never discussed Elizabeth. Until Aunt Margaret’s death, everything I knew about the situation came from the Adams boys.”

“In that case, it cannot have been flattering,” she

said dryly.

"It was not." He shook his head. "Not until Margaret's will was read did I demand the truth from my grandfather, Richard."

"Which was?"

"Richard Widmer and George Adams were neighbors and close friends who wanted to unite their lines through marriage. But neither of them had sired a daughter, so Richard offered his niece Elizabeth as a suitable wife for William. Margaret objected – she preferred Andrew even at the age of twelve – but Richard ignored her, attributing her dislike to a recent prank that had broken Elizabeth's arm."

Maggie tapped the letter. "She writes that Mother's elopement removed the light from her life and begs her to return home, condemning America as uncivilized." She shook her head. "Why does everyone in England criticize a place they know nothing about?"

"You must admit that the country is largely unsettled, though I agree that Boston and Philadelphia differ from London only in size. Your capital, however, is another story."

"You sound as though you've been there."

"Three years ago."

"Then you will understand that I have little incentive to live in England. I love the excitement. America offers opportunities I could never find here. Life can be hard, but the rewards are worth it."

"Your mother died at thirty-one, and your father was killed in a mine disaster."

"Mother died of an inflammation of the lungs – an ailment that kills people of all classes in both our countries. And I doubt that English mines are any safer."

He shrugged, though a viscount's son would never have worked in an English mine.

"I cannot accept this bequest," she said, tapping the letter. "Grandmother may have attached no conditions, but she clearly expected compliance with her wishes."

"But the inheritance is yours. Having proved your identity, Frankel has no choice but to transfer the property."

"I understand the legalities, but that does not mean I must keep it. Overseeing the estate would be difficult."

"Hire an agent."

"I prefer to manage my own holdings," she said absently.

Marcus pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Obviously Andrew had done well in America. Maggie Adams was no rustic, as he should have known from the beginning. The way she had shaken his hand had not been the untutored response of an ignorant girl but the habit of someone accustomed to the world of business. And there were other clues – her reticence about her father, her familiarity with legal proceedings, her indifference to the opulence of the Grand Regent... She'd also recognized Robert's toadeating as the fustian it was, hinting that she had encountered the same thing in the past. And she was—

"Who in the Widmer family has the greatest need?" she asked.

"What?" The question jerked him out of his contemplation.

Maggie wondered what held his thoughts. He was staring at her as if seeing her for the first time. But she would consider that later.

Clearly this legacy was behind Robert's sudden infatuation. Five thousand guineas could support him for years, even without the estate income. Thus giving away the inheritance would remove his interest. "You mentioned my cousins – I believe fourteen others are descended from Grandmother. Who has the most need of property?"

"Michael is always drowning in the River Tick, but he would game away anything he acquired," he said warily.

"Perhaps I should be clearer. Who is both needful and deserving of help? Surely there is someone. This bequest should go to one of Grandmother's descendants, but I've no patience with gamesters."

His eyes flashed in surprise. How had he succeeded as a diplomat when his thoughts showed so clearly?

"Needful and deserving," he repeated slowly. "Edwin Jenkins is a captain, currently in Paris with Wellington's occupation force. Since military pay never covers an officer's expenses, he is perpetually short of funds. Thomas Widmer is vicar to a poor parish in Yorkshire. His income barely supports his family."

"Is Edwin married?"

"Not yet, though he has an understanding with his neighbor's daughter. Now that the war is over, he will

make a formal offer.”

“And leave the military?”

“No. He loves it. His wife will join him wherever he is posted.”

“What about Thomas? Is he dedicated to the church?”

Marcus frowned. “I have never heard him complain, but I suspect he took orders to avoid buying colors. He would not have lasted a week on a battlefield, yet the family had no other position for him.”

“And unlike you, he hasn’t the means to strike out on his own.”

“Or the interest. Few gentlemen are willing to tarnish their reputations with trade.”

She nodded. “Very well. Thomas can have the estate and half the money. The rest will go to Edwin.”

“You should think about this for a few days.”

“There is no need.” She met his gaze, holding his eyes until she was sure he understood her situation. When he nodded, she continued. “Grandmother remembered a young girl trained to English society. She would not have recognized the woman that girl became. Mother loved challenge and would have laughed at the idea of returning to England. I am no different. Thus I have no moral claim to her money. Let it go to those who are content to live in her world.”

“But—”

“You needn’t concern yourself with this, Marcus. I cannot accept it under false pretenses.”

“Very well. We will put Frankel to work.” Rising, he helped her to her feet, catching her by the shoulders when she stumbled. Sparks sizzled up his arms. “Would you like to meet my grandfather? He has changed since your parents eloped, and he now knows that Elizabeth chose more wisely than he. I fear your Uncle William is a wastrel.”

It was a perfect solution to avoiding Robert. She smiled. “I came to England to meet my family. When shall we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. In the meantime, why don’t I show you about London?”

-5-

Maggie was closing her trunk the next morning when someone rapped on the sitting room door.

Expecting Marcus, she pulled it open.

"Are you ready?" asked Robert, stepping inside before she could block him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking you to the balloon ascension, as promised. You will have seen nothing like it in the wilderness." His eyes gleamed just as Patrick's had that last day, snapping her to attention.

"I declined your invitation," she reminded him. It had been waiting for her when she and Richard had returned from visiting St. Paul's Cathedral and Week's Mechanical Museum. Sidling closer to the writing table, she fingered her reticule. "As I explained, I have other plans."

