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## THE DUKE'S DILEMMA

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Rachel McNeely

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ROMANCE

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## A SIREN-BOOKSTRAND TITLE

IMPRINT: Romance

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## THE DUKE'S DILEMMA

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## DEDICATION

\* \* \* \*

I dedicate this book to my twins: Deborah Cross, one of my biggest fans. I love you. And in remembrance of her twin sister, Suzanne, here too briefly but forever in our hearts. Mom

\* \* \* \*

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RACHEL MCNEELY

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## Prologue

France, February 1809

The leader moved his horse closer and whispered to the other man. "Now is the time to implement our plan. The duke is distracted with his search for a wife. It's our best opportunity for success."

A horse snorted and the second man pulled on his reins and glanced furtively into the woods surrounding them. A sliver of moon cast little light through the thick branches. He pulled his collar tighter and shivered in the cold wind.

"Where do we start, here or at home in England?" the second man asked.

"Here, we strike his core." The leader handed over a packet. "The directions are enclosed, read them, and burn the papers afterwards."

"The duke's a hard man to fool."

"Normally yes, but with his concerns in parliament and now his quest for a bride, he won't be as involved in his other pursuits. He'll leave this business to Gates. Gates is our first target."

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## Chapter 1

England, April 1809

The thought of greeting guests and listening to trivial conversation was enough to make Helena want to hide away for the next few days. That and her annoying sister.

"You have to help me, Helena," Mary Ann whispered again as they hurried down the curving staircase to join their parents. "I will not marry the Duke of Monteroy."

Helena cast an aggravated glance at her twin. "You appeared interested all last season. What brought on this change now when he and his family are due to arrive any minute?"

Mary Ann slowed her walk as they went across the large foyer toward their waiting parents. "He's so boring. I admit the idea of being a duchess appealed to me, but after meeting his cousin I've reconsidered."

"This is hardly the time to change your mind," Helena snapped, then immediately regretted her behavior. Her head ached and she was not in the mood for Mary Ann's drama. She yearned for the peace and quiet of her turret room.

"You're late. Their carriage is turning into the drive." Lady Steeples frowned at her daughters.

"Sorry, Mama." Mary Ann smiled sweetly and her mother reached out and smoothed her hand over her daughter's golden curls.

"You look quite presentable," she said, glancing around to include Helena. "I'm sure you realize that this is an important visit. The duke has told his mother he is ready to wed and you both are to be considered for his duchess." She squeezed Mary Ann's hand. "Of course, we all know his choice will be Mary Ann, since he's shown such a preference in the past."

"Thank goodness," Helena whispered and got a frown from her mother.

"Here they are," Lady Steeples said. She glanced once more at her husband and daughters, nodded her head, and opened the door to greet their guests.

The whole family was in attendance. Helena had hoped for a miracle, anything to keep the duke's sisters, well at least Prudence, from joining in the visit. No miracles today.

The tiny dowager duchess greeted Lord and Lady Steeples and the twins with a warm smile. "You are looking well, Lady Mary Ann," she stated. She raised her eye glass and peered at Helena. "Have you been ill? You're a bit pale, my dear."

Lady Steeples smiled. "Only because we're unable to tempt her outside. Helena loves to hide in her turret room with her paints."

The duchess looked surprised. "How interesting. You must tell me more about this painting, later."

"Thank you for your interest," Helena said and inclined her head. She was relieved to see the duchess turn her regard back to Mary Ann.

Helena moved slightly away and found herself facing Nicholas Reginald Selwyn, the Duke of Monteroy. He waited patiently at his mother's side. His name suited him. When she'd seen him before, he always presented himself as in control, a commanding figure.

He caught her studying him. Heat flushed her face at his intent regard.

Drawing his attention was the last thing she wanted.

Hopefully Mary Ann did not notice or she'd assume Helena had decided to help her in her scheme. Finally, the duke and his mother stepped inside and his sisters and their families replaced them in the receiving line.

After greeting all her guests, Lady Steeples instructed her staff to show them to their rooms, and then excused her daughters with a warning. "Do not be late for

dinner."

"Yes, Mama." Mary Ann grabbed Helena's arm and led her down the hallway. "See? You must help me."

"How? Surely, you don't expect him to offer for me. And I'm not a martyr to throw myself into a marriage, not even for you." Helena yanked her arm loose and hurried away before her sister started pleading again.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas found himself thinking about their arrival. He'd been surprised to note the coolness in Lady Mary Ann's greeting. His family planned this week-end around the idea that he would offer for her. He wanted to get this quest for a wife over and go back to concentrating on his government responsibilities.

He needed a wife to handle the social obligations of his title and position. Lady Mary Ann certainly was the appropriate choice. He'd never paid any attention to her quiet twin, at least not until today.

When he caught her looking at him with those sapphire blue eyes and her pale cheeks flushed, he'd been surprised at the heat that ran through his body. An aberrant thought.

After changing into his country attire, he headed out for a walk to clear his head. It had been a long trip especially with Prudence complaining constantly. He needed the fresh air and solitude.

He'd only gone a short distance, when a young maid hurried toward him. "Your Grace, this message is for you. My lady said 'twas most important that you receive it right away."

She handed him a single folded sheet of stationery and scurried back to the house. He hesitated, shrugged his shoulders, and continued his walk while he read the brief missive.

Your Grace, Please join me in the turret room at the northeast corner of our house. I have something important to discuss with you. Sincerely, Lady Helena Steeples.

How very strange. He'd never said more than a few words to Mary Ann's sister. Looking around, he saw the tower with a room on top and open windows. Being of a quizzical nature, the note intrigued him. He changed direction and walked toward the meeting place.

Nicholas stood in the doorway to the turret room, observing Lady Helena. He'd never seen her except on formal occasions. Then, she wore her honey blond hair tightly wrapped in a bun and her arms covered in long white gloves. Her simple ball gowns had done little to draw attention to her or arouse his interest, unlike Mary Ann, the favorite of the Ton.

Today, bent over a canvas and unaware of his presence she presented a completely different picture. Strands of hair fell in curls along the nape of her neck and across her forehead. She had changed since they met earlier and in spite of the faded color of her apple green gown, it became her more than the white and light pastel gowns she usually wore. He smiled. Bare feet peeked out from her hemline. Her small tongue caught between her teeth as she concentrated on her task.

\* \* \* \*

The hair on her nape warned her of another presence. Helena turned her head and looked directly at him. He filled the entrance with his broad shoulders and long sturdy legs. Jewel green eyes gazed at her in return.

His face fascinated her artist's eye and she wished she could sketch his strong features. The thin scar running from the edge of his square jaw to the corner of his mouth, his chiseled cheeks, deep set eyes, and prominent nose did not make him a handsome man like his cousin, Harry. He looked more the warrior, his face much more interesting to her. But what brought him here?

"May I enter?" His words broke the spell.

"Yes, Your Grace. Please excuse the cluttered appearance of the room, but as you can see," she motioned with her hand, "it is my work area."

He walked around the room studying the numerous canvases leaned up against the stone walls and some on easels. Her maid sat by an open window, sewing.

Now that his attention was not on her, she continued her observation of him. His buff leather riding breeches fit snug over strong muscular legs and his white shirt, tan vest, and brown coat emphasized his broad shoulders. His tall well proportioned figure crowded the small area. The smell of her paint mingled with the perfume of spring flowers, and the sultry scent of her visitor.

"You painted all of these?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Helena waited for him to tell her the purpose for his visit to her quiet retreat. How had he found his way to her?

An earlier conversation with Mary Ann sprang to mind. She suspected her twin had something to do with the duke coming here filling up her private space with his bold masculinity. When her sister decided she wanted Helena to help her, she made it difficult to ignore her wishes. More irritated than usual with Mary Ann and surrounded by the duke's strong aura, a rush of heat warmed her usually cool cheeks again.

"You're an excellent painter," he said. "I want to purchase those two landscape paintings." He pointed to a pair of paintings sitting side by side against the wall.

Helena stared blankly. No one had ever offered to buy any of her paintings. But then, no one, but her own family had ever noticed them. A few hung on the walls of her parents' town home in London, but no one paid any attention to the name of the artist.

Mouth dry, she swallowed and her voice came out raspy. "I can not sell them to you, Your Grace."

"Because you are a woman? Ridiculous. I certainly can exhibit your paintings in my homes, if I wish. If it will make you more comfortable, use your initials on those paintings. That should add to their mystique.

"I must also compliment you on the painting of your sister," he pointed, "there on the easel against the wall. You have captured her exuberance perfectly."

Helena glanced at the portrait she had done of Mary Ann last summer. "Your Grace, what brings you to my studio? I suspect you did not come here to admire my work."

His piercing eyes focused back on her. There was something very clear and forthright about his scrutiny. His eyes peered right into her. Nonsense, she was becoming fanciful, quite unlike herself.

Breaking the connection, she looked over to be sure Agnes still sat nearby. It would be most improper for her and the duke to be unescorted.

He noted her glance. “I came at the request of one of your maids. She gave me a message.” He handed her the paper. “The note indicated you had something you wished to discuss with me. I assume it is in regards to your paintings. Therefore, I don't understand your surprise when I offered to buy two of them.”

Helena recognized her sister's handwriting. She wanted to shake Mary Ann for arranging this meeting. Since Mary Ann didn't want the duke, she had apparently decided to bring Helena and him together hoping he might offer for Helena instead.

Mama and Papa planned for one of their daughters to marry their friend's son. Helena was determined to thwart her sister's efforts to make it her.

"I did not ask to have you come here, Your Grace. My sister is playing a joke on us."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas watched the expressions flicker across her face. Mary Ann's sister was a surprise. When he'd seen her at previous social engagements, she'd seldom spoke. On those occasions, she gave the impression of a shy and retiring female. That description did not fit the woman standing in front of him today.

Hair in disarray softened her usual cool demeanor. Wide-set blue eyes, with gold flecks, showed a sharp intelligence unobserved in their few previous encounters.

"Why would your sister play such a prank?"

"She is afraid you will offer for her."

"Ah, she hopes I'll find her twin more engaging. How interesting."

"She believes she has a tender for your cousin, Harry." Helena spoke softly, as though that would take the sting out of her words.

"She realizes, of course, that all my family is here with me. They would take it as a personal affront if she displays such a preference."

"Yes, Your Grace." Helena took one step back from him.

"Lady Helena, please call me Nicholas. All my family does." He continued to watch her with his unwavering attention.

"I am not your family, Your Grace, nor does it appear we are to be family."

"Why?" He stepped toward her. "Have you taken an instant dislike to me also?"

"No, Your Grace, I love another."

\* \* \* \*

Prowling around the small turret room, he gave off sparks of barely leashed energy. She watched him with half-fascination and half-fear. Her heart beat quickened.

Stopping abruptly in front of her, he frowned. "I will discuss this with my mother. I don't want to offer for someone so unhappy at the idea of being my duchess. Since you are already spoken for, I think our parents must give up on the idea of an alliance between our two families." Glancing over at her maid, he looked back at Helena with a question in his eyes.

"Agnes has been with our family for many years. Our conversation will go no further."

"Thank you." He bowed formally and left. The clump of his boots echoed up the stairwell and then silence. The excess energy he'd brought with him drained away.

Encroaching night slanted shadows through the large windows and across the stone floor. She thought of Mary Ann, and knew in her heart, her sister was wrong. The duke far surpassed his cousin in looks and presence.

Moving to her maid's side, she forced a smile. "Time for us to go in, Agnes. Go ahead, I'll be right along."

"Yes, my lady." Agnes motioned toward the empty doorway. "He is a fine looking man. Don't understand you or your sister. You aren't in love, are you?" She shook her head, a puzzled expression on her lined face as she shuffled across the room.

Helena walked to the window and gazed out, but he had already strode out of sight. No, she wasn't in love and she didn't want to be. But, the duke aroused a yearning deep inside her. She must be careful and guard her heart.

\* \* \* \*

Hurrying down the narrow steps, Helena turned toward the back hallway of the west wing, hoping to avoid attention. She wanted no one stopping her before she confronted Mary Ann.

Arriving at her sister's bedroom door, she entered without knocking. Mary Ann stood amongst gowns strewn across her bed and lying on the floor like colorful discarded flowers. The large room with rosette wallpaper and white chintz curtains was a perfect foil to the blonde beauty, standing in her chemise and slippers, obviously trying to decide what to wear for the evening.

Mary Ann looked up from the two gowns she held. "Did you talk to him?"

"Yes, what did you expect that I could ignore him? You didn't want to take responsibility and tell him yourself how you felt. So, you managed to have your way regardless of my feelings."

Mary Ann came over and put her arms around Helena. "Please don't be cross. You know I couldn't do it. He frightens me with his size and fierce looks."

Helena pulled away. All the family spoiled her sister, ever since the first time she'd been sick and almost died of the flu. Now she expected her every demand granted without question.

"Mary Ann, sit down and listen to me." Helena motioned her sister over to the bed. "The duke plans to talk with his mother and tell her neither of us wishes to marry him. This will probably cause a rift between the two families." Helena gripped Mary Ann's arms. "Please consider your decision carefully. I don't believe you are determined in your regard of his cousin. The duke is not just anyone and although the rumors said he was considering both of us, you know you are the main candidate."

Mary Ann jumped up and walked away, stamping her foot. "I admit I thought it might be fun to be a duchess, but I have spent time talking to him and dancing. He is stiff in his posture." She held up her hand. "I know he is a paragon among men, but I need someone different. A man who will thrill me, not make me yawn with talk of

politics." She threw herself back on her bed. "He misses half the parties and dances because he's in parliament or some meeting or other." Mary Ann threw up her arms. "I shall die of boredom if I marry him."

"You must do what is best for you." Helena studied her twin sister, exactly alike in looks and yet so different in temperament. "Remember, I don't want to be included in any of your schemes. When I say no, I mean it."

"Oh, all right. You'd better hurry. Mama and Papa will be expecting us downstairs. Mama will not be pleased if we're late."

Without answering, Helena went into her room and snapped the door shut. In spite of their differences, she and Mary Ann seldom argued and she didn't like the unrest in the pit of her stomach. If only, she had a good reason to stay above stairs tonight.

The sapphire hue of her walls helped calm her and she slipped off her shoes to curl her toes in the plush Persian rug.

"Agnes, thank you." Helena smiled at the tub of steaming water awaiting her. Her white gown with gold trim lay on the bed.

Sinking into the bath, she groaned with pleasure, and leaned her head against the high back. When she closed her eyes, she saw an image of the duke standing in the turret room.

What must he think of me, bare footed and in one of my oldest gowns? Thankfully, her parents expected him to court Mary Ann, not her.

Even after four years, she didn't want to think of marriage with anyone. Lawson had been a neighbor. They planned for a future together, but he died. Lost to her and his family during the battle of Trafalgar.

Mary Ann had always attracted all the attention and Lawson surprised Helena when he chose her to dance with, her to love. She'd yearned for special attention. She remembered his bright blue eyes sparkling with laughter and their first kiss. Her throat tightened with the memories of his leaving.

She would be content to stay with Mama and Papa and be a doting aunt to her future nieces and nephews. Her brother, James and his wife, Sophia, would start a family soon. After all, they'd been married for six months.

"You must hurry, my lady. I hate to disturb you, but it is almost the dinner hour," Agnes warned.

Helena rushed to complete her bath and dress. Agnes put the finishing touches on styling her hair, when Mary Ann stepped into the room.

"I thought we'd go downstairs together." Mary Ann smiled at Helena as though no harsh words had passed between them.

Her sister's innocent smiles hid her intelligence and Helena dreaded whatever Mary Ann planned next to accomplish her goal. Even if Helena admitted to a slight attraction for the duke, there were reasons she mustn't marry anyone and certainly not him. Not after what happened the last time she and Lawson had been together.

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## Chapter 2

All heads turned in their direction when the butler announced the twins to the waiting guests. Helena spotted the duke standing with his mother and her parents on the right side of the room, near the door to the conservatory.

His sisters and their husbands congregated with James and Sophia on the opposite side. Candlelight flickered from the large chandelier and brought out the soft fawn color of the walls. The nearby fireplace added warmth to the large drafty drawing room.

Helena hadn't missed the frown that crossed her sister-in law, Sophia's narrow face. Helena smiled and Sophia turned her back to her.

The duke stepped in front of her and Mary Ann and bowed. "Ladies, you both look lovely. It's a pleasure to see you again, Lady Mary Ann. Hopefully we will have an opportunity to talk after dinner and further our acquaintance."

Unsmiling, Mary Ann turned her head away looking across the room at Harry. Helena was dismayed at her sister's obvious rudeness, especially when the duke stiffened.

"Your Grace," Helena said, and then hesitated before putting her hand on his arm. "Have you met my brother and his wife?" She nodded toward the pair standing nearby.

"Yes."

"Please walk with me over to greet them. Mary Ann, will you join us?"

"Shortly," Mary Ann said and walked toward Harry.

The duke's jaw tightened. Helena pulled gently on his arm urging him to go with her to greet her brother and the others in the group.

"James and Sophia, I'm glad to see you arrived safely from London." Helena reached up to kiss her brother's cheek.