His voice hardened. "I am family, which makes me more important than shopping, Maggie, so cease this teasing. We've barely an hour to reach the launch site."

"I have no interest in balloons."

"I warned you about arguing with gentlemen." He circled the table she'd set between them, stopping an arm's length away. "A lady's first duty is to her family. If you insist on shopping, so be it. But we cannot risk having you bring dishonor to our name, so I must accompany you on expeditions until you learn society's rules."

"Since your father disowned mine, we are not family. Thus you have no voice in where I go or how I conduct myself," she said firmly. "No one would think you responsible for my behavior. Now leave."

"No." His eyes blazed. "You are an Adams. Your actions reflect on our name, so we must take care of you until you assume your proper place in the world."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He smiled. "Your days as an ape-leader are over, my dear. The family has found you a husband – me."

"Absurd."

His fists clenched. "The family honor is at stake, Maggie. We have endured scandal ever since Andrew defiled our name. Only our marriage will suppress it. You will enjoy it more if you accept the inevitable like the lady you pretend to be. We will remain at Fielding Court until you learn to—"

"What fustian!" She wanted to smash a chair over his foolish head. *Family honor* indeed! "I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life." But she



could see the determination in his eyes. He would not accept her refusal. Loosening the strings on her reticule, she slipped a hand inside.

"I knew you were too stupid to recognize your good fortune." He shook his head as he stepped forward to seize her arm. "I must confine you to the country until you learn your place."

"Don't touch me!" She slammed a knee into his groin, doubling him over. Jerking the pistol from her reticule, she backed out of reach.

"You will - regret - this." His voice squeaked between gasps for air, making the threat sound feeble.

"Hardly." Her hand remained steady. "This is farewell, Cousin. Father was wrong to believe that rapprochement was possible. Either leave, or I shoot."

He tensed to attack – anger was eroding his sense – but before he could spring, Alice returned from the kitchens.

"What is going on?" she demanded, taking in the scene. "I knew he would make a nuisance of himself."

"We are discovered," wailed Robert, shakily straightening. "You are compromised, my dear. Marriage is your only hope." He produced a special license.

Maggie laughed. "English girls must be foolish indeed if you thought this scheme would work, Cousin. Find another pigeon for your trap. I will never wed you."

Fury flushed his face. "Do you wish to be cut by society?"

"If you had listened to anything I've said, you would know how stupid that sounds. I have no interest in the opinions of fribbles and wastrels."

"But—"

"No one would question us discussing family business unchaperoned."

"Further proof that you know nothing of the world."

"Of your world, possibly. But that society has no authority outside of England, and its scandals matter only to itself. The rest of us have more important things to think about. Now leave."

He stared at the pistol, clearly contemplating his chances of wresting it away.

"Do not underestimate me," she warned. "No one survives in the wilderness without learning to handle weapons. Will you go quietly, or must we summon the

staff?" Alice had her hand on the bell pull.

"You will rue this day," he spat, raking her with such loathing she nearly flinched. "No one insults me with impunity." He stalked away, slamming the door behind him.

"Conceited oaf! What happened?" asked Alice, sliding the bolt shut.

"I'm not sure." She set down the pistol and sank into a chair. "He invited me to a balloon ascension. When I refused, he began prattling of honor and claimed that the family's name is in jeopardy – which translates into my having to wed him. But if he needs Grandmother's legacy that badly, he won't give up."

"Heavens!"

"Exactly." She glanced at her pistol, grateful she always carried it when traveling. "Are you sure you won't accompany us to Wyndmer Park? Robert is clearly dangerous."

Alice shook her head. "Simmons has finally agreed to overlook my gender and instruct me in hotel management. And Henri is teaching me more techniques each day."

"So how is our stalwart chef?" she asked, smiling.

"More puffed up than ever. He is a man of great appetites and even greater conceit."

"Take care. He seeks more than flirtation."

She laughed. "He is already carrying on with at least two maids, so you needn't fret. He thinks I will approach the Clarendon's chef if he annoys me. They are fierce rivals. Henri swears he himself is more talented, despite the fact that Jaquiers, not he, was once chef to the French king." She brandished several scraps of paper.

"What did he give you this time?"

"Henri's Delight," she said, tapping the top one. "That exquisite dove pie we ate last night, the meringue *glaces* in raspberry sauce, a towering *croquembouche* – Simmons raves about it, though I haven't sampled it yet – and several sauces."

"Good luck," said Maggie as another rap echoed.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus smiled when Maggie opened her door. Every time he saw her, his longing grew, making it harder to remember that she would soon be gone. "Are you ready?"

"In a moment." She handed a pistol to Alice. "You

have more need of this than we do. Keep the door bolted and do not leave the hotel alone. Robert may abduct you, hoping to force my hand."

They exchanged speaking glances.

Marcus frowned, but he held his tongue until they were in his carriage. "What was that all about?"

She shrugged. "Robert covets Grandmother's legacy, so he has decided to wed me. My refusal did not improve his temper. When will Mr. Frankel finish the transfer papers?"

"They will be ready when we return." Someone needed to teach Robert a lesson, he decided, frowning. But first he must warn Maggie of her real danger. Postponing this discussion had been a mistake. He only hoped she would not kill the messenger. She might claim she had come to England because of the vow to her father, but he knew better. Andrew's death had left her alone. She needed family to fill the void in her life, so discovering the truth about the Adams men would hurt. Could she accept the facts, especially those that showed her father in a less than saintly light?

Coward!

His heart was more involved than he'd thought if he was ducking the job merely to stay in her good graces, he admitted in shock. But he could think about that later. Drawing in a deep breath, he launched the explanation he should have made yesterday. "Margaret's legacy is not Robert's goal – though he would consider it a satisfying bonus."