"I see you two are late as usual." James smiled at the duke. "Mary Ann is notorious for always being late. Helena is only late if she is engrossed in her folly."

"By folly, you mean her paintings? They are hardly that. She is very talented," the duke responded.

"You are too kind," Helena protested.

"I am honest," the duke said. "I was privileged to see your sister's art today and she is as good or better than many of the male painters."

Helena greeted his sister, Prudence, in the hopes of changing the subject away from herself. "It is good to see you. I heard you have a new baby boy."

Prudence, short, plump, and dressed in a burgundy gown, faced away from the group, a frown on her face. Helena looked to see what had captured her attention and saw Mary Ann smiling up at Harry.

Turning to respond to Helena, Prudence did nothing to hide her dislike. "Little Peter is in the nursery, asleep."

"Perhaps I might visit with him tomorrow?" Helena asked, forcing herself to respond with warmth. Not that she was anxious to see the baby. She was much more

comfortable with children of school age. Nevertheless, she hoped to break through Prudence's icy disdain.

"Perhaps." Prudence touched her husband's arm. "We prefer to have as few people as possible around our son. It is so dangerous with all the sickness that can befall a small baby or child."

Helena nodded in agreement. "Several times as a child Mary Ann became ill and once we feared for her life."

"Being twins I'm surprised you didn't suffer from the same ailments, Lady Helena." The duke's warm voice flowed over her.

Glancing up, she found his green eyes observing her closely. "I was disgustingly healthy."

She was relieved when their butler, Frederick, came to the door, and announced dinner. Due to proper precedence into the dining room, she would not have to walk in with the duke. And hopefully, she would be at the far end of the table away from him and his family.

She planned to cheerfully strangle Mary Ann when they returned to their rooms. She could not continue to be rude to the duke and fob him off on her.

Lord Steeples and his wife escorted the dowager duchess and the duke, with the rest of the family following into the formal dining room. Tall fluted columns stood at each end. Red and gold cloth wallpaper added elegance and cheerfulness to one of Helena's favorite rooms.

Large vases filled with tulips, yellow roses, and sprigs of yellow jasmine, sat at intervals along the white lace tablecloth and filled the air with their sweet scent. The silverware and dinnerware glistened in the candlelight.

Mary Ann, seated between the duke and his mother, glared down the table at Helena. Helena lifted her wine glass as though to toast her sister, before turning to Harry seated on her right.

"My sister has mentioned you several times, Lord Selwyn. She said you have an interest in horse racing?"

Harry straightened. "Yes, Lady Helena. I do enjoy a good race. I envy my cousin, Nicholas, his fine stable."

"You and the duke are close?"

"We grew up together. Of course, he's the older, by six months," Harry added. "My parents died, while traveling abroad. I was four." He took a sip of wine and dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "Nicholas's father and mine were brothers. My uncle and his wife took me in and raised me along with my cousins."

Helena observed Mary Ann continue to ignore the duke and stare at Harry. When she smiled at Harry, the dowager duchess' face flushed with anger.

Mama and Papa, lines of worry on their faces, tried to cover up some of the more obvious slights. Mary Ann rejected their attempts to include her in conversation with the duke. Helena glanced around and caught Harry smiling at Mary Ann.

"You, sir, are not helping matters."

Harry frowned. "Why should your sister be forced into a marriage she does not want?"

"No one is forcing her," she said, and lowered her voice. "She seemed well satisfied with the possibility until meeting you." Helena frowned at him, glad to see him turn red.

"It's not my fault if she prefers someone more like her in disposition."

Helena considered the man beside her. His light blue eyes and blond hair shone golden in the candlelight. The perfect symmetry of his face made a person look at him twice. He was exceptionally handsome and yet...

"Have you always gone after what your cousin wanted?" Helena asked, as surprised by her question as Harry appeared to be.

"I find I am better at getting what I want. Nicholas gives up too easily," Harry said.

Helena glanced toward the duke. So he and his cousin did not have a good relationship. The duke's deep set eyes met hers. He raised an eyebrow. Helena wet her lips and watched his eyes darken. Abruptly, he turned away.

"I wonder why my cousin chose Mary Ann as the one to marry. You're the oldest, I understand." Harry's voice brought her attention back to him.

"You have been talking with my sister. She loves to tell everyone she is the youngest, if only by five minutes." Helena forced a smile.

"Nicholas might do much better with you," Harry said. "Perhaps I shall suggest it to him."

"You do not charm me, Harry." Helena frowned at him. "Stay out of my life."

"But, I must help my dear cousin when I see him making a mistake in his choices."

"Don't you like the duke at all?" Helena persisted.

"Why do you ask such ridiculous questions?" Harry turned his head to speak with Prudence's husband thus ending their conversation.

Helena gave a sigh of relief when her mother stood, a signal for the ladies to retire to the smaller drawing room. Glancing at her plate, she realized she had barely eaten. The tension between the families had taken her appetite.

Mary Ann flounced into the drawing room and sat on a nearby sofa. Helena rushed to her side.

"Mary Ann, your behavior is embarrassing everyone, especially Mama and Papa. You must be more polite to the duke and his family."

"You would feel the same way if our parents demanded you marry someone other than Lawson. How can you not understand, Helena? It's been four years since his death and you still won't look at anyone else."

Helena frowned, Mary Ann's voice rose and she hoped none of the others overheard their conversation.

"I have been in love once, Mary Ann. This is what, your fifth or sixth time?" Helena noted her sister had the grace to duck her head and flush. "What do you see in his cousin? He is not a kind man. And you know no one is forcing you to marry the duke."

"You're jealous. I never thought to see you so unkind to me." Mary Ann's eyes glistened with tears.

Sighing and shaking her head, Helena gave up and went to speak to the dowager duchess. "Your Grace, it is good to see you again."

"Lady Helena, please sit beside me and keep me company." The duchess seated on a gold settee moved to the side so Helena could join her. "I heard you asked about my grandson. Do you like children?"

"I've always enjoyed the little ones here at the estate and in the village. I look forward to enjoying my future nieces and nephews."

"Does your sister share your liking of children?" The duchess glanced across the room at Helena's twin.

"You would have to ask her, Your Grace."

"I think most all young girls dream of marrying and having a family. My sisters and I talked of nothing else at your age."

"Ladies, we found ourselves much too bored without you." Helena's father interrupted their conversation, as he and the other men filled the room.

"Helena, please play some music and have Mary Ann accompany you," her father said, and turned to the duke at his side. "Mary Ann has a beautiful voice, Your Grace."

Dragging her feet, Mary Ann joined Helena at the pianoforte. Helena picked out a soft ballad that they both knew well and Mary Ann's light musical voice accompanied her.

Helena tried to banish troubling thoughts to the back of her mind. The glow from the fireplace created an aura of contentment. The ladies sat in graceful Trafalgar chairs, facing her and Mary Ann.

She couldn't resist glancing toward the fireplace again. Flanking it on either side, the men stood relaxed, appearing to enjoy the entertainment. The fire cast red highlights through the duke's wavy hair. His relaxed body posture indicated a feeling of well being and yet she sensed his vigilance.

Golden chintz curtains shut out the night and a crystal chandelier spread warm sparkles of light to the four corners of the room. Anyone looking in on them would see a family and friends enjoying a pleasant evening together. All the entanglements of the day soothed by the ambiance of the moment.

After several songs and polite applause, the ladies stood and began to excuse themselves. Helena and Mary Ann started toward the door. The duke's voice stopped them.

"Lady Mary Ann, might I have a moment of your time? Your father has agreed we might walk in the garden, while he has a final smoke on his pipe."

"Go," Helena, whispered. "Talk to him about how you feel. You'll be happier."

"All right." Pasting a smile on her face, Mary Ann took the duke's arm.

Helena gave a sigh of relief as she ascended the curved staircase to her room. Agnes helped her undress, and then departed leaving Helena curled up in her chair by the window.

She would wait for Mary Ann. Outside the trees rustled in the breeze. A full moon cast its light across the lawn to the shadow of the trees.

Helena sat up startled when her door banged against the wall and her sister rushed into the room. Mary Ann appeared rumpled and her eyes full of tears.

"I can not marry him. I love Harry."

"What happened? What has upset you?" Helena asked as she tried to shake off her sleepiness. She straightened in her chair.

"He is so cold," Mary Ann said, rubbing her hands up and down her arms. "He talked of a possible alliance between us. I would have houses and clothes and could go to parties with his mother, when he is not available. I told you my life would be a disaster."

Mary Ann paced around the room.

"What did you say, Mary Ann?"

"I told him I would not marry him. I said I preferred Harry that I found him much more to my liking."

"How can you be so tactless?" Helena asked. "The duke does have feelings."

"I don't think so," Mary Ann said, standing with her hands on her hips.

"Have you been talking all this time?" Helena persisted in her questions.

"No." A smile crossed Mary Ann's face. "I met Harry on my way upstairs. We slipped outside and... he kissed me." Mary Ann twirled around the room. "Oh, Helena, now, I know without a doubt I can't let anyone force me into this marriage."

"It certainly sounds as though you got your message across. I don't think you have to worry about being forced to marry the duke."

Mary Ann would get her way again. As much as she loved her sister, Helena knew she was beginning to resent her. "You should go to bed, it's late. I hope no one saw you with Harry or you may be forced to wed him."

Mary Ann laughed. "That I would like."

"For the first week, maybe." Helena mumbled, while watching Mary Ann shut the door to her room.

Lying down on her bed, Helena tossed and turned and her stomach rumbled with hunger. An empty stomach and too many thoughts would keep her awake. She slipped into her silk robe and tiptoed downstairs.

\* \* \* \*

Moonlight shone across the kitchen floor and the lingering smell of food brought a smile to Helena's lips. All the servants were abed and the fire had burned down to a small ember.



Cold beef and thick slices of bread sat on a platter. She poured herself some milk, got the butter, and cut herself a slice of the beef. The moonlight provided plenty of light to see by.

"May I have a piece?"

Helena jumped, dropping the knife onto the metal pan. The clatter echoed in the silent house. They stood breathless for a moment, but no one seemed disturbed.

"Your Grace, what are you doing here?"

"The same as you, I suppose. I couldn't sleep and I was hungry. It is rather forward of me to come into your kitchen in the middle of the night, but I've always thought it the best time and place to relax and think."

"I too. None of my family knows of my midnight jaunts, but cook usually leaves something out in case I come down." She couldn't stop herself from smiling at him, as though they were fellow conspirators.

He seemed more approachable tonight in his open-necked white shirt and black trousers. Her heart tripped faster when his green eyes looked at her so intently. She studied him. She'd never paid attention to his handsomeness. Of course, she rarely considered any of the men she saw during the season in London. They all circled around her sister and didn't notice her.

Forcing herself to look away, she cut the duke a larger piece of the meat, handed him the bread plate, and poured out another glass of milk. Then she sat at the old wooden table and put her beef between two slices of buttered bread.

The silence of the house created an atmosphere of intimacy and Helena knew her behavior was improper. Her nightdress left few barriers to the imagination and her skin heated every time he gazed at her. She didn't want to leave. He fascinated her and brought back color and feeling into her life. Something she'd almost forgotten. What harm could come of a few stolen moments?

\* \* \* \*

The enjoyment on her face when she bit into her sandwich made him smile. How had Helena managed to always stay on the sidelines? Tonight, her golden hair fell in waves down her back, making his hands tingle with the desire to run his fingers through it.

Although he busied himself, putting the meat slices on his bread, he couldn't ignore her. Her light blue robe did nothing to hide the soft curves of her body. And yet he'd never noticed Mary Ann's figure. How odd. When Helena bent to slice his meat, her robe had parted just enough to tantalize him with a brief glance of one soft rounded breast. His body hardened at the thought, desire flickering along the pathways of his nerves.

Did she hide her real self deliberately? If so, why?

"Don't you like the food?" she asked.

He bit into his sandwich, washing it down with milk. But his hunger for food was gone, replaced by a different craving.

Forcing his mind into a safer direction, he asked, "Did your sister discuss our conversation?"

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, I'm sorry things did not work out to suit both of you." She studied him. "I suppose you will all leave tomorrow." For some unexplainable reason the thought made her sad.

"No."

"But Mary Ann said she made it very clear she wouldn't marry you."

"She did. I intend to speak with your parents tomorrow," he said.

His voice was cool and reserved. Helena realized the friendly warmth had faded, replaced by the proper duke.

"They won't force her, you know."

"Don't worry. That's not the reason I wish to speak with them." He leaned back and pushed his plate away. "I want to be certain we leave on good terms with your family. Our parents have been friends for many years and your mother has been a support for mine, since my father's death."

"We are here now." He shrugged. "It would be rather awkward to wake everyone up tomorrow morning and leave right away."

"Of course, I only thought it might be uncomfortable for you. My sister is not the most tactful person as you saw tonight. Although, do not misunderstand me, I love her very much."

"I'm sure you do and I appreciate your thoughtfulness." His lips curved into a half smile. "Don't concern yourself about me. I'm a grown man and quite able to handle disappointment or rejection. It is nothing."

His words rankled. They made him sound cold and uncaring. She resented the confused emotions he created inside her. Disappointment swept over her as she realized the man she'd been attracted to earlier only existed in her imagination.

"Mary Ann is right. You aren't the man for her. She needs someone with feelings, someone who will love and cherish her." Standing, she glared at him. "Not a man who sees her as a slight inconvenience." With those words, she pulled the skirt of her bed robe to the side and marched out.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas chuckled after she left. He hadn't seen such a grand exit since watching a play, several months ago, at Drury Lane.

Head high, she walked as though clothed in a ball gown of heavy satin and not the thin robe of silk that did little to hide her enticing figure.

What he wondered would have happened if someone had come into the kitchen and found them having a midnight snack? Would the man she loved reject her? And more importantly, would she be considered compromised and he forced to marry her?

Feeling the lingering remnants of desire in his body, he wasn't sure he'd mind. Mary Ann's twin sister became more intriguing each time they met and most especially when alone.

He stood and stretched. No, he wouldn't leave tomorrow. This week-end had become much more interesting than he'd expected.

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### Chapter 3

Helena hid behind the curtains and watched the men from the front drawing room window as they prepared to go hunting. The duke stood head and shoulders above the rest. Amid dogs barking and horses restlessly pacing, she could hear the men's voices as they joked and jostled.

She watched the duke slid his fingers along his horse's sleek coat and whisper to calm him. She imagined the warmth and strength in those hands touching her and her body ached with desire. Shocked by her thoughts, she moved from the window.

They would be gone all morning, giving Helena time to collect herself and talk some sense into Mary Ann. She didn't have to marry the duke in order to be polite in his presence.

A quiet solitary breakfast would be pleasant. Most of the ladies still slept. She headed for the small dining room.

Whatever possessed her to stay and chat with the duke last night? Proper etiquette required her to leave when he came into the kitchen. But, she didn't. Her face flushed with heat remembering him watching her prepare his food. Her hand had brushed his handing him the plate and a sharp tingle traveled up her arm. If anyone had seen them, they'd have been compromised and her choice taken away regarding marriage.

He wasn't for her, even if she wanted him. She didn't of course, but if she did, there was at least one barrier to prevent her from becoming his wife. She had lost her virginity years ago, to Lawson. One important mistake that now prevented her from being a candidate for any respectable marriage.

To her dismay, she saw Mama and the duke's mother already occupied the dining room. In her present state of mind, she didn't want company. She tried to slip away unnoticed.

"Come join us, Helena." Lady Steeples smiled, spotting her. "Her Grace and I decided to enjoy a mutual pleasure, the quiet of the early morning."

"Your mother tells me you are also an early riser." The duchess smiled at Helena. "Most young ladies prefer to sleep late and have breakfast in bed."

"I like to be up and about." Helena went to the sideboard. "The scones smell delicious." She helped herself to ham, eggs, and two of the hot scones. The maid poured her a cup of tea. Faint sunlight came in through the French windows to Helena's left.

"My grandson is an early riser, also." Her Grace's eyes sparkled. "I am so pleased to finally have a grandchild and I will be especially pleased to see Nicholas become a father."

Helena took a sip of her sweet tea and stared at the light green walls surrounding them. She could imagine Mary Ann's reaction if she heard the duke's mother speak of grandchildren. There would no doubt be an explosion.

"Is your son looking forward to being a parent?" Helena's mother asked.

"He is well aware of his need for an heir. I believe he is more conscious of this since his good friend, Baron Mews, died recently in a hunting accident." She shook her head. "So terrible, such an agreeable young man. He had no children and the estate went to a cousin." The duchess took a swallow of her tea. "I'm sure he never thought about dying and his title and everything going to another branch of the family. My sympathies go out to his mother, poor dear. She lost her son and her home.

"Nicholas learned from a young age the responsibilities of the dukedom and this guides his decisions. One of them is to have a son to inherit his title upon his death."

The duchess glanced down at her napkin and smoothed it out. "I am not certain how he feels about being a parent, but he is very fond of his nephew and the children of his friends. He will make a fine father."

Helena tried to picture the sober faced duke in his own nursery and wondered how he would react the first time the baby spit up on his fine clothes. She stifled a chuckle, almost choking on her ham.

"I see you have doubts, Lady Helena. Wait and see. He does a far better job of calming his nephew than either of the parents." A frown crossed the duchess' usually pleasant demeanor.

"Prudence and her husband leave the child too much with their servants. I know it is quite acceptable, but I always wanted to be more involved in my children's lives."

"I agree," Helena's mother added. "I shocked my husband when I refused to employ a wet nurse. I insisted on nursing all three of my children."

"What are your thoughts on this subject, Lady Helena?" The duchess asked.

Helena froze, her hand almost to her mouth. She smelled the sweetness of the scone. Reluctantly, she sat it down and turned her attention to the conversation.

"I do not plan to marry."

"Nonsense, you are a lovely young lady. You will marry, mark my words."

Helena did not protest. The duchess would scoff at her story of a lost love. She'd never understand that when Lawson died, Helena accepted that she had to avoid other relationships. No, the dowager duchess would not be easily fooled. She might ask questions Helena preferred to avoid.

"Helena is teaching art at the village school and the children adore her." Her mother spoke, breaking the silence.

"How very interesting," the duchess commented.

Helena saw the duchess glance at her speculatively and sighed inwardly when the conversation moved to other topics. She rushed to finish her meal before the duke's mother thought of any further questions.

\* \* \* \*

"Mother, might I have a word with you?"

The dowager duchess glanced up from her letter writing. Nicholas stood in the open doorway to her bedroom. Pebbles, her small white terrier, ran over barking and

jumped around in circles at his feet.

"Come in. Quiet, Pebbles." She reached down and placed Pebbles in her lap. "I am finishing a letter to your Aunt Juliet. Have you come to escort me downstairs?"

"I would be pleased to, but first I wish to have a private word with you."

"Good, I have sensed everything is not as you expected when you arrived here yesterday."

"No." He paced across the royal blue Wilton carpet to a window and stared out.

"Lady Mary Ann will not accept an offer of marriage from me," he said, and turned to face his mother.

"What?" His mother's hand went to her throat. "How dare she refuse a duke? She can do no better then you, son."

Nicholas gave a short, sharp, laugh. "She feels she can. I believe she envisions herself in love with Harry."

"The Ton is expecting an announcement, especially after this trip to meet with her family. How embarrassing this will be for all of us. Has the girl no sense of propriety?"

"I don't think she understands or wants to understand how this will appear to others." He stood, hands clasped behind his back. "Anyway, I did not indicate a preference between the twins, to anyone other then family."

"Of course, but everyone expected you would ask Mary Ann. She is such a favorite."

"Nevertheless, I have a possible solution to satisfy my desire to marry and have an heir and your desire to see our two families form an alliance." Nicholas observed his mother's expressions as he spoke. Her countenance brightened.

"You do? Because I also have a suggestion, but tell me your plan first."

"What do you think of her twin, Lady Helena?"

"I had the pleasure of spending some time with her this morning. She is a lovely girl, very polite, with a good head on her shoulders."

"Yes, that has been my impression. Originally I favored Mary Ann because of her ability to socialize and intermingle quite well with society." He started to walk around the room again. "You know how I hate all of the social amenities and necessities intertwined with my rank." He shrugged. "I hoped she could free me of those tiresome activities and I could concentrate on my work in parliament. But, it is not to be."

"So you are considering asking Lady Helena to be your duchess?" his mother asked, her face wreathed in a smile.

"I believe you are pleased, Mother?"

"Actually, I had decided to make a similar suggestion. Lady Helena has a pleasing amiability about her and she'd certainly make a more dignified duchess than her twin of a sister. However," she cautioned, "she does not appear to be as enraptured of the society life as her twin. Still," his mother hesitated, "I am convinced she could fulfill the role."

\* \* \* \*

Tapping her finger against her cheek, the Duchess smiled at her son. "Yes, she most definitely could. Lady Steeples has trained both girls in all the social amenities."

"I believe you are right, Mother, but there is a problem." A frown creased his forehead. "Did you know she is in love with someone? I believe there may already be an understanding."

"Her mother did not indicate any such thing. Who told you she was in love?"

"She did!"

"Most unusual, something is not right. We will talk with her parents."

She stood and gently touched her son's cheek. "You are a handsome rascal." She smiled, staring into his intense green eyes and admiring him dressed in his royal blue jacket, silver vest, and matching blue pants. Rays of sunlight sparkled across his chestnut brown hair. She sighed. "How you remind me of your father. If you were less involved in your work and put some effort into charming Lady Helena, you might be surprised at her answer to your proposal."

Nicholas laughed and leaned down brushing her cheek with a kiss. "Said like a proud mother. Thank you. We'll talk with her parents first and then, I'll see." He put out his arm. "Shall we join the others?"

\* \* \* \*

After finishing the light noon meal, Mary Ann motioned for Helena to come walk with her. The stilted conversation and general atmosphere of the dining room was uncomfortable. Helena was relieved to escape outside, away from Sophia, their disapproving sister-in-law, and the duke's two sisters, especially Prudence who continued to stare coldly at the twins.

Mary Ann took Helena's arm and pulled her down the path away from the house, glancing back frequently.

"I hardly think the duke or his family is going to come after us and drag you back inside, Mary Ann," Helena said dryly, pulling her arm free.

"He hasn't mentioned to any of his family that we are not going to be married. It's obvious he still plans to formally ask me." Mary Ann continued her brisk walking. "Earlier today, Prudence talked of recent weddings and all the while she frowned at me."

"Calm yourself. Let's walk toward the lake," Helena said, heading toward the large oval shaped body of water.

"This is serious, Helena. I'm not going to marry the duke," Mary Ann repeated.

"I believe the duke and I are at least aware of your decision. You should talk with Mama and Papa though. They are upset and confused by your behavior." Helena turned her face upwards toward the early spring sunshine and soft breezes.

"They will only try to change my mind. Couldn't you talk with them?"

Helena glared at her sister. "No, and I mean no. You have created this chaos on your own and you must resolve it one way or the other."

Mary Ann flushed. "All right, but I warn you, Helena, I'll run away if anyone attempts to pressure me into this marriage. I'm sure Harry will help me. Perhaps we could run away to Gretna Green." A smile returned to her face.

Helena stopped walking and jerked around to face her twin. "Don't even joke about doing anything so disastrous to your reputation. Harry may well be dependent on his cousin for money. I seriously doubt he would go so far toward ending a profitable relationship, even for you."

"I don't understand why you're talking to me in such a disagreeable manner. You certainly crossed the bounds of propriety when Lawson was leaving to go to war."

Aware of a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach Helena spoke, "We are not talking about me and my behavior." The words pushed through her tight throat. "You must know Mama and Papa would never force you to marry the duke. They only want you to be happy."

She squeezed Mary Ann's hand. "Please don't do anything you will regret." As I have, she added to herself. The day seemed less bright now; clouds forming in the west brought an overcast of shadows and a chill to the air.

"You do not believe in or understand my feelings for Harry." Mary Ann's eyes flashed with sparks of temper. "You of all people should support me."

"I support your decision, Mary Ann, but not the way you're treating our guests." A headache began to form behind Helena's eyes. "Sophia is furious at your behavior and until everyone knows there will be no wedding between the duke and you, your actions appear tactless and rude."

Mary Ann walked away without saying goodbye or looking back. Helena watched her go.

It was early, plenty of time to sneak off and go to the privacy and quiet of the turret room. If only her headache would ease, painting would be a pleasant escape from the dramatics of the past two days.

Weary, Helena climbed the steep stairway. The sun had not yet dispelled the dampness of the stone walls and she shivered in the cool air. She sat and stared sightlessly at her paintings. The paint odor usually unnoticed by her brought on a spell of queasiness.

Goosebumps covered her arms. She was the strong one, the capable one, the reliable one. The words mocked her and she wished for someone to turn to for comfort.

All her life she shared everything and everyone with Mary Ann. She didn't want to do that anymore. She had needs, desires that she'd never expected nor wanted to feel and she was utterly alone. No man had ever tempted her to want to change her life. Not until this weekend when the duke arrived and brought about feelings, she'd never contemplated.

More and more, Helena found herself losing control of situations and remembering and confronting the secret, she'd kept hidden from everyone but Mary Ann. If someone found out, it would be much more embarrassing and damaging to her family's reputation, than Mary Ann turning down the duke.

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#### Chapter 4

"Lady Mary Ann is gone!" Mary Ann's maid rushed into Helena's room with a crumpled sheet of paper in her hand.

Taking the note, Helena smoothed it out to read. Glancing up, she found both Agnes and Mary Ann's maid staring at her. "She wrote she is upset and plans to stay gone until our guests leave," Helena told them.

Helena looked out the window. The moon lit the grounds and walkways. "Does everyone know?" she asked Mary Ann's maid.

"No, Lady Helena, I came to you first." The young maid wrung her hands.

"Mary Ann could not have picked a worse time to do this on top of her earlier behavior," Helena snapped.

"I knew you would know what to do, my lady," the maid said.

"I'm ready to go downstairs. However," she walked over to her bed and picked up her gloves, "at this point, I have no idea how to resolve this problem."

Helena walked slowly down the curving stairwell, thinking. There was only one place Mary Ann would go to at night, unless she had left with Harry. First, she would ascertain whether Harry was also missing.

She hoped her sister hadn't been so foolish. If Harry were downstairs, she'd wait until after dinner to find Mary Ann.

Having a plan in mind, she joined the group gathered in the drawing room. Best to tell her family Mary Ann felt unwell and that she would go upstairs after dinner to check on her. Hopefully, she could get Mary Ann back home without disturbing her parents or causing another upset with the duke's family.

Helena spotted Sophia, Prudence, and Priscilla sitting together whispering. The duke, his brothers-in-law, her father, brother, and Harry stood in a circle on the opposite side of the room. The duchess sat by the fire with Pebbles in her lap and Helena's mother beside her. Seeing Helena, her mother invited her to join them.

"You look delightful," the duchess said. "Your yellow gown is lovely on you. Where is your sister?" she asked, looking behind Helena.

"Mary Ann isn't feeling well. I plan on checking on her again right after dinner."

Lady Steeples started to stand. "Perhaps I should go now and see to her."

"No, Mama," Helena motioned her to stay seated. "Mary Ann said to enjoy your dinner and our guests. She will be fine. After I check on her, if she is not feeling better, then you can see about her."

"That sounds like a good plan," Her Grace said, as the butler came to the door and announced dinner.

"Nicholas, help me up." She waved her hand at her son.

Helena's father rushed over to assist her. "Allow me."

The duchess winked at him. "If I were only a little younger, Lord Steeples, your lovely wife would have to worry. I would try to steal you away from her."

Helena's mother took the duke's arm. "And I would worry you'd succeed," Lady Steeples teased back.

At least the families entered the dining room in a lighter mood. When Helena did find her twin she would give her a long over due scolding.

At the dinner table, Helena caught the duke staring at her intently. It was as though he tried to read her mind. How silly, only Mary Ann could do that.

She and Mary Ann had a special bond that allowed them, at times, to know each other's thoughts and feelings. However, she never sensed anyone else's thoughts. Shaking off a feeling of unease, she reassured herself, she would know if Mary Ann was in any danger.

Frowning at the duke, she picked up her wine glass in a mock salute to him and proceeded to take a sip. Her eyes boldly returned his stare. Then abruptly she turned her head away, cut some of her roast beef into smaller pieces, and proceeded to pretend to enjoy her dinner. It would be good for Mary Ann to miss a meal.

\* \* \* \*

Everyone had assembled in the drawing room to play cards and converse. She took the opportunity to excuse herself to go upstairs. She must hurry. Her mother wouldn't wait long before going to check on her daughters. Putting on her pelisse, Helena slipped downstairs and out the back door.

Moonlight brightened the path leading to the edge of the forest. For years, she and Mary Ann had kept their favorite spot a secret. A place all their own, where they told each other their most private secrets. Even in the poor light, Helena was sure she'd find her way to the small cave at the bottom of a hill behind their house.

"Mary Ann," Helena called out as she came closer. "Mary Ann."

"Over here, Helena. Help me! I've fallen and twisted my ankle."

"Oh dear, however did you do this?" She knelt by her sister and saw the shine of tears in Mary Ann's pain-filled eyes. "We must have assistance. I shan't be able to carry you back home by myself."

"Does everyone know I'm gone?"

"No, thanks to your maid. She came to me first and I told Mama and the others you weren't feeling well. We must hurry to get you home before Mama goes upstairs to check on us."

Helena glanced around the area thick with bushes and trees. The darkness sent a chill across her skin. "How could you be so careless of your own safety? Mama and Papa would worry terribly if they found out about this escapade and now that you are injured, I doubt we can keep it from them."

"Please don't scold me. I realize I've gone a little overboard." Mary Ann sniffled.

"A little!" Helena shook her head. Carefully she checked her sister's ankle. "It's slightly swollen, hopefully it's not broken. You'll be all right. I have an idea. If I can find a stick stout enough, you can use it for a crutch and we'll get home without help."

The loud snap of a twig had them both looking into the dense growth. "Did you hear that?" Mary Ann whispered.

Fear coursed through Helena and she nodded yes. She scanned the area. The shadows looked more menacing. After waiting a moment, Helena helped Mary Ann up, supporting her on the side of her injured ankle.

"We've got to get home."

"May I be of assistance, ladies?" The duke stepped out of the trees, an amused smile on his face.

"You! Helena, how could you bring him with you?"

But, Helena noted relief on Mary Ann's face, belying her words.

"Did you follow me, Your Grace?" Helena asked.

"Yes, I suspected something was not right when I saw you going out alone. I'm glad I did. I will carry your sister back to safety." He leaned down and Mary Ann pulled back from him.

"I won't return until you agree we are not to be married. I want your word."

"Surely you do not think me so needy for a wife that I would force such a foolish young woman to marry me," he remarked with a hint of disdain. "After I deposit you safely in the arms of your parents, any relationship we might have had is ended."

Shocked by his harsh words, Mary Ann meekly held her arms upward and let him pick her up.

Helena walked beside them unable to hold back a smile. Normally, if anyone spoke in such a manner to her twin, she'd be angry. Perhaps this was a good lesson for Mary Ann and one she wouldn't easily forget.

Thoughts of the noise they'd heard just before the duke arrived still puzzled her. The sound came from the opposite direction of the duke.

The duke carried Mary Ann into the library, set her in a cushioned chair and went to get her parents. They'd all agreed Lord and Lady Steeples must know of Mary Ann's escapade.

Helena stood beside her sister waiting for the rush of attention Mary Ann would receive from their parents on her safe return. How many times had she stood or sat beside Mary Ann watching her family swarm around her sister in love and concern? It had never bothered her before...

"Mary Ann, thank goodness you are safe. The duke said you have injured your ankle. We will have the doctor check you first thing tomorrow." Her mother rushed in with a whirl of words and soft touches for her daughter.

"You naughty girl, and you, Helena," she frowned, "should never have lied to me. We would have sent out a search party immediately. Heaven forbid that your sister gets pneumonia from the night air."

Their father stood at Mary Ann's side, his hand touching her hair. Helena clenched her hands and a brief flare of irritation tightened her chest. She took a deep breath to stifle it.

Looking beyond her family, Helena noticed the duke standing in the doorway. He looked both elegant and dangerous in his black attire. They stared at each other for several moments and then, he turned abruptly and left. She sighed, feeling bereft. He is probably disgusted with us all.

\*\*\*\*

Helena rose early the next morning to go riding. She would skip breakfast and avoid having to sit with her mother and the duchess and listen to them talk about Mary Ann.

She peeked in on her twin on her way out and found her fast asleep. Helena moved quietly to the bedside and touched Mary Ann's cheek. Her skin felt cool. Thank goodness, she didn't have a fever. She'd never forgive herself if Mary Ann suffered any serious consequences from last night. Her mother had been right. If she'd told her immediately, they'd have found Mary Ann much sooner.

Skipping unladylike down the stairs, she went out the back way through the kitchen, her one thought to escape the house before the others arose.

"Good morning, Lady Helena." The short, rotund cook wiped her face leaving flour marks on her cheeks. "Up early and ready to ride, I see. Better take some of my fresh biscuits with you."

Giving the cook a quick thank you, Helena took the offering and headed toward the stables. Sparkle, her frisky brown mare, pranced around ready for a run. They took off across the open pasture.

An early morning ride was a perfect way to clear her head. She raced to the top of the largest hill on her father's estate and stopped.

This was as far as their parents allowed her or her sister to ride on their own. Her parents insisted they have an escort if they wished to ride beyond the property. Today, Helena wanted to be alone.

Crisp cool air blew across her face and the early morning sun touched her skin with its rays. The fragrance of the wildflowers carried on the breeze tickled her nose.

A hint of spring hung in the air, her favorite time of year. Small very green, new leaves shown among the branches of the trees and fluffy clouds sailed overhead.

Dismounting, she tethered her horse and walked to the edge of the clearing. She took another deep breath of the fresh morning air, while surveying the rolling pastures and the distant steeple on the village church.

For a moment, everything seemed at peace in her world. She went over to her favorite spot and sat down, leaning against the large smooth rock. Taking one of the biscuits from her knapsack, she bit into it, enjoying its soft sweet flavor.