"What now?"

Cloudy skies made it too dark to read her expression, so he clasped her hand. Touching her was the only way to gauge her reaction. "I thought Grandfather could do this better, but I will try to explain."

"Explain what?"

"About Andrew and William."

"Is this about the theft that drove Father from the country?"

"That was merely their last contretemps." He stroked her fingers, momentarily distracted by their trembling. "Even as boys, William and Andrew were usually at odds, arguing with an edge that made others uncomfortable. Their pranks sometimes turned dangerous. And both suffered numerous unexplained

injuries.”

“Robert claimed that Father was jealous of William’s position as the heir, but I cannot believe it.”

“I suspect it was the other way around, but Andrew was not blameless. He retaliated against his brother’s malice. And though his reputation as a gamester was exaggerated, he did lose three thousand guineas shortly before William was to be married.”

“He would never do such a thing!” swore Maggie hotly.

“Maggie—” He caught her other hand, kissing it lightly. “We all make mistakes. The smart ones learn from the experience. I am not criticizing your father.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“I am explaining the truth he wanted you to find. Personally, I think that card game was odd – not that it matters now. George paid the debt, but he and William reminded Andrew of his shame every day.”

She relaxed. “So he made a mistake that his family refused to forgive. I suppose they believed the other charges, too.”

“Of course.” Relief warmed him. He should have trusted her sooner. “I suspect William started most of the rumors, for there was little evidence beyond the usual young man’s wildness. He hated Andrew for being everything he was not – charming, intelligent, honorable, even better looking. The final straw was when he discovered that Andrew and Elizabeth were in love.”

“Yet everyone continued pressing her to wed William.”

“They had no choice.” He met her gaze. “The betrothal had been arranged when they were children. Contracts had been signed. Neither party could cry off without the other’s consent, though William might have agreed if she had wanted anyone but Andrew.”

“So Mother eloped.”

He nodded. “When Margaret died, we discovered that your parents had written twice. The first letter confirmed that they had wed and swore that Andrew was innocent of theft. The second announced your birth. That was the last she heard.”

“I should have realized she’d written. How else would Frankel have known about me?” She shook her head. “I don’t know why there were only two letters, unless Father feared retribution. Or maybe it was too

difficult – they moved to the frontier shortly after I was born.” She sighed. “You’ve tiptoed around the subject long enough, Marcus. Was William responsible for that theft?”

“All the evidence pointed to Andrew – supposedly he had incurred another gaming debt. He swore he was innocent, but George summoned a magistrate. By the time the man arrived, Andrew and Elizabeth were gone.”

“That explains why they sailed under false names. With his own father against him, he was helpless.” Her voice was shaking.

“George should have known better, but he only discovered the truth a year ago,” he said wearily.

“How?”

“His valet spotted William leaving a forgotten secret passage. When George explored it, he found the missing jewelry in a niche behind Andrew’s old room. He consulted Richard, but they could think of no way to prove William was the thief. William could claim that he’d just discovered the passage himself and that Andrew had fled before he could recover the jewelry.”

“Why keep it in the house?”

“He probably planned to find it when he came into the title.”

“Monstrous.”

“I heartily dislike your uncle.”

She nodded agreement. “Did George confront him?”

“No. I think he was afraid to. William would dare anything to protect his interests. If George and Richard had told the rest of us, things might have been different, but they left the jewelry where it was.”

“Robert claimed that George tried to find Father,” she said suddenly. “I thought it was another of his lies.”

“George tried, but the task proved impossible. Andrew could have gone anywhere. It wasn’t until Margaret suggested Elizabeth was in Halifax – the subject arose in another context – that he sent an agent there. Unfortunately, he died a week later. When William learned about the agent, he recalled the man.”

“Poor Grandfather. I wish we had known. Father would never have come back, but he would have been pleased that George knew the truth.”

“That is not the end of the story, Maggie.” He pulled her closer so he could see her eyes. “George’s

investigation turned up other crimes that continue to this day – or so we think; there is not enough evidence to put before the Lords. William is cunning, as is Robert. Both lie and steal and cheat, arranging that others will pay for their misdeeds. Fielding Court was entailed to William, but George willed everything else to Andrew.”

“When did he die?”

“February – more than a month before your father.”

She sighed in disgust. “No wonder Robert has been prattling about protecting the family.”

“His allowance is much smaller than it used to be, which has not improved his temper.”

“I will return it, of course.”

He traced her wrist with his thumb. “Don’t do anything rash, Maggie. We are talking about two estates and more than fifty thousand guineas. You need to think carefully before disposing of such wealth.”

“We have already held this discussion,” she reminded him. “I want nothing from them.”

“But this comes from George, who did everything he could to keep it away from William and Robert.”

She gazed out the window. Rain pattered against the roof. Marcus’s fingers burned where they stroked her skin. If only she could throw herself against that hard chest and feel his arms close around her. Confronting her family’s past left her feeling weak in ways the most complex business problem never did.

But she couldn’t. Imposing on him for comfort would cross a line that would ultimately hurt both of them.

“I will accept that much,” she said finally. “He did recognize Father’s innocence in the end, and Father’s last wish was to heal that breach. Is there a residual beneficiary?”

“A third cousin, or possibly fourth.” He shrugged. “I’ve never met the man. I suspect George chose him because the connection was too remote for the money to find its way back to William.”

Maggie let the subject drop. She would talk to Richard Widmer before making any final decisions. But now she needed to place some distance between herself and Marcus. His leg brushed hers, weakening her resolve. She should have known that sharing a carriage would fuel her attraction.

But it must stop. They belonged to different worlds and would never meet again once she returned home.

Though the carriage was narrow, shifting put a small space between them. He withdrew his hand, turning his attention to the countryside. Stifling an unexpected burst of disappointment, she followed suit.

The heath they were crossing was very different from home. Even the wildest areas seemed tame. In sunlight, they would look downright inviting. Yet the scenery could not hold her attention. Thank heaven no one knew about her real inheritance. There was too much wealth connected to her name already. She would dispose of this latest legacy as soon as possible. Then she must leave if she hoped to reach home before winter. She should never have left.

-6-

Ten days later, Maggie returned to the Grand Regent, more relaxed than she had been since her father's death. For the first time in her life, she felt connected to the past – not that she would remain in England; society was too formal and inflexible, and she had too many responsibilities at home.

She had been reminding herself of those responsibilities since admitting her danger in the carriage. It had been the only way she could keep Marcus firmly in the role of a friend.

He was the most fascinating man she had ever met – witty, intelligent, impeccably correct when necessary, yet carefree the rest of the time. Not only did he accept all her interests, but he honored the bounds she had set and even helped maintain them. Knowing they must soon part, he had not touched her again, though desire often heated his eyes.

He'd made sure that she enjoyed her visit, riding with her most mornings, escorting her to call on neighbors, and placating his grandfather. Richard had often been shocked by her outspoken ways, so Marcus's diplomatic skills had been in frequent demand.

But he rarely used them on his own behalf. She had heard shouting from the library more than once. Richard Widmer would never condone Marcus's plans – which confirmed her inability to fit into English society. Richard's cautious welcome would fade if he

knew she ran a business.

She rapped on Alice's door, then hugged her friend when she answered. "You look wonderful!"

"As do you. The visit went well, I take it." Alice appeared more vibrant than ever. Flirting with DuPré agreed with her.

"Very well. Uncle Richard is a nice man, despite being quite pompous at times. I shocked him more than once, but we reached a reasonable accommodation. I wish you had joined me."

"I accomplished more by staying here. That silly chef has parted with dozens of recipes."

"Silly?"

Alice laughed. "You would not believe the contretemps yesterday. Two of the maids discovered that he was bedding both of them – I am amazed they didn't know long ago; it was obvious to everyone else."

"He must have bedazzled them."

"Probably. Henri is a powerful force."

"What happened?"

Alice's eyes twinkled with laughter. "When Fanny slipped downstairs to steal a moment with Henri, she found him kissing Pamela in the pantry."

"Henri should be more discreet. I suppose they turned on him."

"On each other." Alice shook her head. "Each accused the other of stealing her beau. Words led to blows. They'd reached the hair-pulling stage when the milkmaid burst in, furious because Henri was carrying on with a kitchen maid at the Clarendon. *That's* when they turned on him."

"Four liaisons?" Maggie choked. "How does he manage?"

"Four that I know of, though I suspect that last is merely a way to keep an eye on the Clarendon's chef."

"Words fail me."

"They did not fail the maids – or Henri, for that matter; they probably heard his protests in the attics. When Fanny shoved the milkmaid into a rack of pastries, the real fight started. The milkmaid – I think her name is Sally – retaliated. Pamela grabbed a syllabub and hurled it at Henri."

"Oh, no!"

She nodded. "I thought he'd been in a temper before, but you wouldn't believe the pandemonium that unleashed – arm waving, foot stomping, spitting,



scratching. Food flew in all directions. Most of the kitchen staff joined in. It took Simmons and the footmen an hour to break it up. They are probably still cleaning the kitchen."

"You sound as if you were there."

"I was." She laughed until she had to sit down. "I never thought I could do anything so childish, but when the food started flying, I had to join in. It was incredible fun."

"Alice!"

"I know. Shocking behavior. And quite inappropriate. You would think I grew up in the wilds of North America." They laughed. "Matthew whisked me away before Simmons spotted me. He would never think me a suitable hotel manager if he knew I had peppered Sally with a dozen eggs and whacked Fanny with a loaf of bread."

Maggie shook her head. "Be careful, Alice. DuPré will be looking for new conquests now that his current liaisons are over."

"He only flirts with me because I keep turning him down – he likes a challenge," said Alice dryly, wiping her eyes. "Besides, you underestimate his charm. Matthew claims the tension below stairs is thicker than old aspic, but each girl expects him to rebuff the others and remain with her."

Maggie stared. "Incredible. But watch yourself. What happens when he discovers that you've no intention of puffing his talent to London society? You know how wicked his temper can be."

"We will be gone in another fortnight – or have plans changed?"

"I'm not sure." Maggie's humor faded until her mood matched London's sooty air. "Grandfather Adams left a fortune to Father. I don't want it, but Marcus doesn't know the more remote Adams cousins well enough to advise me. Nor does Richard."

"What tale is this?"

"You were right about William." She explained why George had disinherited his heir. "Last week, he denounced me as an impostor to Richard's face, then refused an invitation to the Earl of Candleigh's picnic because I would attend. And yesterday a groom discovered that the girth on my saddle had unaccountably frayed. I am convinced William is responsible."

“What about Robert?”

“He is capable of trying, though he has not returned home in months as far as anyone knows. He and his father haven’t spoken since George’s will was read. But he must be growing desperate – rumor claims he is beholden to several moneylenders. I agree with Grandfather’s decision to disinherit them, but it will take time to decide who should receive the legacy.”