Thoughts of the previous night ran through her head and she puzzled over her reactions. Never had she been so irritated and yes, she admitted, jealous of her sister for the special attention lavished on her by their parents. Especially after Mary Ann behaved so rudely and her parents never said a word of reproof to her twin.

Helena had accepted their worry and concern as natural, since they perceived Mary Ann as having a delicate condition. Which was understandable since her sister barely survived serious complications with pneumonia, and of course that awful bout with the flu, all before the age of eight.

Helena had always been healthy and looked the stronger of the two. Slightly taller and heavier, Helena perceived herself as large and gawky, beside her graceful sister.

She took another bite of her biscuit, hoping to quell the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. Even when they were younger, no one seemed to notice Helena. She faded into the background. Lawson was the only boy to ever show her any particular attention.

They met at one of the local assemblies and there was an instant attraction. She loved his sense of humor and the way his blue eyes looked on her with obvious appreciation.

Her parents had been surprised when he asked permission to court her. Being a second son, they wanted better for their daughter but seeing the young couple's determination to be together, they reluctantly agreed.

They added a stipulation. There would be no wedding planned until Lawson attained a higher rank in the military. He had recently enlisted and awaited his orders to report to duty. Her parents had no intention of allowing their daughter to follow the drum

Helena closed her eyes against the bright light. She'd left her hat at home and Mama would not be pleased.

She sighed remembering the black letters on the formal letter sent to Lawson's parents. During his first major encounter with the enemy, at the battle of Trafalgar, he had been shot and fell overboard. Lost at sea.

Standing, she shook out her riding skirt, as though trying to shake away the memories. She heard another rider, whirled around, and watched the duke dismount leaving his horse alongside of hers.

With his hair in disorder from the breeze, and his white shirt opened casually at the neck, he looked more like the country squire than the powerful duke. Even across the open space, his potent masculinity reached out to her.

"I always seem to be interrupting your solitude." He stepped closer and studied her face. "Have you been crying?"

She stepped back. "No, it's the bright sunlight. I didn't expect to see you abroad so early, Your Grace."

"I must admit, I saw you riding in this direction and thought it would be a chance for us to talk privately."

"What about? You and my sister have agreed not to marry. I presume you and your family will be leaving soon." She raised her head to look at him directly, "I hope you will take your cousin Harry with you. I don't believe he has your best interests at heart.

"Now, please excuse me. I need to return home and see that all is well with my family." Helena strode quickly toward her horse, but a small root caught the toe of her boot throwing her forward. His quick, warm hands and strong arms pulled her back against him.

"Are you hurt?"

She could feel the low rumble of his voice against her back. His breath stirred the hair on the back of her neck, every nerve in her body alert to him.

"I'm fine. Please release me."

His actions annoyed her, when he didn't let go. He turned her to face him.

Biting her lip, she glared at him and felt a quiver of shock seeing an answering glint of fire in his eyes.

Not yet, my dear, I have something to say."

She struggled against his hands gripping her arms, anger warring with an unexpected desire to lean into him and touch his hard mouth with hers. His tall lean body beckoned to something deep inside of her.

Frowning, he released her and stepped away. She felt desolate, but sparks still flashed between them.

"You may say you love another, but there is this, spark or flash of recognition, whatever you wish to call it, between us," he said and his eyes blazed boldly full of passion.

"You caught me at a moment, when I was more vulnerable than usual and took unfair advantage."

"Liar," the whispered word and the steel of his voice reverberated through her body.

She started toward her horse again. His hands reached out and stopped her. Then he stepped around her. He stood for a moment, his eyes roaming over her face, a softer expression covering his countenance.

"I sense you are the caregiver in your family, Lady Helena, but at what cost to you?"

Puzzled, Helena shrugged off his comment and pulled out of his grip. Taking long strides across the uneven ground, she reached her horse and prepared to mount.

The duke, right behind her, grasped her around the waist and lifted her onto the saddle, and held her reins. "Running away will not work forever. Someday, you'll have to stop and reach out for what you want. You're no coward."

Helena pulled the reins from his grasp and galloped away. She felt his eyes on her as she rode down the hill.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas watched her ride out of sight. He had planned to bring up the subject of their possible marriage. It was just as well he hadn't. His body's reaction to her nearness had surprised him. Her fragrance and the softness of her skin had sent sparks of desire spiraling down his body. He had wanted to hold her tight and kiss that desirable mouth. And yet, he was not a young man without control.

Walking briskly around the small area, he reminded himself he was marrying for convenience, if he desired his wife so much the better. Still, he'd be master in his home and of his destiny. Love would not enter into it.

He needed to speak to her parents and ask about the other man. He raked his fingers through his hair. Surely, she couldn't be in love with another and still react as she had to his touch?

She tantalized him. Her lilting voice, strands of hair blowing free in the breeze like soft downy feathers, and her full lush mouth made for kissing, aroused him. Groaning, he shook his head to clear it. He would not lose control and be distracted.

Standing feet apart, he studied the countryside and reviewed his plan. He wasn't going to leave the Steeple's home without a marital contract, if at all possible.

The results of this week-end visit were certain to be the talk of the Ton for some time. He didn't relish all the hopeful mothers who would throw their daughters into his path, when they realized he was serious about taking a wife. Lady Helena was his best hope to avoid such a nightmare.

The simple reason he wanted to marry was to have an heir. Nothing more, he reminded himself vehemently.

If he had a brother, he would never marry. Having had women around him all his life, he'd found them a disruption to his quiet busy existence.

He leaned against the rock where Helena had stood. In the distance, lambs frolicked in the fields and men worked. He loved his job in parliament and his private, very secret work for his country as head of a group of spies. The main reason for an heir insured Harry did not inherit his title.

Helena's astuteness regarding his cousin surprised him. Harry envied him and did all he could to disrupt Nicholas' life.

With determination, he mounted his horse and headed back to the manor house. He would speak with her parents this morning. He was not about to start looking for another to be his duchess. No, the better choice for him was Helena.

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## Chapter 5

Helena left her horse with one of the stable boys and went inside. She hoped to change and calm herself before running into any of their other guests.

Pouring cool water into her white porcelain bowl, she splashed her face until her cheeks cooled. Then, she proceeded to freshen up. Agnes helped her into her white muslin gown with small lilac flowers embroidered around the neckline and hem. She sat at her dressing table.

"Agnes, please style my hair in a comfortable bun."

"But my lady, you look so pretty wearing your hair in a looser style."

"Please do as I ask." Helena said. She reached for a black ribbon with a cameo dangling from the center and fastened it around her neck.

Helena observed herself in the mirror. Her cool and composed demeanor stared back at her. Thank goodness, her reflection did not show her turbulent emotions.

She admitted reluctantly, something about the duke aroused her. She didn't want to be attracted to him. Any man, especially a duke, expected his bride to be a virgin. Even though afterwards, couples seemed to look the other way at their spouse's liaisons. She must remain single for her and her family's sake.

Frowning, Helena brushed away thoughts best left forgotten. She would find Mama and Mary Ann and make sure all was well with them.

The quietness of the house gave Helena the feeling it was empty. After having looked in most of the downstairs rooms, she asked Frederick where she could find Mary Ann or her mother.

"All of the young people have gone walking, Lady Helena. Lord and Lady Steeples are meeting with the duke and his mother in your father's study." Frederick smiled at Lady Helena. "Your sister said if you wished to join them they would be at the end of the lake, by the old dovecote."

"Thanks, Frederick. I think I'll enjoy this quiet time up in the turret room. If anyone is looking for me, you can tell them where to find me."

"Quite so, my lady. If anyone asks, I'll give them your message."

\* \* \* \*

"You want to marry Helena?" Lady Steeples asked and sat down abruptly on the chair beside her.

"Yes, I have come to believe she would fit the role of my duchess much better than Lady Mary Ann." The deafening quiet caused him to add quickly, "Not that I am criticizing Lady Mary Ann, but Lady Helena is more serious and settled. I don't think the role would be as overpowering for her as for her sister."

Lord Steeples spoke up from where he sat behind his desk. "My daughter might not agree with you. It would be embarrassing for all of us if she should refuse your offer of marriage also. This has been an awkward time for both families."

"I realize Lady Helena might refuse my proposal, since she said she is in love. Has she already contracted an agreement with this person?" Nicholas caught himself holding his breath, waiting for the answer.

"In love? I don't know of whom she could be speaking. She hasn't shown the slightest interest in any young man, not since the Falscroft boy." Lord Steeples chewed on his pipe stem and glanced over, as though to question his wife. "They had an understanding they would marry, when he returned from his sea duty, but he died in the war."

"I know of no one either," Lady Steeples added. "Surely you misunderstood her."

"Their marriage would be most advantageous for both of our families," Nicholas' mother spoke up. "Both for personal reasons and for the political power it would give us. And I agree with my son." The duchess emphasized with a shake of her head. "Your daughter, Lady Helena, would make a fine duchess. I suggest Nicholas discuss a marital arrangement with her. Perhaps she might reconsider."

Lord and Lady Steeples glanced at each other. "This may be the answer for Helena," her father said. "Since Falscroft died she has become reclusive, not at all her usual self."

He stared at the duke standing behind his mother's chair. "If you can convince her to accept your suit, then we would be pleased." Lord Steeples hesitated. "I too see much advantage to the union both for my daughter and our families."

"Thank you, Lord Steeples. I will approach Lady Helena with my offer."

"You know she will not willingly give up her painting?" Lady Steeples said, her hands twisting the long strand of pearls she wore.

"I would not ask her to give up any of her interests. We shall discuss fully my expectations, before any announcement is made."

"Good," Lord Steeples smiled, stood up, and put out his hand. "Hopefully, you shall have better luck with this daughter, Your Grace."

\* \* \* \*

Helena got out her paints and stood for a minute looking across the lawn. She could see tiny figures in the distance, at the far end of the lake. She glanced at her current canvas. She was unhappy with it and not sure if she wanted to continue or start over.

Picking up her sketching papers, she flipped through the sheets hoping to find inspiration. Uneasiness enveloped her. Usually she found only peace and solace here in her retreat.

She wondered about the meeting between the duke, his mother, and her parents. Her parents were probably trying to smooth over the embarrassment of Mary Ann's refusal to marry him.

Helena went back to her papers and stared at the blank page. She picked up a quill pen and began to sketch. Her hand flew across the sheet. Deep set eyes stared at her from the white paper, a strong jaw, and firm mouth. Stunned, she dropped her pen and turned the paper over.

She heard footsteps coming up the stairwell, firm, heavy, steps. Her eyes stared toward the empty doorway and he came into sight.

"May I join you?"

"Your Grace, did you not want to go with the others on their outing?"

"No, this seemed to be a good time to have the private talk I mentioned earlier today."

"As I told you then, we have nothing to discuss." She forced calmness to her voice and reached across to place her loose papers on a nearby table. Straightening, she faced him. "I'm sorry my sister has been unpleasant, but I can't help your cause."

"I thought I made myself very clear last night. I no longer wish to marry your sister. It is obvious she would not do well as my duchess. I have decided on another. Someone I feel will much better fit the role."

"Oh...that is good." Helena felt a sickening drop in the pit of her stomach. "If you have another to take my sister's place so quickly there won't be as much gossip among the Ton."

She ran her gaze over his tanned face and along his strong body encased in a bottle green fitted jacket and brown pants tucked into polished boots.

"There is only one problem."

His smoky voice brought her eyes to his. Her lips parted and heat flowed through the lower half of her body.

"I hope my next offer of marriage will not be so summarily dismissed. It would be rather embarrassing to me and my family to have two rejections in a row."

His eyes held her attention. They were the green of a stormy sea. "I feel sure, Your Grace, that you will be successful in your next endeavor." She forced herself to look away and walk over to the window, clenching her hands on the window sill.

"Do you mind telling me who will receive your offer to be your future wife?"

"Not at all. I am asking you to marry me, Lady Helena."



Her breath caught in her throat as the shock of his words sank into her mind.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas watched Helena's back stiffen and saw her hands tighten on the window sill. She seemed to barely breathe. He felt sure she did not dislike him. He waited for her answer.

Slowly she turned around, her face pale, those captivating eyes darkened to midnight blue. Every hair in place, she had become the remote quiet sister he'd barely noticed before this visit to her home.

"Is my offer so surprising, Lady Helena?"

"Yes." She held her hands out toward him. "I do not plan to marry, Your Grace. I thought you understood. I love someone else. Your mother and my parents both know of my desire to remain unwed." Her words were soft, whispered in a breathless tone.

He moved closer, resisting the unexpected urge to gather her into his arms and comfort her.

"Why don't you want to marry, Lady Helena? If you love another, why has he not asked you to marry him?"

"He is dead." The stark cold words reflected in the dullness of her tone.

The words hit him squarely in the chest, unexpectedly causing him to flinch, even though he'd already known the answer. "I am sorry to see you so sad. I don't believe your parents are aware you still grieve for your young man. How long has it been since his death?"

"It doesn't matter. I shall not love another." Her words came out forcefully and she walked from the window over to her easel. Picking up one of her brushes, she rolled it in her hand.

"I see."

"No, you don't. You know nothing of me." She whirled around facing him with flashes of fire in her eyes. "All you want is any woman to fill a role and give you an heir. What she feels in here," she clasped her hands over her heart, "or cares about is naught to you. You," she flung up her hand and dropped her brush, "you think your title and riches will get you anything you want."

He grabbed her, his hands tight on her upper arms as he pulled her hard against him. "And what do you know or care of my feelings and needs?" he growled, then lowered his mouth and bruised her soft lips in a hard punishing kiss.

She strained against him but when he wrapped his arms around her, her mouth became softer and her body leaned into him. He enticed her to open her sweet, wet mouth and kiss him back. Lifting his hands to her head, he pulled the pins out of her hair, running his fingers through the thick silky waves, soft as velvet, and smelling of honeysuckle.

Cupping her face in his hands, he stared. Her eyes closed, cheeks flushed, and that enticing mouth slightly open made him harden with hunger. Gently he kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, and her lips. She tasted like honey and the light fragrance of honeysuckle wafted around her body.

Suddenly, he realized what he was doing. He stepped away and held his hands behind his back, his posture ramrod straight.

"Forgive me, I have obviously surprised you with my offer, and I'm afraid another rejection has not brought out the best side of my character. My behavior today has not been commendable. I will be leaving with my family on the morrow and will not bother you again."

He turned to leave and in his haste, his arm brushed against her papers. Her drawings fell to the floor. Reaching down, he picked them up. He froze, seeing his likeness staring up at him. He swung his head around, anger and confusion pulsing through his body. Flinging the sheets of paper into her outstretched hands, he stormed out the door.

\* \* \* \*

She listened to his footsteps race down the steps. Why, oh, why did the papers have to fall at his feet? She touched her swollen lips and hot cheeks.

Lawson had kissed her and touched her long ago. Mostly his were laughing warm kisses and light loving touches, at least until the end. Never anything as overwhelming as the duke's kiss or the touch of his hands on her face. His fingers threading through her hair, the possessive unspoken demand of his body, all frightened her, at first.

Yet, his kiss and touch changed and became gentler. She felt dizzy from the strong emotions he'd aroused.

She would find Mama and talk with her. No, Mama would be overjoyed and encourage her to marry him. Whatever could she do?

This can not happen. Even if she wanted to wed him, she mustn't. Her reason flashed before her. Why had she allowed Lawson to touch her? At the time, she'd hesitated, but he'd convinced her to show him her love. At seventeen, it had all seemed so romantic. Not like taking a small step that had changed her life so irrevocably. And now, she mustn't marry anyone. Of course, Mary Ann would not agree with her reasoning. And her traitorous body did not agree either.

Feeling closed in by the walls of her sanctuary, Helena headed outside toward the maze. Walking the intricate path to the center always helped to calm her thoughts and no one would find her.

"Lady Helena, may I speak with you?"

Helena stopped. "I prefer to be alone."

"I understand, my dear, but please give me a few minutes of your time. I can see you are upset. Since I also attended the meeting with your parents and my son, I think I am aware of what has caused your distress."

That did it. Helena faced the duchess. "I'm sure you are. You all knew I don't plan to marry. Neither did I want to hurt your son after the way my sister has treated him. Why did you not explain to him my desire to remain unwed?"

"How was I to know that you would not accept his offer? To be a duchess has turned many a woman's head. You and your sister being the exception."

The dowager duchess peered up at Helena. "Tell me, my dear, why are you so determined to remain single, to be a spinster? It is sad you lost your first love, but do you wish for your whole life to be empty. I can not believe your young man wanted you to remain alone."

Helena walked into the maze. Pebbles followed, barking happily at her feet.

"I'm sorry, but I can't lose Pebbles, my dear," the duchess said as she followed her pet and Helena deeper into the intricate paths leading to the center. "Oh, what a lovely spot."

In the middle of the rounded area stood a large water fountain, the water making tingling noises, as it fell from the top to the second and bottom basin. Sunlight sparkled off the drops. Several benches stood around the cleared area and Helena went to one and sat.

"Please join me. I apologize for my rudeness. I do owe you an explanation for my behavior."