“Take care to keep your plans secret, Maggie. Honor will fly out the window once people learn you are giving away money.”

“I will say nothing. In the meantime, let’s see what the kitchen can produce when the chef is beset by jealous women.”

\* \* \* \*

Maggie returned to the hotel late the following afternoon, seething with frustration.

George’s solicitor was away, visiting a client. She could hardly discuss her business with a clerk, so she had to wait until he returned – not a situation she was accustomed to. Her own lawyer would run down women and children if it meant serving her faster.

*How arrogant*, chided her conscience.

She grinned, finally able to relax – which was good. She must hurry if she meant to bathe before dinner. As would Alice, who had stopped in the lobby to speak with Simmons. They had lost track of time while trying on bonnets.

She had entered her suite and was headed for the bell pull when a shadow moved in the corner. Her stomach clenched. “What are you doing here?”

Robert turned to face her. “You’ve had time to come to your senses. I can postpone the wedding no longer.” His eyes belied his otherwise pleasant expression.

“There is no wedding.”

“Arguing is useless.” He fingered the Greek maiden atop the writing desk. “Either we wed or I kill you.”

“Killing me would serve no purpose,” she said, more calmly than she felt. Her pistol was in her bedchamber, but if she could keep him talking until Alice arrived, they could deal with him.

“I would prefer marriage,” he agreed. “I need your inheritance to pay off my debts. But killing you would reinstate my prospects. Father would collect your estate as next of kin.”

“No, he wouldn’t. I have a will.” The moment the

words left her mouth, she cursed. She should have sworn that she'd already disposed of everything. Even if he knew Mr. Knowles was out of town, she could have claimed Frankel as her solicitor. Now it was too late.

"Bitch!" Fury flared in his eyes. "But that decides the matter. Marriage will negate any wills and make me independent of Father."

"I will not wed you."

He ignored her interruption. "I know a vicar who won't care if the bride is unwilling. Actually, he would sign the license whether you were present or not."

His sudden smile sent chills down her spine. She sidled toward the hallway, seeking another way to distract him. "No court would uphold such a marriage."

"But who would question it? A gentleman's word always outweighs a female's." His voice firmed. "You have no friends here. Several gossips saw us dining together, so marriage would surprise no one. Charles will do anything for a bit of the ready – his tithes hardly keep food on the table, let alone the opium he loves. I can forge your signature and use your companion as one witness," he added as his fingers closed around the base of the Greek maiden. "If I split the money with Father, he will sign as the other witness and swear you proposed the match yourself to rectify Grandfather's injustice."

He'd decided to kill her and forge the license, she realized in shock. He must not know that she'd spent ten days with the Widmers, any of whom would contest his claims. As would her American agent.

But her protest died unuttered. Alice was no good as a witness unless she were also dead. He had clearly abandoned reason and would dare anything to claim the fortune as his own. Mentioning Marcus would endanger his life as well. She could not do it.

Robert lifted the statue and sprang.

The latch on the door jammed. Tipping the table into his path, she raced toward her bedchamber. Only her pistol could save her now.

He shoved the table aside and bounded after her, then ignored the vase she bounced off his shoulder.

As she jerked open the chest holding her pistol, the lamp crashed down on her head.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus concentrated on a treatise on steam engines, pushing all other thoughts aside. At least he tried to. Maggie kept intruding.

Since returning from Wyndmer, he had avoided her, stifling his desire to see her, to touch her, to make love to her.

She had made it clear that she wanted only friendship, and he could understand her reasoning. Nothing would keep her in England. Thus he'd invented excuses that allowed him to hover over her without admitting that he cared – she was family and needed help to negotiate society's treacherous waters; she was a friend, who shared his interests and never ridiculed his aspirations; if he didn't watch her, she would fall prey to an unscrupulous wastrel like Robert...

He had needed the excuses to hide his growing infatuation. They kept him from thinking about her inevitable departure. As did focusing on other topics – like steam engines and gas production and the mistakes he'd made in the past.

At least one mistake was well and truly past. When he had returned to the Grand Regent, his possessions had remained exactly where he'd left them. Betsy had not slipped in to wreak havoc in his absence. She must have finally forgiven him.

"Fire!"

Someone beat on the door, jerking his mind from his work.

"Fire!"

Footsteps pounded along the hallway, accompanied by screams.

"My God!" He stared at the door. Smoke was seeping underneath. The air reverberated with terrified voices, clanging bells, and the distinctive popping of flames devouring green wood.

"Maggie!" he choked, fear baring the truth he had been ignoring for days. She was like no one else – warm, independent, caring, intelligent. He could not imagine life without her.

"Later," he muttered, grabbing his coat.

Another fist pounded on his door. He jerked it open to see Betsy running toward the servants' stairs. She blew him a kiss as she opened the disguised door.

Smoke filled the hallway. Clamping a handkerchief over his mouth, he raced for the nearest staircase. It

was free of flames, but Maggie's rooms were in the other wing. Had she escaped?

By the time he descended two floors, he could barely see. The acrid odor of burning paint stung his nose and left him lightheaded. Flames flickered hellishly behind billowing smoke.

Feeling his way past the grand staircase, he pounded on her door.

"Maggie!"

It was locked, but faint moans came from inside.

The fire was thirty feet away, lapping at the next suite. Fighting off dizziness, he threw himself at Maggie's door. And again. The third time it burst open, dumping him on the floor.

Blinking the sweat from his eyes, he choked. In here, the flames were only ten feet away, dancing in her bedchamber. He stared stupidly for a long minute before realizing they had eaten through the dining room ceiling. The fire must have started in the kitchen, two floors below.

"Maggie!"

"Help."

Her voice was so weak he was amazed it had penetrated the closed door, but at least it came from Alice's room. Maggie was dragging Alice toward the sitting room. Blood streaked both their faces.

"What happened?" he demanded, heaving the unconscious Alice over his shoulder. The flames were crossing the threshold between Maggie's bedroom and the sitting room. They seemed to be spreading at lightning speed, while his feet felt mired in mud. A year might have passed since he'd broken down the door, though it could only have been minutes.

"Robert is trying to kill us." When she stumbled, he grabbed her waist with his free hand.

"Can you walk?"

She nodded, then darted away. "My writing case!"

"There's no time to collect belongings!"

"I can't leave her recipes." She was already back and pushing the broken door aside. The flames in the hall were closer. Others raced up the grand staircase.

"Hug the wall," he gasped. "The east stairs are still free."

Her lips moved, but the fire's noise drowned her response.

Again time seemed suspended, though they were

stumbling eastward at a near run. The smoke was thicker than ever, suffocating him despite the handkerchief. Alice weighed more with every step. Maggie tried to help him, but by the time they reached the stairs, he was so dizzy, he could hardly stand.

Smoke rolled up in a solid wave. They could never remain conscious long enough to reach the bottom. Remembering Betsy's dash along the hallway, he gestured toward the last niche in the wall. "Servants' stairs."

Thank God she was not prone to hysteria. She found the disguised handle and pulled. The air inside was nearly clear.

She coughed. "Can you manage Alice alone?"

The spiral was too narrow for two abreast, so he nodded. But Maggie must have known how weak he was. When he nearly fell from the last step, she caught him. Together, they shifted Alice to his other shoulder, then cracked open the door.

On this floor, the entire west wing was ablaze, and flames had spread to the lobby. But the door to the nearest parlor was ajar. Stumbling across the hall, he collapsed against the window frame.

"Hand Alice down!" Maggie shouted, pulling him out of a stupor. She'd opened the casement and jumped the four feet to the ground.

He complied. The last thing he remembered was Maggie tugging on his wrist.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie tried to ease Marcus's fall, but she was too weak. They went down together in a sprawl of arms and legs. But at least he was out of the building. For a moment, she'd feared he would collapse inside. Even if she'd pulled herself back in, she could never have lifted him to the window.

"What happened?" demanded a man, materializing from the gloom. Night had descended. She must have been unconscious for at least two hours.

"Too much smoke," she gasped. "Help me pull them clear." Alice's face looked gray in the flickering light. Marcus didn't look much better.

"You're cut," the man said, touching her head.

"I fell." A crash sent flames roaring through the dining room windows. The ceiling must have come down. "We have to move," she said firmly. "Can you help?"

He summoned others, who carried Marcus and Alice to the park dividing Queen's Garden Road. The relative coolness made it easier to breathe. Cradling Marcus's head in her lap, she looked around.

The street teemed with people, garishly lit by the blazing west wing. Some sat in stunned silence, staring at the flames, but most were milling about, screaming, sobbing, or shouting orders.

A rope of sheets tumbled from a second-floor window above the dining room. A dark figure emerged, oblivious to the flames already threatening the fabric. But even as a scream welled in Maggie's throat, men tugged the sheet away from the window. A fireman directed a stream of water onto the flames, allowing the man to scramble safely down. The crowd cheered.

A shrill whistle cut through the noise. Before she could figure out who had signaled, a shout drew all eyes to a man wearing the soot-stained uniform of a kitchen servant.

"DuPré done it, I tell yuh. After that fight, 'e vowed 'e'd prove 'e were the best chef on earth. 'E's been in there two whole nights and two whole days, a-bakin' away. I told 'im this mornin' that wall was too 'ot. But 'e turned 'is nose up, just like you'd 'spect from a mad Frenchie."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Simmons calmly, pushing through the crowd toward the speaker. "The kitchen was designed for twice the ovens that are currently installed. They could burn around the clock for weeks without endangering anything."

"The wall was 'ot," the servant insisted stoutly. "Ol' DuPré were stokin' them ovens night an' day, yellin' fer more an' more coal. I tol' 'im the wall was burnin', but 'e don' care. Too busy boffin' the maids to listen to honest workers."

"The wall could not have smoldered all day," insisted Simmons. "Now cease this prattle at once."

"Prattle?" shouted someone.

Growls were already sweeping the crowd.

"What sort of hotel installs a madman in the kitchen?" demanded another. "He nearly stabbed my wife last week. And how do you explain that fight?"

"The flames are in my room," sobbed a girl. "All my new gowns are ruined!"

"Who's going to pay for my lost trunks?"

"And my missing jewelry?"

"Maybe it's the Frenchie what's been robbing us."

"He could have started the fire to cover his crimes."

*Robbing?* Maggie shivered, pulling Marcus closer. The crowd was becoming a mob. Two men held Simmons. The servant was inciting even more anger. Gratified to have an attentive audience, he regaled them with every complaint he'd ever heard against DuPré. Most of his claims were embellished, but his listeners didn't care. They wanted someone to blame for their losses.

She was wondering how to protect Marcus and Alice from a riot when the arrival of a clanging fire wagon distracted everyone's attention. Simmons jerked free and hustled the servant away. Tempers eased as new firemen jumped down to assault the blaze.

She relaxed, aware of her pounding head for the first time since Marcus had burst into her room.

Bells, horses, and a crying child formed a counterpoint to the crackle, hiss, and roar of the inferno, beating against her temples in unrelenting cacophony. Exploding windows showered spectators with glass. Firemen worked feverishly to pump water on the blaze. Others rushed inside to attack walls and floors with axes, hoping to contain its spread.