The duchess sat and pulled Pebbles up into her lap, patting his head to keep him quiet.

"As I told your son, I was in love with a neighbor. We were unofficially betrothed. He went off to war and was killed. I don't want to love anyone again and can not picture myself as a wife."

"I understand your feelings of grief, my dear, especially at such a young age. How old were you?"

"Seventeen. Mama and Papa said we must wait to marry until he returned with a higher rank and then I'd be older." Helena spoke, staring down at her hands folded in her lap.

The duchess reached over covering Helena's hands with hers. "You have chosen a long lonely life for yourself, my dear. I hope you might reconsider your plans for your own sake."

Helena looked up. "Why do you want me to marry your son knowing I don't love him?"

"You are a lovely young lady and I am sure you will make him a fine wife. I believe love can grow. My son wants a convenient marriage. Each of you would have your roles to play in our society." She stopped talking and stared into the distance, while gently stroking Pebbles head. She smiled at Helena. "You respect each other and that is a start. You'd have children to love and to fill your days with joy. Yes," she nodded, "I believe you would be good for each other."

Helena looked around at the fountain and remembered another time and someone else asking her to marry him. Her heart had beat fast, joy filling her body. She pictured Lawson standing in front of her, his blue eyes twinkling.

But that was long ago and he wasn't coming home. If she was honest, part of her was relieved at not having to make a decision about marrying him. She had changed. Four years of keeping the secret regarding her virginity had set in her mind the facts of her life. She couldn't marry. She knew this. And with that, knowledge she'd accepted what her life would be. She devoted her time to painting and quiet pursuits with her family. Lawson became a convenient excuse to avoid any commitments or time spent in the company of possible suitors.

"I see I have made you sad. I'm sorry. Please consider what I've said." The duchess patted Helena's hands. She put Pebbles down and stood. "Come along, Pebbles."

Helena stayed where she was long after the dowager duchess left. Thoughts of yesterday filled her mind. The good memories and the bad, especially the one she regretted. A cool wind whipped around her and she shivered. She'd lied to the duchess. She didn't still love Lawson and she feared she might be starting to care too much for Nicholas.

"Helena, the duchess said I'd find you here." Mary Ann came into view walking with the help of a cane. She smiled at her sister, until noting Helena's expression.

"What is it?" She sat and pulled Helena into her arms. "Has someone upset you?"

No, I've been thinking, but all my thoughts go around in circles."

"Now, you sound like me," Mary Ann teased.

Helena smiled. Her twin always lifted her spirits. "Mary Ann, the duke has decided I should marry him, since you refused. He and his mother seem to think that's the solution for our families and us. And I believe Mama and Papa agree."

"How do you feel?"

"I honestly don't know. Mama has been pushing me to think about marriage. She wants me to seriously consider the suitors we meet during the season this year."

"And will you?"

"You know I won't. Anyway, there isn't much chance that we'll meet anyone different from the last three years." Helena stopped when she realized what she'd said. "Soon we'll both be considered on the shelf and opportunities to marry will be gone." She laughed at Mary Ann's expression.

"I don't think we have to worry yet," Mary Ann protested, "but I think you're right. I must get more serious about finding my perfect man."

"I don't believe in perfect anything." Helena stated. "At least with the duke I might have the opportunity to set ground rules of what I want from the marriage. But, you know why I can't marry."

"What happened occurred years ago. You must forget all of that and allow yourself to go forward. You want to consider the duke's offer." Mary Ann pulled Helena up. "And I think you'd make a wonderful duchess. Think of all the prestige it would give me," Mary Ann quipped.

"I don't know, Mary Ann, but you're right, part of me wants to think about the possibility. Now please," she caught Mary Ann's hand, "don't run and tell anyone I've made a decision. I'll talk with the duke, if he mentions it again, and we'll see."

"Fine, let's go in. Mama sent me to remind you this is the last evening our company will be here. We must be downstairs on time for dinner."

Helena and Mary Ann walked toward the house.

"You shouldn't be on you feet, Mary Ann."

"The doctor said I'm fine, a slight sprain, and my cane helps. Don't worry. Mama was wrong to scold you. My bad behavior put me in danger."

"She's right. If I'd told her, she'd have sent someone right out to bring you home. Instead, I was irritated with you and didn't want to endure the confusion created when everyone found out you had disappeared."

"I don't even understand my own behavior lately. I only know the duke is not the man for me," Mary Ann stated firmly.

Helena laughed, "Well, you got your message across." And unfortunately, Mary Ann's message led to her present predicament.

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## Chapter 6

Dinner over, Helena and Mary Ann followed the other women into the small drawing room. Prudence spoke to her sister in a loud voice. "I will be very glad to be on our way tomorrow. Our friends will be arriving in town for the season and I look forward to all the activities."

Priscilla smiled at Helena and Mary Ann, "Will your family be coming to town soon?"

"In a week or two," Lady Steeples joined in. "My husband hates to leave the estate and waits until the last possible moment."

"There is no need for Lady Mary Ann to go to town since she obviously does not desire to marry. She surely will not receive another offer more prestigious or advantageous than my brother's." Prudence held her head up, furled her brow, and pointed her sharp nose at Mary Ann.

Helena caught Mary Ann's arm tight, to prevent her from stepping up to Prudence and saying something rude or worse, striking her across her tight-lipped face.

"My sister discovered she and your brother are not compatible. Mary Ann desires to be in love with her husband and that is certainly understandable. I'm sure your brother will have no difficulty finding someone more agreeable for him."

"Humph, love? Women marry to better themselves or at least not lower their position. Love has little to do with it," Prudence snapped.

"Prudence," the Duchess exclaimed. "You will apologize immediately for your unladylike behavior. We are guests and it does not show your best character to criticize your host family."

"My unladylike behavior? Lady Mary Ann is the one who has demonstrated such by her actions. I am only stating the truth of the matter."

Helena was happy to see the gentlemen coming into the room. The duke's eyes met hers briefly, before he turned away. She had not seen him since earlier in the day. As usual, he dressed impeccably. He drew attention from both the women and the men with his commanding stature.

"Are you going to talk with him?" Mary Ann whispered.

"I don't know. It's up to him, and anyway, I won't be rushed to make such an important decision. If he wants to give me time, that's fine. Otherwise he can ask someone else."

Mary Ann shrugged. "I can't blame you. He may be handsome, but he is much too solemn and duty bound. You might meet someone else you'd rather marry. Wait and see."

Helena did not answer her sister. There was no answer. She'd been out for three seasons since she was eighteen. The duke was the first man to seriously arouse her interest.

But, she needed time to decide whether to accept his marriage proposal, and if so, how to tell him her secret. She feared seeing his reaction. Would he turn from her in disgust? He'd probably turn away for good. Unaware of his approach, the duke's deep voice startled her out of her reverie.

"Lady Helena."

"Your Grace." She nodded her head.

"Would you care to walk in the garden?"

Helena pulled her shawl closer around her. This was an opportunity to let him know her thoughts. Still, she hesitated. Walking at night in the garden seemed intimate and dangerous after their earlier encounter.

"We leave tomorrow morning. Have you possibly reconsidered your answer, after some reflection?"

Helena moved toward the side door. He opened it and followed her out.

"I believe your reluctance to speak with me alone has given me your answer. You continue with your determination to not marry."

"You assume too much. You said you wanted to talk, so give me an opportunity to tell you my thoughts."

He bowed to her and put out his arm. "Fine, let's walk along this path and enjoy the fragrance from your mother's rose garden."

Looking away from him yet very aware of his firm arm muscles under her hand, Helena took a deep breath and began to speak. "I can't make such an important decision quickly. Since Lawson's death, I have been determined to not marry."

"But," she stopped walking and turned to face him, "I do love children and as most women I'd like to have my own home. I am not sure about being a duchess or that if you knew me better you would still want me to fill that role."

"You may set your own style as my wife and keep social gatherings to a minimum. I certainly don't care about them."

She studied him, his face an unreadable mask. "You wanted to marry my sister. I expect because she is well versed in the social aspects of your obligations. You must know I will not do nearly as well. I'd try to hide from them if possible." She smiled at him.

"True, but I also see the advantage to a merger of our families."

\* \* \* \*

He listened to her words and studied the fleeting expressions on her face. She held something back.

The drawing she'd done of him had been a surprise. The details of the picture denied her protests of disinterest.

She'd said he would not want her for his duchess if he knew her well. He sensed something about being his duchess and in the public eye frightened her more than the attraction sparking between them.

There was a key here. A missing part to this puzzle. Nicholas had always been enticed with mysteries and finding answers. This was why he was good at his government job. He enjoyed working as head of a team of special spies trained to find out any threatening information against their country and stop leaks from going to the enemy.

The moonlight tangled in the golden strands of her hair and the breeze blew her soft muslin gown against her long legs, outlining her lovely body. His hands wanted to reach out and touch the creamy skin of her arms and her exposed neckline. Fluid heat ran down his body and he felt himself grow hard.

Almost involuntarily, one of his hands cupped the back of her neck. She stopped talking, her eyes startled like a doe stunned and quivering, not sure how to react.

He tipped her head up and brushed his lips over her mouth. When her lips parted, his tongue swept inside the moist sweetness. He cradled her head in one hand and brought her body close against his with the other.

When he deepened the kiss, she tangled her hands in his hair and pushed her breasts against his hard chest. He moaned and a shudder went through her. He forced himself to slowly release her and step back.

Around her, he seemed to have no more control then he did as a randy sixteen year old boy. His usual coolness and reserve disappeared whenever she came into the same room with him. He wanted her and he would have her.

\* \* \* \*

Confusion clouded her mind as she tried to ignore the ache that had built up in her body from his touch. She stared mesmerized into his green eyes. What was happening to her? He both fascinated her and frightened her. With him, she feared she might lose herself, her independence.

"This makes no sense," she caught herself saying aloud. Pulling her shawl over her shoulders and holding it tightly across her breasts, she started to walk toward the French window. "We must go inside." She heard the quiver in her voice.

She hesitated at the door and glanced back. "I will consider your proposal, Your Grace. But, in the meantime, if you should meet someone more fitting send me a letter informing me of your changed situation. I will not stand in your way."

"When might I expect to hear from you, Lady Helena?"

"I'm not sure. I will not keep you dangling long."

"Thank you." He bowed. "I shall wait for further correspondence from you."

Helena took his arm and they went inside. "You must be looking forward to seeing the last of us, Your Grace."

"You would think so." He spoke cryptically, a slight smile on his lips.

\* \* \* \*

Helena stood beside her parents and the rest of her family to tell their guests good-bye. She watched the last coach go out of sight.

"Thank goodness that is over." Mary Ann stated.

"You are a foolish young woman. Who ever heard of turning down an offer from a duke?" Sophia glared at Mary Ann. "Why the prestige alone would give your family a greater status. How could you have been so selfish and not think about the rest of us?"

"If you wanted prestige, you should have married a duke, instead of an earl's son," Mary Ann snapped back.

"Well, I never," Sophia said, placing her hand on her chest and turning up her nose.

"Girls, stop it!" Lady Steeples said. "Remember your manners."

Mary Ann flounced off down the hall and Sophia went in the opposite direction. Helena and her brother looked at each other and started laughing.

"It reminds me of the old days when we were kids," her brother said. "Guess I'd better go and try to tease my wife into a better humor. We will leave later today for London."

Lady Steeples watched until her son walked out of sight. "What a horrible visit for the duchess and her family and for your father and me. Both my daughters turned down the duke's proposal and neither has another offer." She threw her hands out. "I give up. I will be in my room. My heart pains me at my daughters' behavior."

Helena watched her mother leave, her father following behind. She strode directly to the winding stairs of her retreat. Agnes had gone to rest. Finally, she'd have peace and quiet.

His presence seemed to linger. Touching her lips, she remembered yesterday and his embrace. If Agnes had been with her she'd have told him no and that would have been the end of it. No kissing or holding her. She'd forgotten the feel of a man's arms around her.

And then last night he'd kissed her again. She'd wanted to taste his mouth and feel that hard, strong body against hers.

Lawson had held her close before he left and kissed her, touched her. She had forced the scene out of her mind so many times that gradually it had faded.

She must decide whether to let go of her past concerns about marriage and go forward, or stay as she was before the duke came barging into her room and her life.

\* \* \* \*

Helena sat on her bed and watched as Agnes directed the maids in packing her dresses for their trip to town. She was both excited and anxious about the trip.

"I've been looking for you. Look what Papa brought from the village. Sent to you, from London." Mary Ann thrust a package wrapped in brown paper into Helena's hands. "Open it. I'm so excited. Who do you suppose sent you a gift?"

Helena's name and address written in large bold letters leaped out at her. "Let's walk outside and get some fresh air." Helena carried the package and led the way to a shady spot under a tall old oak tree.

After they'd sat on a nearby stone bench, Helena pulled the wrapping off and discovered a lovely picture book of gardens. She opened the front cover, and a slip of paper fell out. Mary Ann quickly retrieved it for Helena.

Lady Helena, I saw this in the bookstore and thought of you. Perhaps it will give you some new ideas for your paintings. With best regards, Nicholas Selwyn.

Looking over Helena's shoulder, Mary Ann gasped in surprise. "The duke sent you a gift. How thoughtful of him to choose such a special present for you."

"Yes, it is nice." She hugged the book to her chest.

"I do believe you are going to accept his proposal," Mary Ann stated and stood up. "Sophia will be overjoyed."

Helena watched her sister go into the house. Did Mary Ann regret rejecting the duke? More and more Helena felt a distance growing between her and her twin. Tonight she would determine Mary Ann's true feelings regarding Helena marrying the duke.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner and a quiet evening spent with their parents, Helena and Mary Ann retired to their rooms. "Wait." Helena put out her hand and stopped her sister from going into her own bedroom. "Come in and sit with me for a while. We need to talk."

"Mama and Papa did not mention your gift. Did you not show them what the duke sent you?" Mary Ann asked, following Helena through the door.

"No, I took it up to the turret room. I didn't want any discussion about my marital status until I make my decision. That's why I wanted to speak with you."

"Me! You have to make up your own mind about this, Helena."

"I will. But you sounded regretful this afternoon. Have you changed your mind? Do you now want to marry the duke, Mary Ann?"

"Heavens no! I admit to being a little jealous of your pretty gift. I want to meet someone, fall madly in love, and receive beautiful gifts. However, your duke is not for me. And are you sure you don't want to wait for a man who will make your heart pound madly in your chest?"

For a second, Helena remembered her response to Nicholas the morning he offered for her and later that evening. He had taken her by surprise. There was nothing more to it. She refused to dwell on the gamut of emotions that had overwhelmed her each time.

"I would be satisfied with someone I can respect and who respects me," she said in response to her sister's question. "There is a lot to be said for setting down on paper all the expectations of a marriage. You know what to expect and will have no surprises along the way."

"Surprises are what make life worth living. When Lawson went off to sea all your spontaneity went with him." Mary Ann shook her head. "I wonder what Lawson would think if he saw you today."

How very true Helena thought and then worried again about her need to talk with the duke, open and honestly. Or could she forget everything about the past and take what she wanted here in the present? She knew Mary Ann's answer was yes without even asking.

"Lawson is my past," she responded to Mary Ann. "There's no reason to consider what he'd think of me today. We've all changed. I'm no longer a young girl dreaming of the perfect husband and marriage. Seeing the Ton and their behavior has taken away any foolish dreams of my childhood."

"Silly. It doesn't have to be that way. There are still love matches. Not everyone is only looking for titles and money."

"I will leave you with your belief, Mary Ann, and I have my own."

Mary Ann snickered on her way to the door. "Watch out, dear sister, love can come along unsuspectingly and sweep you off your feet. I know I feel like I am going to meet the man of my dreams soon."

"I thought Harry was the one." Helena retorted.

"Harry helped me out of a difficult situation and he is funny at times, but..." She smiled wickedly at Helena. "He is not the one."

Mary Ann walked back to Helena's side. "Do you remember when we used to have a sense of foreboding before something important or traumatic occurred?" she whispered.

"Yes, I do."

"I have sensed something about to happen and I think it will change my life."

Helena pulled her sister down by her. "I haven't had any feelings of forewarning in several years either. Nevertheless, every time the duke is near me, it's as though he can read my mind."

"Did you feel that way with Lawson?"

"No. Not even when he was in danger. Nothing at all came through."

"Perhaps he was not your true love."

Helena smiled at Mary Ann. "We're being silly. There is nothing to this premonition or forewarning, whatever we want to call it."

"You didn't think that when we were younger."

"It was a fun thing to talk about."

Mary Ann stood and went to leave. "I prefer to believe in it."

Helena thought about Mary Ann's remarks after she left. Mary Ann might be impractical and impulsive, but she filled the air around her with gaiety and love. Helena undressed and crawled into bed.

She lay for hours listening to the night sounds of rustling leaves and a lone wolf howling in the distance. Filling her mind with rationalization and sensibility, she tried to deny her second sense.

They'd soon be in London and she'd have to make a decision. Right now, the answers kept changing back and forth in her mind until she wanted to grab the many contradictory thoughts whirling madly in her head.

When she shut her eyes, Lawson's blue eyes no longer smiled at her. Instead, green, unfathomable eyes steadily regarded her. "Nicholas," she whispered, softly. She recalled the touch of his lips, demanding, caressing. His hands holding her tightly. A shiver ran down her back and she snuggled into the covers.

Her thoughts refused to go away and let her rest. The family planned to leave for London in a day's time. She got out of bed and went to the window seat where she huddled in her blanket.

If she accepted Nicholas' proposal, her life would change. Moving into his residence meant living apart from Mary Ann. Being away from all her family. And if she married him without telling him the truth, how would he treat her when he discovered her shameful secret?

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## Chapter 7

Helena smoothed her skirt and pulled on her gloves as the carriage stopped at Lady Cottrell's residence. She'd been pleased to receive an invitation from that lady to one of her afternoon parties soon after their arrival in London. The more serious members of the Ton attended and the entertainment always included at least one interesting and informative speaker.

Her footman helped her out of the carriage and she climbed the steps to the entrance of Lady Cottrell's home.

"Lady Helena, I was so glad to hear your family had arrived in town and you could join our little group today." Lady Cottrell took Helena's arm and walked with her into the drawing room. People stood in small groups and the low buzz of conversation filled the room.

Peach blossom wallpapered walls gave a feeling of warmth and welcoming, with glazed chintz curtains of a deeper peach color hanging beside long windows. Lady Cottrell led Helena across a soft Persian carpet, lavishly decorated with roses and long leafy vines. They stopped beside rows of delicate chairs set in front of a podium.

"Our speaker will give his talk and afterwards we will have refreshments," Lady Cottrell said. "I do hope you will enjoy yourself. Lady Edgewood is here. I believe you met her last year." Lady Cottrell guided Helena to the row where Lady Edgewood sat.

"Lady Helena." Marian Edgewood stood and gave her a hug. "It is good to see you. Do join me."

Smiling, their hostess backed away and went to welcome other guests to her home.

\* \* \* \*

The Duke of Monteroy watched Lady Helena's progress from the other side of the room. He had not expected to see her in such a gathering. Few women attended. Mostly men came to hear the informative and intriguing lectures.

Except for a brief thank you note, he had not heard from Lady Helena or seen her since leaving her home several weeks ago. Today wasn't the time he would have chosen to renew their acquaintance.

He studied the clusters of people standing around. His cohort, recently returned from a secret mission, planned to meet him here. In fact, Franklin was late.

His gaze went back to Lady Helena. She wore a tasteful and elegant gown, white with blue trim and matching bonnet. Her height gave her a regal appearance. Her head turned and their eyes met.

He saw a slight flush of color on her cheeks. Her lips curved briefly in a smile and she nodded. He chuckled. He had, at one time or another, given others such a look, but he'd not received one.

If he weren't so concerned about Franklin, he would go and speak to her. But today, he had to take care of government business.

\* \* \* \*

Helena flushed when she saw him watching her. Whatever was he doing here? She did not remember his ever attending before. She had been to a number of these lectures last year. But this gave her an opportunity to tell him she'd like to meet with him.

He didn't approach her. Helena sat beside Marian and tried to watch him discreetly out of the corner of her eye. She saw a tall man join him.

The lecture started and she soon found all of her attention captured in the discussion of electricity and its future uses.

"I don't know which I love better," Lady Marian said, as the lecture ended and she started to walk toward the long side table filled with food. "The lectures or the wonderful biscuits and other desserts sat out to tempt us."

"Lady Cottrell has an exceptional cook." Helena tried to carry on a conversation while casually glancing around the room. The duke and the other man had gone.

I suppose he did not have time to dally over food. Now, she would have to write him a note. Maybe he'd changed his mind. She'd be very embarrassed if she sent a note and he had forgotten about his proposal. He certainly took Mary Ann's refusal nonchalantly.

\* \* \* \*

The duke paced across his office. Franklin sat smoking a cheroot and cradling a glass of brandy in his right hand.

"You found out nothing about the traitor?" He frowned at Franklin.

"I know the enemy has been privy to at least some of our internal information. Keyes died because they knew of the meeting place. I barely escaped."

Nicholas studied his friend. "I'm glad you escaped unharmed. I have lost one close friend this year. I don't want to lose another." He took a swallow of his drink. "Although I didn't know Keyes well, he was a good man and served his country with honor. We will find the man responsible. Until then, you are to stay in town and send a message to the group to lay low."

"We did have some success. We rescued one man, Miles Barber. One of the more active pirates had imprisoned him on the high seas. They're out of commission now."

"Good. Is he in London? I'd like to meet with him and ask some questions."

No, he wanted to see his family. I have concerns regarding him. I've assigned a man to watch him. He'll report anything out of the ordinary." Franklin rolled the glass between his hands seeming to study the golden liquid.

Nicholas sat on the end of his mahogany desk, directly across from Franklin. "You think he is our traitor?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. But, I think he was more willing to be a pirate than he acknowledges and may have information he will not voluntarily disclose." Franklin shrugged, "It's a gut feeling. Nothing concrete."

"I'm glad you're having him followed. By the way, you will be attending the Hazelton ball tomorrow, I assume."

Franklin grinned. "That sounds remarkably like an order. Otherwise you know I wouldn't go within ten feet of the Ton."

"You're an earl and rightly belong at any of the fashionable activities you might wish to attend." Nicholas put his hand on Franklin's shoulder. "It will do you good to polish your manners for the time when you retire."

"What makes you think I'd retire, Nicholas? You know I care nothing about my title and estate. I wish I could give the earldom to my younger brother, but I can't. And anyway, he is entirely too happy preaching to his flock."

Nicholas noted the wary expression in Franklin's eyes. "I worry about you. Your land agent appears to do a good job of managing the estate, but it needs your personal attention."

"Is my step-mother still in residence?"

"You know she is."

"Then I won't go home."

"Why not send her to one of your smaller estates? You'd never have to see her."

Franklin put out his cheroot and put down his glass. A noticeable coolness settled over him. He went to the door. "This is not a discussion I wish to have with my superior or my friend. I'll see you tonight."

Nicholas walked around his desk and sat. Franklin never answered personal questions. They'd been friends for over ten years, yet they both had areas of their lives neither discussed.

Turning to stare into the fire, he thought about earlier this afternoon. Helena looked beautiful and he wanted her for his duchess. She'd make a good impression as his wife.

Usually calm, she didn't appear to be a slave to her emotions as so many of the women he'd known. She would suit his requirements.

He took a swallow of his brandy and settled further into his chair. Perhaps she'd be at the ball. His Mother made him promise to make an appearance, and for once, he found himself looking forward to it.

\* \* \* \*

Helena had wrestled with her decision about attending the ball tonight. Harry had visited Mary Ann and her yesterday and had made a point of telling them that the duke would be here. Helena had said she rarely went to balls. She hoped Harry did not see her, or he'd be sure to taunt her.

Her sole motivation for coming was to speak with Nicholas. After missing her chance at the afternoon gathering, she thought this might be her best opportunity.

But had he changed his mind? She'd roamed around the room and hadn't seen him. With his involvement in parliament, he might still be busy with government business.

"Lady Helena, I see your sister has wasted no time involving herself in the season's activities." Prudence's strident voice brought Helena to a halt.

"Lady Prudence, how nice to see you." Helena forced a smile and nodded to Prudence, dressed in forest green with a matching bandeau around her head. Her thin-faced husband stood next to her looking down his nose at Helena.

"Mary Ann is very popular, as you can see. She received so many invitations since coming to town that there was no way she could refuse them all. Nor should she," Helena answered.

"Well, she might have shown a little discretion and stayed away from the few activities my brother attends. After all he seldom makes an appearance and this is sure to start the gossip's tongues wagging."

Her waspish tone grated on Helena's ears.

"The Ton expected he'd offer for one of you and I'm sure they knew his choice would be Mary Ann. I'm glad he isn't going to marry her. She has no sensibility or awareness of the requirements of polite society," Prudence continued.

Helena glared at Prudence. "My sister is a favorite of the Ton. It might do well for others to imitate her happy, friendly manner. The world has enough sadness and mean-spiritedness. Now if you will excuse me I see a friend across the way and must speak with her."

Helena strolled away, forcing herself to unclench her hands and cool her anger. She refused to look back to see how Prudence had reacted to her speech. With her vision clouded with emotion, she wasn't watching where she was going. Head down, she bumped into a solid surface.

"Sir," Helena exclaimed when she looked up. "Please excuse me. I was lost in thought and not watching my way."

"It is quite all right, My Lady. You are not hurt?"

Helena smiled derisively. "Only my pride is injured for not watching where I walked. "

He laughed. "That is quite all right. "

"May I interrupt?" the duke's deep voice brought their attention to him. "Lady Helena, I see you have met my good friend, Lord Gates."

"No, we have not been properly introduced, Your Grace. I stumbled in to him."

May I present, Lady Helena Steeples, Lord Franklin Gates, Earl of Wharton."

Franklin bowed over Helena's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I believe I saw you yesterday afternoon, Lord Gates, with the duke at Lady Cottrell's afternoon gathering."

Franklin glanced at Nicholas. Nicholas spoke, bringing Helena's attention back to him. "May I have this dance? If Lord Gates will excuse us?"

Franklin nodded, "Go right ahead. I'm going to wander around the room."

"Lady Helena?" The duke offered his arm.

Helena walked onto the dance floor with him. She expected he'd be a poor dancer. Everyone said he seldom attended balls, and being a large man, she imagined he might move awkwardly in the flowing movements. As soon as the music started, she knew she'd been precipitous in her judgment.

From the moment they began to dance, his steps were sure and smooth. They dipped and whirled around the dance floor.

"You are looking especially lovely this evening, My Lady."

Helena glanced down briefly at her new, Persian blue ball gown. "Thank you, Your Grace."

"Are you going to call me Your Grace forever? I had hoped you might relent and call me Nicholas."

"I do not think that would be proper at this time, Your Grace."

The laughter rumbled up through his chest and she was surprised to hear it and see a smile cross his stern countenance. Several couples dancing in their formation glanced their way.

The dance parted them for a few moments and then she was back at his side. His eyes fixed on hers. "Tell me, have you thought anymore about our discussion?"

Her tongue darted out and she wet her lips. His hand holding hers tightened. Without looking directly at him, she answered.

"I would like to make an appointment with you, Your Grace."

The music stopped and she faced him. His expression gave away none of his thoughts.

"Good. Shall I call on you at your home? Or perhaps we might go for a carriage ride through Hyde Park tomorrow morning. There will be less of a crowd at that hour."

She put her hand on his arm as they moved through the crowd back toward her mother and sister.

"I believe a ride might give us more privacy, Your Grace. If it is an open carriage my maid will not be required to accompany us."

"Very good, I will come for you tomorrow morning around eleven. If that is not too early."

"That will be fine. Thank you for the dance," she said, as they joined her family. Nicholas bowed and she watched him go to the other side of the room. He disappeared amongst the large crowd of people filling the too small ballroom.

Mary Ann stared past her and Helena scanned the crowd. Franklin Gates smiled and nodded at Helena then continued on his way.

"What a handsome man." Mary Ann murmured. "Do you know his name? I saw you and the duke talking with him."

"Yes, he is Lord Franklin Gates," Helena answered, slightly bewildered by the expression on Mary Ann's face.

"I wish he'd ask me to dance," Mary Ann said.

Ah, Mary Ann's interest was aroused. Helena hoped this would not lead to another traumatic event for the family. Lately her sister's love interest seemed to cause problems.

\* \* \*

"Is he still in town?" Nicholas asked when Franklin joined him beside the dance floor.

"No. My contacts reported he had left his family home and rode to London, but then this afternoon he left town again," Franklin said.

"Did he talk to anyone?" Nicholas asked.

"He went to the bank and posted a letter, but my informant couldn't get close enough to see the address on the envelope. You said you didn't want us to arouse any suspicions at this time."

"Correct. We might be wrong about this. We'll bide our time. Did you send the message to the others to lay low?"

"Yes. We're all waiting for further instructions."

Nicholas stared across the room. "I'll talk to my superiors and get back to you. Meanwhile socialize, listen to the gossip."

Franklin groaned. "What I won't do for my country."

"You make socializing sound worse than risking your life out in the trenches."

"It is!" Franklin said and strode away.

Nicholas watched Helena dance by several times, her face flushed from the briskness of the dances and her eyes smiling at her dance partner. A sense of possessiveness swelled up inside of him and he caught himself glowering at her partner. It was time for him to leave.

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Colorful gowns covered Helena's bed, when Mary Ann entered her room the next morning. "What has you in such a fluster?" she asked and pointed to the pile of dresses. "I've never known you to have trouble making up your mind over what to wear."

"I'm not in a fluster," Helena said in quick denial. She held a light blue gown against her. "I have several new gowns and I hadn't tried them all on yet."

"Right," Mary Ann answered with a smile. "You still didn't say where you're going. Somehow I doubt it's to a museum or one of your boring lectures."

"What are you doing up so early?" Helena asked.

"Ah, answering my question with a question. Now I am curious. Come on dear sister," she teased. "You can't keep secrets from me."

"All right, but you said you didn't want to be involved in my decision. If you must know I'm meeting the duke this morning for a ride in Hyde Park and to discuss his proposal."

Mary Ann pushed the dresses aside and sat on the bed. "Have you decided what your answer will be?"

"I have, if he agrees to my demands."

"You have demands? Good for you." She chuckled. "I would love to be a little bird listening in. I doubt the duke has even considered you might have your own requirements. I can hardly wait until you return home."

Helena turned for Mary Ann to fasten her gown. "Let me see how this one looks on." She hesitated and then added, "Do you think it would be horrible of me if I don't tell the duke all about my relationship with Lawson?" She turned her head looking over her shoulder at her sister.

Mary Ann paused. "You are a wonderful woman and will make a gracious duchess. I think you only need to consider what you have to offer the duke. I love the idea of you having your own expectations of the marriage. You don't suppose his friend, Franklin, will be anywhere around?" Mary Ann faced her sister, with a twinkle in her eye.

"How do you know they're friends? They could be only acquaintances."

"No, I watched them last night and I know men. They are well acquainted and my guess is very good friends," Mary Ann stated.

"How astute of you."

"Helena, you're not the only one who studies people. My observations are just less noticeable."

Helena hugged Mary Ann. "You know everything about me. It seems I might not know my little sister as well as I thought."

Mary Ann wrinkled her brow. "It will seem strange for you to be married and living away from me."

"I might not accept the duke's offer. I'm not certain yet."

"You will and you should. I'm convinced you'll be good for each other. I only wish I knew what I wanted."

"The right man will come along and carry you off," Helena answered.

Mary Ann went to the window. "Oh, there is your knight in shining armor," she teased. Turning she looked at her sister. "I guess you'll be wearing the blue gown."

\* \* \* \*

Helena peeked glances at the duke as he drove the curricle through the busy streets toward Hyde Park. Today, he had dressed in brown with a cream colored vest. His chestnut brown hair blew in the breeze making him appear younger and more approachable.

"Is something wrong with my appearance, Lady Helena?"

She blushed realizing he was aware of her scrutiny.

"Forgive me for staring. You are always impeccably dressed, Your Grace."

He chuckled. "I'm trying to tease you. My skills must be a bit rusty. I used to tease my sisters unmercifully."

"Prudence must have hated that," Helena murmured.

"She did, but I persisted anyway. Priscilla loved it and paid me back many times."

"Your sisters are very different. If you don't mind my saying so, Your Grace."

"You're right. Prudence is much more like my father. I often wondered how he and my Mother had such a happy marriage when they were such opposites, but they did."

"Maybe their individuality was the key," Helena commented.

"I believe two people with common interest can do as well." The duke slowed his team of horses and glanced at her as they entered Hyde Park, "You wished to speak with me?"

"Nothing has changed your mind, Your Grace? You have not found someone more appropriate, that you would prefer to be your wife?"

"No." He pulled the curricle to the side and stepped out. "Join me for a walk. Hank," he nodded at his groom, "will walk the horses and follow behind."

Helena turned to him and he put his large warm hands around her waist and lifted her to the ground. Her body shivered at his touch. She was relieved to see few people in the park. None close enough to notice how he let his body touch hers briefly on the way to the ground. She arranged her skirts and opened her parasol, giving herself enough time to regain her composure before continuing their conversation.

"I agree that two reasonable people can come to an agreement and have a marriage that is both pleasant and fulfilling to both without the necessity of love clouding the issues," Helena stated firmly.

"How very astute of you, Lady Helena." He put out his arm and she placed her hand on it as they strolled along. "Am I to understand you are accepting my offer of marriage?"

"Not quite. I have certain conditions to be met before the contract is drawn up."

"Conditions?" His head snapped around and he stared at her with a surprised expression.

"You thought, I suppose, that only men had requirements. I am not your typical simpering female agreeing with whatever her father and the man she is to marry decide. There are certain requests you would have to agree to before I accept your proposal."

"And why should I meet your conditions?" He spoke rather coolly. "I'm sure many young ladies would marry me without any qualms or demands."

Helena nodded. "I am aware you are considered a very good catch." She chuckled. "But, this is not the usual marriage proposal and we both want a different type of marriage than the one you would have with the young ladies you mentioned."