Smoke burned her throat. Heat baked the side facing the hotel. Plants withered before her eyes.

Alice groaned. Her color had improved and she was breathing easier, but Marcus remained inert.

"Marcus!" she cried, running her fingers across his face and through his hair. When he failed to respond, she slapped his cheeks and chafed his hands. How could she live with herself if he had sacrificed his life to save hers?

"Maggie?"

*Thank God.* "We're safe." She smoothed his hair one last time, then helped him sit up against the tree.

He coughed deeply, then took in the scene. "The crowd looks dangerous."

"One of the servants was blaming DuPré, which unleashed tempers."

"Why DuPré?"

"The servant swears the ovens overheated and set the wall on fire, but it had to be Robert."

"So you said. But if he wanted to kill you, why leave you alive?"

"He wanted it to look like an accident. He knows a



vicar who will sign his special license without a formal ceremony – apparently the man is an opium-eater. Marriage would negate my will, so he could claim everything.”

Marcus muttered something creatively vile.

“I agree. He smashed a lamp over my head, then waited for Alice. That was several hours ago – plenty of time to stage an accident that would shift suspicion to someone else. You said he was adept at such chicanery.”

A shout rang out. “There he goes! The mad Frenchie! Make him pay.” Half the crowd raced away.

“DuPré?” asked Marcus.

“Yes.” She peered after the retreating mob. “I hope he escapes.”

“He should. For all his size, he’s quick.” Marcus struggled to his feet. “I must tell the firemen about Robert so they can search for evidence. Will she be all right?” He nodded toward Alice.

“She is coming around.”

“Wait for me here.” Kissing her lightly on the forehead, he strode away.

## -7-

Maggie sipped a cup of tea, relaxing for the first time since last night’s fire. Marcus had commandeered a cart and brought them to Richard’s town house.

Alice had wakened fully by the time they’d arrived, but the doctor demanded that she stay in bed for a week to allow her concussion to heal. Maggie was under similar orders, but she’d come down to the drawing room anyway. Now she let her eyes take in the decor.

Unlike her sitting room at home, which was decorated in blues and creamy whites, this one had deep red walls and draperies. Red also figured strongly in the chair covers and carpet, complementing the dark woods of the ancient furniture. Under other circumstances, she might have found the intensity overwhelming, but today it was comforting. Even the room’s clutter seemed almost cozy.

Footsteps on the stairs announced Marcus’s return.

She had lain awake well into the night, trying to accept the truths yesterday’s terror had revealed. She should have known where befriending Marcus must

lead. Yet what could she have done differently? She'd been doomed since running him down in the lobby.

"Any news?" she asked when he reached the drawing room.

"You are supposed to be in bed," he reminded her.

"I am not one of your fragile English maidens."

"True." He poured wine, then leaned against the mantel as he examined her. Apparently her appearance satisfied him, for he relaxed.

"The firemen confined the damage to three floors of the west wing, so my room was spared. My belongings reek of smoke, but are otherwise undamaged. Your suite was destroyed."

She shuddered, but they were lucky to be alive. When set beside that, the loss of a few possessions was nothing. And in truth, she had saved everything important. Alice's recipes and her father's papers had been in her writing case. The locket still hung from her neck.

"I spoke to the magistrate. He needs your statement but will wait until you are recovered. Robert is under arrest."

"They found enough evidence?"

"More than enough. He was seen in the basement just before the fire started."

"I'm not surprised. He went more than a little mad."

"Perhaps, though that would not matter under normal circumstances. Few people would believe a servant's word against that of a viscount's heir." He shrugged. "But this case won't come down to a gentleman's word. The fire clearly began in the basement hallway, climbing the wall to the dining room. The kitchen was untouched until the dining room floor collapsed into it. Thus the fire cannot have started inside the kitchen wall."

"I suppose he tried to emulate the rumors about the Ipswich Gardens."

"They weren't rumors." He joined her on the couch. "That fire really did begin in an overheated wall. What rotten luck that Formsby was nattering on about it the night Robert dined with you."

She refilled his glass, pleased that her hand remained steady. "It was actually good luck. Without Formsby's hints, Robert might have killed me outright. He took a chance, though. How could he be sure the fire would reach my suite before someone put it out?"

"A bucket of turpentine spread in the hallway. The pot boy saw him carrying it, but DuPré distracted his attention before he could mention it."

"So they arrested Robert."

Marcus nodded, but his eyes were troubled. Setting his glass on a table, he clasped her hand. "Not just for arson, or even for the attack on you. A maid died."

"Oh, no!"

"She had returned to the attic for her things – including a hoard of stolen jewelry – and was overcome by smoke."

"Just as you were." Her voice trembled.

"It's over, Maggie." He stroked her fingers as he'd done in the carriage. "But I will never forget the moment I realized you were still in your room."

"It can't have been worse than when you nearly collapsed in that parlor," she admitted in a moment of weakness, then cursed herself. She had not meant to reveal her feelings. Nothing could come of them.

"I love you, Maggie." His eyes bored into hers.

"That certainly complicates matters," she complained, though her heart was trying to batter its way out of her chest.

"It doesn't need to."

She sighed. "I can't stay here, Marcus. I have too many responsibilities at home."

"I know. But I can come with you – if you'll have me."

She stared. Was he serious? "But women always follow their husbands."

"Because men are usually tied to estates. But I have no estate. I can live anywhere."