"You are right, of course. Tell me your requirements. If I agree I'll have a contract written and present it to your father."

Helena hesitated. Is this what she wanted? A marriage set up like a business deal, and more important, was she being fair to him? She didn't have the courage to be completely honest. Was her secret so bad that she'd deny herself a chance of having a home and children? No, this made perfect sense and a business contract was not unusual, especially when the adult children of two powerful families aligned.

As for the other, she'd work hard to please him, so he would not regret his choice of her for his wife. She'd have her own home and children to love. They'd be pleasant and remote with each other and not interfere with either one's interests. A marriage to meet both their needs.

"Lady Helena and Your Grace, how nice to see you both this morning." Lady Shrewsbury's sharp tones startled Helena. She groaned inwardly when the lady stopped her carriage, her expression questioning and speculative.

"How is your dear sister, Lady Helena?"

"Very well, Lady Shrewsbury. Thank you for asking."

"And your family, Your Grace? I saw your dear mother at the ball last night and she looked quite well."

"Mother is the embodiment of good health. She and my sisters are all fine." The duke nodded politely, but his cool demeanor would have discouraged most people right away. Not Lady Shrewsbury.

"We expected some happy news when you returned to town, Your Grace, but have heard nothing." Her heavily made up face, with its long nose and pursed lips, glanced in Helena's direction. "Since you appear to have no further obligations, Your Grace," she smiled brightly at the duke, "perhaps you would join my husband, our two lovely daughters and me for dinner, tomorrow night? Of course, we would love to have you and your sister join us also, Lady Helena."

Helena fought to keep the bubble of laughter rising up inside of her from coming out. Her lips curved up slightly.

"I'm sorry we must miss such a wonderful dinner. Mary Ann and I have a previous engagement." Helena noted the visible relief in Lady Shrewsbury's eyes.

"Then we will expect you on your own, Your Grace?"

"I too have another engagement. I will be busy in parliament. Perhaps another time."

"I shall hold you to it, Your Grace." She wagged her finger at him. "You must get out more. It is not good for a young man to bury himself in his work."

They both watched her carriage drive away.

"She and others like her are what I want you to protect me from," the duke stated, frowning after the carriage.

Unable to hold the laughter in any longer, the giggles came out. She tried to stop them, but found herself bending over, laughter flowing out of her, tears filling her eyes.

The duke watched, as though he didn't recognize her at all. This sent her into another spill of laughter. Wiping her eyes, she straightened and faced him.

"Forgive me. It seemed so funny. She was so determined for you to attend her dinner and your frosty manner did not deter her at all." A last chuckle came out. "I'm not sure she even noticed. Does that usually work?"

"Yes. Now back to our discussion before we were so rudely interrupted."

"I don't believe I can get my thoughts together right now, Your Grace. I'd rather write down my conditions and send them around for you to study. We can meet another time fully understanding each other."

"I shall be busy this week, but send your requirements for my consideration. After I've reviewed them, my mother will invite you to visit her and we'll meet there. No one can say she is not a proper chaperone."

"An excellent idea, Your Grace."

Nicholas motioned to his groom and helped her into the carriage. He turned the horses around and headed back to her house. She touched his arm, lightly drawing his attention to her.

"I hope you received my thank you note. The book on landscapes is lovely and will be most helpful with my painting."

"I'm glad you like it. I did receive your note."

He was withdrawn and his posture rather rigid on the ride back. Helena was glad to tell him good-bye and rush up to the privacy of her room. He was not an easy man to know or understand.

Yet there was something about him. Sometimes she had to fight the urge not to reach out and touch him. And sometimes she wished he would reach out and hold her. It was all very confusing.

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After sitting at her desk all morning staring at a blank page Helena decided to go out to the garden and draw. Most of her sketch papers showed various drawings of the duke, all of his expressions that she had observed over the short time of their acquaintance.

She especially wanted to capture the time he'd laughed, but it kept eluding her, as did her list of conditions waiting for her to complete. Tomorrow was a week since their ride in Hyde Park.

"Lady Helena, how nice to see you again."

Helena hurriedly turned her papers over before Harry saw her work.

"I came looking for Lady Mary Ann but your butler said she was out, so I asked for you."

"How might I help you, Lord Selwyn?" Helena asked the duke's cousin. As usual, he was dressed in the height of fashion, his blond hair shining in the sunlight.

"Always so formal. I planned to invite your sister to go for a walk in Hyde Park. Perhaps you would care to accompany me?" Harry asked.

"Thank you, but no. I'm quite content to stay home. There are several chores I must complete. I was just about ready to go inside."

Harry persisted. "If you prefer I'll be glad to escort you on any errands you need to do."

Helena stood, which brought her to eye level with Harry. "I believe you came knowing my sister wasn't here. Why are you so anxious to escort me instead, Lord Selwyn?"

"So suspicious for a young lady. Does a man have to have an ulterior motive to be seen in your company, Lady Helena?"

"You do. I don't believe you do anything without thoughtful consideration."

"You make me sound quite interesting when I am a simple fellow with simple taste and requests."

Helena shook her head and laughed shortly. "Excuse me, but I'm busy. Mary Ann will return within the hour. I'll let her know you came by to invite her for a walk. Our butler will show you out."

Helena felt his eyes boring into her as she walked in front of him. Whatever his motive, he was unhappy he didn't succeed.

\* \* \* \*

One—The duchess will continue with her paintings and other interest, including attending various lectures and gatherings whose primary function is intellectual discourse.

Two—Attendance at social functions will be kept to a minimum and also the arranging for parties, balls, etc.

Three—The duchess shall not be required to reside in London unless she wishes to, the exception being when absolutely necessary to carry out her duties.

Four—The duchess will be an equal member in deciding on the raising and education of any children born of our union.

Yes, that sounded very businesslike, children born of our union. Then why did she immediately think of the day in the tower room when he kissed her? His warm mouth, his touch, the smell of him seemed to dwell forever in her mind.

Helena stretched. A few more conditions and she'd be finished. She would send her letter out today. Harry's arrival motivated her to return to her desk. Still, his behavior puzzled her.

Mary Ann bounced into the room, a happy grin on her face. "Guess who I saw today and he took time to talk with me."

"Judging from your face, you are very pleased with yourself. I give up. Who?" Helena asked.

"Franklin Gates. He doesn't say much and I had to work to get any conversation out of him." Mary Ann sighed. "He is so handsome and gives off such a feeling of mystery."

"I suppose you are in love again," Helena teased.

"I don't know what I feel. He shows very little interest in me." Mary Ann hesitated. "I sense secrets and intrigue surrounding him. But," her smile returned, "he's handsome and getting to know him is certainly a challenge."

Helena laughed. "I almost feel sorry for the poor man. Hopefully he won't come to regret the day he met us." Helena stopped Mary Ann on her way out the door. "By the way, Harry came by. He said he called to ask you to join him for a walk, but he ended up asking me. I don't understand him."

"I'm glad I was out. He is a bit tiring. He seems to enjoy poking fun at people and pointing out their weak spots. I am glad I am over him. He's very attractive, but inside he is small and mean."

Helena sat staring at the empty doorway after Mary Ann left. Her sister definitely seemed to be going through another change. It was difficult lately to keep up with her moods and some of the insightfulness she exhibited when least expected.

Finishing her letter, she sealed it and handed it to the footman to post. Now she just had to wait for an answer. Hopefully, she wasn't making a mistake. The words she'd written might well change her whole future.

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## Chapter 9

"Harold Odell is back." Franklin handed an envelope of dispatches to Nicholas.

"You told everyone to lay low," Nicholas growled. "He took a great risk."

"Seems he'd already started on his way home when I sent your message. His sister is getting married next week, and he plans to stay with his family."

The old man will be glad to get these dispatches from Wellington. We have to find the traitor soon so messages can be sent back from us." Nicholas paced his study. "Anything else happening with the man we've been monitoring?"

"Nothing. You need to let me go back. We won't find out what we need here in London. Let me make one more trip."

"It's hard to continually send a friend into danger," Nicholas said. "And I sit here closeted in comfort and security."

"I'm willing to go, Nick. Anxious, in fact."

"I'll agree on one condition."

"Something tells me I'm not going to like this," Franklin said, wryly.

"When you return you will stay in England and help me from this end. It's time for someone else to take the risk for a change. You've had several close calls. If you won't think about your own safety, then I must."

Franklin's face flushed with anger and Nicholas saw him clench his hands. He waited patiently.

"All right, unless of course I can change your mind after my return."

"Don't count on it, my friend. You're like a brother to me," Nicholas stated firmly. "Before you go..." He stopped Franklin. "Try to return within the month. If you can't find any information by then, it's not to be found."

"A month isn't long."

"No, but I need you here for another assignment."

"What?" Franklin asked suspiciously.

"I hope you'll attend my wedding."

"You're going to wed the Steeples twin?" Franklin asked in a low voice.

Nicholas nodded. "We're working on the marriage contract and if everything can be resolved in time, I plan on having the wedding within the month. No need to wait. I expect you back for the ceremony."

"I'll try," Franklin murmured and hurried out the door. Nicholas walked to the window and watched Franklin enter his carriage. As he rode out of sight, Nicholas realized he'd forgotten to tell Franklin that he was marrying Helena Steeples, not Mary Ann.

\* \* \* \*

Helena anxiously awaited word from Nicholas. A rare feeling of restlessness found her doing busy work around the house and running errands for her mother. She wanted to receive his response first, before she spoke to her mother and father about her decision.

Arriving back home after a trip to the book store, Helena saw a white envelope on the side table. She put down her books and picked up the letter. She'd go to her room and read his answer in privacy.

Reading his note of acceptance, with only minor changes to her requests, made her realize how quickly her life was about to change. The duchess, his mother, was sending her an invitation for tea in the next few days. Twinges of anxiety rippled down her spine. Jumping up she paced around her small bedroom.

She'd realized these past weeks that she did want her own home, children, and a husband she could respect. But, she did not need love. Her throat tightened. Maybe if she told herself that enough times, she'd be convinced.

She must find her parents and tell them the news. She smiled. They'd be pleased. But first, she'd talk to Mary Ann.

Helena knocked on Mary Ann's door.

"Come in." Mary Ann took one look at her sister and the paper in her hand. "You've heard from him?"

"Yes, he has agreed to my terms."

Mary Ann hugged Helena tightly. "Wonderful, I'm so happy for you." She stood back studying her. "What's wrong? You're pale and trembling."

"How do I know this is right for the two of us? Marriage is a huge commitment and we are entering into it without love or all information exchanged."

Keeping her arm tight around Helena, Mary Ann steered her over to a chair and sank down in front of her. "You must quit blaming yourself for an indiscretion that occurred when you were very young. I don't know why Helena, but I feel sure this is the perfect solution for you. The duke is a kind man and will be a good husband."

"Why are you so sure he is the man for me? He wasn't the one you wanted," Helena responded.

"No, you and I may be twins, but we are very different in our taste and what we want from life. Most men would let you take charge of the household and give of yourself to your new family, as you have with us. You're strong and the one we've always gone to for support. You need someone stronger. The duke will not hesitate to take care of what is his. He can and will support you." She reached up and touched Helena's face. "I demand what I need. You won't ask. I act out my anger and feelings whereas you withdraw. It makes me look frivolous and silly at times, but it works. I refuse to accept less than what I want. Your kindness prevents you from demanding something if it will hurt someone else."

The words rolled over Helena. She knew much of what her sister said was true. Helena still remembered her mother years ago telling her not to cry. She had to be strong and help her take care of Mary Ann. Learning to overlook her own desires, Helena became good at helping Mama with Mary Ann. Quietly, she did as she was told, earning Mama's approval.

Helena knew her parents loved her, but Mary Ann and her brother seemed to come first. Enough, she was not one to cry over the past.

When Lawson chose her and turned his attention in her direction, it had increased her confidence. Now, she had an opportunity to turn her life in another direction.

She would close the doors to her past and look forward to the future. Letting go of Mary Ann's hands, she stood.

"Will you go with me to see the duchess?" Helena asked Mary Ann.

"You aren't mad at me for what I just said?"

"No."

"And you're sure you want me to go with you? I'm not her favorite person."

"You're my favorite person and I need you."

"Then I'll be there," Mary Ann, said.

"Come on let's tell Mama and Papa," Helena said. She pulled Mary Ann along with her.

Mary Ann backed away from the study door. "You tell them alone. Seeing me might remind them of the week-end debacle." She knocked and pushed Helena toward the door.

After Helena told her parents, Lady Steeples sank onto the settee. "You're going to marry the duke!"

"Yes, Mama. We have discussed the marriage contract and he is having it drawn up. I'm to go to tea with his mother soon and I'll review it. Then he will visit Papa."

"Highly irregular! He knows that as your father I have to agree. I don't understand why he wants to show you the contract before he and I have talked." Her father frowned.

"Because I have certain conditions, Papa, and they must be included."

"Conditions?" Her mother said faintly and put her hand to her heart. "You gave the duke conditions? I will never be able to look his mother in the face again. Whatever will she think of my daughters?"

"She is agreeing to the marriage, Mama, or we would not be meeting at her home."

"I agree with your father. This is highly irregular. We will go with you to the meeting."

"No. You both have been encouraging me to wed. I am doing as you wished, but under my own terms. The duke will come to see you and Papa afterwards."

Helena walked to the window and pulled the curtain open. Gray clouds blocked out any sunlight. Raindrops dripped off the eaves of the house. She let the curtain drop in place and turned to face her parents.

"I hoped you would be happy for me."

Her mother rushed to her and took Helena in her arms. "We are very happy for you, dear. If this is what you want. It will bring our two families together and also stop the gossip and speculation going around the Ton. Tongues have wagged ever since we arrived in town without an engagement being announced."

Her father cleared his throat and spoke gruffly. "My only concern is ensuring you are given a good contract to your benefit, my dear. I'm sure all will be well. The duke is a fine man and known for his honesty. However, don't sign anything until I read the papers."

"All right, Papa. I will do as you say."

Her father smiled at her. "My little girl is getting married. We'll have a duke in our family after all. Leave it to Helena to solve our problem." He kissed her cheek.

Helena excused herself and hurried upstairs. She pulled on her coat and warm boots. She needed time alone. Bonnet and gloves on, she and Agnes stepped out of the house and into the misty rain.

\* \* \* \*

Empty halls and silence greeted her in the art museum. She heard a few voices off in the distance.

Helena wandered along, stopping to study her favorite paintings. Or at least she pretended to study the paintings. She still thought about the conversation with her parents.

They thought she'd accepted his proposal to save the family from embarrassment and to cement two families into one strong alliance. Her personal reasons were not so important to them. Looking back, she knew she'd always been there to straighten up any family difficulties. Their ready acceptance irritated her.

Sadness tightened her throat and brought a frown to her face.

"Lady Helena, how nice to see you." The duke's deep voice brought her head up.

He reached out and touched her cheek. "You're crying."

"No, I got something in my eye." She forced a smile.

She unclenched her hands and her breath shuddered through her. He was too astute and not easily fooled.

"Whatever brings you to the museum on this rainy afternoon? It's terrible weather to be out and about, unless you have to."

A slight smile crossed her face. "It is a dreary day, but visiting a museum always picks up my spirits. I might ask the same of you."

He shrugged. "I also felt an urge to get out of my house. Parliament is not in session today and I'm rather bored with my own company."

Hot scalding desire ran through her when his eyes roamed over her face and body so intently. She knew he didn't believe her. Never had she known anyone, other than Mary Ann, who could perceive her moods so well.

She sensed there was more to this visit to the museum, than he was saying. Alert and totally aware of his surroundings, yet he presented a nonchalant air about him. He seemed poised to react at any moment. Was she being fanciful again and why did he bring out these feelings and thoughts when so many others had not?

\* \* \* \*

She had expressive eyes. If Nicholas watched closely, he could glean more about her. Right now, he knew the reason he gave for being here hadn't fooled her. It

wasn't going to be easy to continue his clandestine work without her knowledge.

She had lied, too. He saw tears glistening and shadows under her eyes. Did she already regret her decision to marry him?

Too late, he would have her. He surprised himself with his determination to make her his wife. He told himself it was because she'd make an elegant duchess, and be the type of woman he needed. And he knew he lied also. She touched a place inside of him and stirred an unexpected desire.

He glanced around and looked for his contact. It would have to wait for another day.

"May I escort you home?" he asked.

"You'd best not come to my house without the contract," Helena teased. "Papa is not happy we have already settled on our own terms."

"Have you received my mother's invitation? She sent it out yesterday evening."

"No, but I expect it will be waiting for me when I return."

"Then let's go down the street to the shops and have a hot cup of tea before I drop you off at your door."

"I have my carriage, Your Grace."

"We will send it back with a message that you're with me."

He looked at the bench across from where they stood and smiled wryly. "I see we have the very respectable Agnes with us to maintain the proper decorum."

"Yes, Your Grace," Helena answered.

"Whatever will you do when we no longer need Agnes and you can stop calling me Your Grace?"

He caught a mischievous smile cross her face. "Why it is quite proper for your wife to continue to call you by that respectable title."