"You don't understand what you are offering, Marcus. I live in Pittsburgh. We are growing steadily, but you would hardly consider us a city, and we are remote even from the rest of the United States. Life is very, very different from what you know."

"It might be more remote than Washington, but I doubt it is odder than Russia."

"Don't make light of this." She blinked back tears at fate's cruelty. His offer was too good to be true. "You have so many ties here."

"Family, yes. But they will never approve of how I wish to live. Nor will my friends. Leaving will keep me from embarrassing them. And I don't enjoy the *ton* any more than you do. So will you marry me?"

She closed her eyes, a lifetime of wariness holding her back. She wanted to believe him, yet he could not imagine what life would be like. England was so small and so tame when compared to America.

"I do care, Marcus," she finally admitted, "but you don't comprehend what you're offering. It took me three months to reach London. Granted, I could have done it faster if I hadn't been covering my tracks, but not by much. If you go back with me, you'll never see your grandfather again – you know his health is failing; it will be years before you could return. And you would be leaving behind everything you've known."

"Trust me, Maggie. I've served in places just as different. If I am with you, I can live anywhere." He gripped her shoulders. "Yes, I will miss my family, but if I'd stayed in government service, I would have been posted to some foreign place anyway. The only family I need is you."

His words warmed her, but there was one last question. "Father trained me to take over his business. I won't give that up."

"You don't have to. I've dreams of my own, love, and the means to pursue them."

"Are you sure? I've been confronting fortune hunters since I was sixteen. You are the first man who ever looked at me and saw Maggie Adams instead of money. No one else can tolerate me for long."

"Just what did your father leave you?" he asked, then kissed her forehead. "American men must be very strange. I cannot imagine anyone not wanting you."

"Thank you." She squeezed his hand, then gasped when he pulled her against his side. She melted into him, knowing this was where she belonged. "As to my inheritance, it started with Uncle Peter's glassworks – I always called him Uncle, though in reality, he was Father's partner and the creative genius behind the company. He made some of the most exquisite glass I've ever seen, but mostly he produced sturdy ware that settlers could afford. Pittsburgh is where they board the flatboats that take them down the river."

"I am not following."

"The easiest way to move west is to follow the Ohio River, which begins where two smaller rivers join at Pittsburgh. Many people bring little with them. Some buy goods before hiring flatboats. Others wait until

they are settled – we ship glassware to a dozen river towns.”

“So you inherited part of a glass factory.”

“Actually, I own the whole thing. Uncle Peter died in a factory fire ten years ago, leaving everything to Father.” She sighed. “By then, Father had started other businesses.”

“Which are—”

“He bought fifty thousand acres of land.”

Marcus choked.

“America is huge – much larger than England. The bulk of our land is unsuited for crops, but it holds coal and iron.”

“He owned the mine where he died?”

She nodded. “He’d just completed plans for building an iron works. It should be running by the time I return. And we supply much of the timber for the local boat builders.”

“Pittsburgh sounds like the ideal place to start my own company.” Visions of steamboats and locomotives flitted through his head.

“You are serious.”

“I love you, Maggie. I can’t live without you. Discovering that your home fits my own aspirations is merely a bonus. Do I get an answer now?”

“Yes. The thought of leaving you behind has bothered me more than I wanted to admit. I love you, Marcus.”

He pulled her closer, kissing her as he had wanted to do since she’d run him down in the lobby. Passion exploded, newer than the world to which he’d committed himself, hotter than the fire they’d escaped last night. He needed all of his control to keep from taking her immediately. By the time he lifted his head, he was shaking.

Maggie was more than willing to continue. She had not expected his lips to ignite so much heat. It spread and sizzled until even her toes tingled. When he pulled away, she moaned.

“Later, love,” he promised. “I won’t dishonor you by anticipating our vows, though if we don’t restore a little propriety, I may change my mind.”

She stroked his cheek. “Can we be married here, or would it be easier to wed at sea like my parents?”

“Here. We owe the family that much. I will get a special license tomorrow. Alice should recover soon, so

we can wed in a week or so.” He smiled. “Are you financing her hotel, by the way?”

“No. She’s been my governess and companion since Mother died. Father left her more than enough to follow her dream.”

“I wish I’d known him.” He kissed her again, then resolutely put her aside. “I can’t think when I’m holding you, but we must make plans. William is already swearing that Robert is innocent. He is powerful enough to have his heir released on the promise of sending him abroad. Neither of them will forgive you. You will take the place of your father in their minds.”

“So we must hide our destination.” She sighed.

“We can go to France, then take a French ship to America using false names.”

“Good. I really do not want to retrace my steps so late in the year.” She frowned, contemplating her uncle’s displeasure. “William will also hate anyone to whom I give money, so turning Father’s legacy over to another Adams could bring disaster.”

“I doubt he will actually harm anyone. That would be too difficult to hide.”

“Perhaps not, but he *will* put pressure on them. I would rather not have that on my conscience. The estates can go to the residual beneficiary and one other remote cousin – you must help me decide which. But I will put the rest into a trust.”

“For what?”

“To help scientists and inventors.”

His eyes glowed. “An excellent decision. We can arrange it when Knowles returns.”

“Perhaps I should establish a similar trust at home,” she began, but he distracted her with another kiss.

“We will have plenty of time to discuss it, love. I would rather concentrate on us.” He pulled her into his lap, running a hand down her thigh. “I love you, Maggie.”

“And I, you.” Her arms tightened around his neck. “May you never regret leaving England.”

“I won’t.” This kiss was even better. His good intentions slipped away unnoticed as passion again exploded between them. She was his. Forever.

Some promises were impossible to keep...

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