\* \* \* \*

Helena was glad he suggested tea. She needed more time with him, to know him better. Her cheeks flushed when he mentioned them not needing Agnes anymore. After the wedding, they would be alone and she'd be his to command.

She knew a woman lost the few rights she had once married. Her husband controlled her money and her. Although, she didn't fear him physically, emotionally, she wasn't sure. However, thus far she sensed his protectiveness toward her. And that was good. Perhaps Mary Ann was right.

He helped her into the carriage and Agnes sat across from her. Swinging in, he sat close by her side.

"You're very quiet. What are the thoughts going around in your head?"

"It's nothing important. I am anticipating the cup of hot tea you promised. This is a biting cold, wet day."

He reached out and clasped her gloved hands. "I will help keep you warm."

She started to pull away, but his firm grasp comforted her and for the first time in her life, Helena wanted to lean against someone and have a good cry. She knew instinctively he would hold her close and reassure her. She straightened her posture and heard him chuckle.

"I've noticed you do that several times. You pull yourself up straight and tilt your head. I'd like to know what thought brought on the need to strengthen your defenses."

Her head whipped around and her gaze clashed with warm green eyes. The man was far too perceptive.

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## Chapter 10

When Helena returned home yesterday, the invitation from the duke's mother had been on the table. Today, dressed in their most respectable of wool gowns, Helena and Mary Ann set off on their way to the duchess' town home. Agnes sat across from them.

"Mama is out of sorts that you did not invite her to attend with you, Helena."

"I know, but I feel nervous enough without Mama hovering over me."

A giggle slipped out and Mary Ann leaned forward. "You want the duchess to have the two of us to compare. She will remember my horrible behavior and immediately give a sigh of relief that her son has asked you to be his wife."

Helena laughed. "You did behave terribly."

Mary Ann shrugged. "It worked. I couldn't see myself tied to your duke, ever." She shuddered. "He would probably have strangled me within the first year." The carriage stopped and Mary Ann reached across to take her sister's hand. "It'll be all right. Remember, the duchess likes you."

\* \* \* \*

"My dear, Lady Helena," the duke's mother greeted her with a smile. She did not smile at Mary Ann. "Lady Mary Ann, how nice of you to accompany your sister."

Mary Ann made a polite curtsy and flashed a quick grin at her sister. The duchess led the way to a small sitting room. She motioned Helena to join her on the settee. Mary Ann took a seat across from them.

Helena held her hands tight at her waist, trying to hold back the fluttery feeling in her stomach. To take her mind off of herself she looked around the small sitting room. It was a gray day outside, but enough light came in to create a soft pinkish glow from the pink stained glass window panels. The diffused light shone across the polished floor. She brought her attention back to the duchess and Mary Ann.

"My son has sent papers over for you to read, but first we shall have tea." The duchess proceeded to pour tea into small china cups with dainty roses covering the

White background. "I am pleased to hear your news. I am sure you and my son will do well together."

"You are most kind."

"Nicholas also told me you have conditions to be agreed upon and signed before the wedding."

Mary Ann choked on her sip of tea and coughed softly. Helena returned her sister's stare. She was surprised the duke had made his mother aware of their agreement.

"That is correct. We had important issues that we needed to agree upon before the contract was drawn up for our marriage."

The duchess laughed. "Good for you. I knew you would be his match. Whoever would have thought a young lady would be brave enough to set her own conditions of marriage. I could not be more pleased."

Surprised, Helena asked, "Have you read the papers, Your Grace?"

"No, I would love too, but my son would not invade your privacy in such a manner." She patted Helena's hand. "Do not worry, my dear. I am sure your requests are very reasonable. Ah, here is Pebbles."

The dog ran to them, barking and tail wagging. The duchess set her tea cup down and scooped him onto her lap.

Looking at her future daughter-in-law, she spoke softly. "My son has asked me to help you in any way you request, to make the transition to duchess occur more smoothly and pleasantly for you."

"Thank you. I'm sure I will need your teaching and assistance in many areas. Did he tell you I will be continuing my work?"

"Your work?"

"My painting. I won't give it up."

"I would like to see some of your paintings. But now we must talk of the wedding plans. I thought a family dinner, Friday night, to announce the betrothal to our respective families and close friends. Also, an announcement to appear in the paper the next day. Do you agree, my dear?"

Helena hesitated. Events rushed upon her. "Perhaps we'd best check with the duke and my parents, after he has spoken with them."

"Oh yes, Nicholas did mention he has requested a meeting with your father. If you agree with the papers he has drawn up. Let me get them for you and your sister and I will go for a walk while you read them."

The duchess went over to her escritoire set against the far wall and pulled out a thick packet of papers handing them to Helena. Leading the way out, Pebbles and Mary Ann followed her. Helena held back a smile when she saw her sister's expression.

Helena unfolded the papers. They were written in proper legal form. She studied each paragraph carefully. After a while, she raised her head.

He had been very generous. Papa would be pleased. The duke had revised only one of her conditions. He preferred she be in London during the time parliament was in session.

She would agree. He had been most reasonable about all the other requests. She saw the place for her to sign, but remembered her promise.

Going to the desk, she found a blank sheet of paper and wrote a quick note explaining she agreed with the contract and would sign the documents after he spoke with her father. She finished right before a knock came at the door.

"Please come in," Helena spoke up.

"I left parliament early. I thought it best I come by in case you had any questions." Nicholas stepped inside the room, closing the door behind him.

He was a magnificent looking man. Her breath quickened when he came close enough to look at the paper in her hand.

"I wrote you a note." She held out the paper. "You have been most generous in the contract, Your Grace."

A brief smile crossed his face before he read what she had written. "You accept my offer of marriage?"

"I do."

"I'm glad," he said, moving even closer. Hands reached out, pulling her against him. Slowly, never breaking eye contact, he lowered his head. Warm firm lips briefly caressed her forehead, her cheeks, and across her lips. She gasped and he slid his tongue into her mouth, deepening the kiss, wrapping her more tightly in his arms.

Helena put her arms around his neck and touched his silky thick hair. His chest against her breasts and his hard thighs touching her legs, made her want to melt into him.

Pulling back, his hands came up to frame her face. "I'll send a man to your village to see the banns are read. We'll be married within a month."

Helena jerked away. "There is no need for such a hurried wedding. Mama and your mother will want to plan the occasion with much pomp and ceremony, I'm afraid."

He shook his head, "They will have to hurry. I see no need to delay."

"I prefer to wait. We don't know each other well. It would be best to take our time before the actual ceremony."

"No, you have agreed to marry me. We'll know each other well enough, once we are living together."

Puzzled, Helena frowned at him. "Are you afraid I'll change my mind?"

"Lady Helena, we have agreed on a sensible relationship. I have important demands on my time. I wish to settle this business of our marriage, so I can get on with the many issues of government."

She controlled her expression at his mention of their sensible arrangement. The very relationship she'd wanted, and in fact had demanded, from him. But each time she was in his immediate presence, her heart fluttered with something elusive. His words crushed any hope she might have harbored about having more than a convenient marriage. That is what he offered and she accepted. Never the less, disappointment filled her. She took a deep breath and answered.

"You're right. This is why we have our agreement, so neither can interfere in the other's work. Forgive me for being so thoughtless."

Nicholas said nothing. He studied her for a few seconds before bowing and leaving the room. Helena, knees weak, sat on the nearest chair.

"Was everything to your liking?" The duke's mother asked as she came in from the outside with Mary Ann and Pebbles following in her wake.

Helena forced a smile. "I agreed to the contract. I wrote the duke a note, but he surprised me and arrived just as I finished."

"I hoped he could get away. Has he gone already?"

"Yes, I think he had to get back to his work."

"I am sure your father and Nicholas will agree to the terms on the contract and all will be well," the Duchess said.

"We must go. Thank you for inviting us to your home." Helena said.

"I will look forward to seeing you and all your family this Friday." The duchess walked them to the door of her sitting room and her butler led them out. Agnes joined them at the front door.

Both girls leaned back in the carriage with a sigh of relief.

"Now that wasn't so bad. I told you she liked you, Helena."

"Did you enjoy your walk?" Helena asked.

"I received a very gentle lecture about the proper behavior of young ladies and she ended by thanking me, since she feels you and her son are much better suited."

"I am so sorry you had to deal with her displeasure."

Mary Ann chuckled. "She was absolutely right. I am spoiled and willful and should learn from my older sister."

"Oh dear, did she say that?" Helena couldn't keep from laughing.

"She did, but I like her. She's honest. Tells you exactly what she thinks. I told her I could learn a lot from her."

"What did she say?"

The carriage pulled up in front of the Steeples town home and Mary Ann, Helena, and Agnes stepped down and went into the house.

"Actually," Mary Ann continued, on their way down the hall to find their mother. "She went into gales of laughter. I think I should feel insulted, but I laughed with her."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas arrived promptly the next day for the meeting with her father. Helena found herself pacing the floor of her bedroom waiting for her summons.

"Helena." Her mother stood in the doorway. "Your father and the duke have finished talking and have signed the contracts. The duke asked for you to come down and sign the papers and all will be complete."

She straightened her gown and walked over to the door. "Did Papa seem pleased?"

"Very. The marriage contract is even more than your Papa would have asked. I still can not believe you made demands on the duke, but he seems satisfied."

"I have never understood why a woman should not have her own requests considered. I'd not agree to this marriage otherwise." Or would I? She pondered, thinking of his most recent kiss.

Her mother only shook her head and led the way downstairs. On entering the study, Helena's eyes went first to her father. His broad smile told her that everything was all right.

Nicholas stood on the other side of the desk. His eyes met hers briefly. He continued to stand as she and her mother sat.

"Well, daughter, this is a time for celebration. The duke has been most generous in his settlement and the contract but awaits your signature." Her father pushed the papers across the desk to her.

"Thank you, Papa." Helena ran her eyes over the sheets again.

Nicholas spoke dryly. "I have not changed anything since you read the terms yesterday."

Helena glanced up and felt her cheeks flush. "I am sure you have not, Your Grace." She reached for the quill pen and signed her name. For a second, she just sat staring at the three signatures. Here was her future, all signed and sealed. Hopefully, she made the right choice.

"The duke has brought an invitation from his mother for dinner at her house Friday night. I understand you have agreed to have the announcement of your engagement made at the dinner?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Are you also aware the duke wishes the wedding to occur in about four weeks' time?"

Helena glanced at Nicholas.

"It will give us time to have the banns read, celebrate the wedding and then we will come back to London until the end of parliament," Nicholas stated.

"I hoped we might wait until the summer break," Helena said as though they had never discussed the wedding date.

"I prefer we wed soon. The sooner you begin your duties as my duchess the better." His voice was gentle, but firm. "I don't want you to worry or panic with too much time between now and our marriage."

"I am not such a fragile female, Your Grace. I do not panic."



He bowed. "Forgive me, my dear. You are most certainly right, normally, but preparing to marry a duke can be very demanding and daunting. My mother suggested we not prolong the time before the wedding. Since she has gone through the ordeal herself, I felt it wise to follow her advice."

"Perhaps I shall enjoy the attention and ordeal as you call it," Helena said.

"I'm sorry. I must insist we go forward as I have planned. We will meet in a few weeks, with our families, to decide on the specific day."

Helena's mother spoke up with firmness and determination, directed at Helena. "I, for one, think the duke has been very reasonable in agreeing to your requests. If he wishes to marry within a month, we shall have to work quickly, but I'm sure his mother and I can arrange a fine wedding in that time."

Helena watched her mother smile sweetly at the duke as she added, "Don't worry, Your Grace, my daughter is like all young ladies. The actual formalizing of the marriage contract is very final and a bit frightening. She will be fine on her wedding day."

Helena observed him, the flare of irritation, and then something else, gone so quickly she was sure no one else noticed. She found herself attuned to this man and his moods. Her gaze moved down his face to his lips, well formed and warm when ever they touched hers. Looking up, she caught a flash of fire in his eyes and felt the flush return to her cheeks.

\* \* \* \*

He studied this woman he had committed himself to marry. Her face shown with more animation than usual. Something inside him wanted to push her a little harder, but not now. It could wait. He suspected there was much more underneath her outward cool refined appearance. Emotions no one else had seen released. A fierce desire to bring those emotions out and find the real woman permeated his body with longing.

Mentally shaking himself, he frowned. This was to be a rational polite marriage, beneficial to the two parties involved. From where did this hunger for her come? He'd always managed to avoid emotional entanglements until now. He didn't want anything or anyone diverting him from his work.

Nicholas nodded to Lady Steeples. "Thank you. I know I can count on you and my mother." Formally bowing to her and Helena, he excused himself. "Until Friday night."

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## Chapter 11

Nicholas paced his office, the short missive from Franklin in his hand. No luck so far in finding the traitor. His men, following the man Miles, had no success either. The man must be innocent or aware they watched him.

He needed to leave for his mother's house. It would be the height of impropriety to arrive late to his betrothal party.

Leaning across his desk to reach for the other note he received earlier, he heard the whistle of the bullet, the sound of the shot splintering in the wall next to him. Heart pounding, he fell to the floor and crawled behind his desk. As he reached into a drawer for one of his pistols, he heard footsteps running down the hall and a voice yelled out to him.

"Don't open the door. Stay back," Nicholas, answered. His fingers felt along the left sleeve of his jacket. The material felt frayed. Moving his arm, he noted soreness in the muscle, but he didn't see any evidence of bleeding. He lay silently, watching the bottom of the doors leading out to the garden.

Slowly the door opened. He knew the shooter would see his feet and come closer to make sure he'd killed him. He didn't doubt the man had another loaded pistol.

The intruder stepped around the desk. Nicholas rolled and pulled the trigger. The assailant fell where Nicholas had been lying. Jumping up, he kicked the gun far from the man's hand and nudged him over with his shoe. The man lay staring sightless at the ceiling. Damn, he had hoped to only wound him.

The butler and footman charged in frantically looking for the duke. Nicholas brushed himself off.

His footmen came hurrying over. "Your Grace, are you injured?"

"I'm fine. Please notify the authorities. Also I'll need to change my clothes before leaving for my dinner party." Nicholas wrote a quick note to explain his late arrival. He handed the letter to his butler. "See this is sent straight away to my mother."

\* \* \* \*

The family waited in the foyer for the butler to announce them. Helena glanced down at her new gown. The thin gauzy layers of the outer gown were different shades of blue and green. Underneath was a satin gown of teal blue. The gown was tastefully low cut and hugged her upper curves, then flowed softly around her when she walked.

Mary Ann had arranged several tall matching plumes in her hair and fastened a ribbon with a small cameo around her neck. The silver satin wrap completed her ensemble. She was nervous but knowing she looked her best increased her confidence.

"Lord and Lady Steeples, Lady Helena, and Lady Mary Ann, I am so happy to welcome you." The duchess rushed forward to greet them. "Join me in a walk around the room. I will introduce you to our family and friends that you might not have previously met."

Glancing at the room's occupants, Helena didn't see Nicholas. He must be here. They were barely on time. She tensed, noting the curious stares as the dowager duchess led them around.

Helena was sure she'd never remember all their names. The duchess held securely to her arm and went from one group to the next. Maybe she's afraid if she lets go I'll run out of the room. She's right. Given an opportunity she would love to run and hide from all the inquisitive people.

"And of course you remember Prudence and Priscilla." The duchess stopped in front of the fireplace where her daughters had gathered with their husbands.

"I do not understand my brother," Prudence spoke sharply, not bothering to hide her disdain or the volume of her voice. "I should think after his experience with your sister," she nodded at Mary Ann, "he would have run as far away as possible from your family."

The rudeness of her words stopped any conversation nearby. A ripple of gossip traveled through the crowd. Mary Ann started to step forward, but Helena stopped her with a wave of her hand.

"I'm sorry you're upset, Prudence. I hope you and your sister will be my friends eventually, but if not, so be it. I only have to please one person, your brother and—"

And she pleases me very much." Helena's head snapped around and she stared up at him. Relief swept over her.

The duke spoke with a stinging retort directed specifically at Prudence. "Shame on you for showing such unkindness to my future wife. Be aware any further behavior such as this will not only be frowned upon, but you may find yourself unwelcome in my home."

A bemused glance crossed his face and he gently touched Helena's cheek. "You look beautiful, my dear. What a regal duchess you will make."

He glanced around at their guests. "Hello, everyone, please forgive me for my tardiness. I had an emergency to deal with, but all is well now. Shall we go into dinner and celebrate my betrothal to the lovely Lady Helena Steeples?"

"The plan was for your mother and my father to make the formal announcement after dinner," she whispered.

His eyes glinted with humor. "I'm sure they will forgive me. It was the right time to declare you as my own. No one will hurt you with my protection," he concluded.

"I am not such a silly female to let such talk disturb me, Your Grace."

"I am sure you're not. But, I will take no chance of anyone, even my sister, believing they can treat you with anything less than the utmost respect. Now smile or our guests will think we are having our first disagreement."

"Do you always get your way?"

"Yes."

"That will have to change," Helena retorted and sat in the chair pulled out for her.

She heard him chuckle and felt his arm brush hers. Familiar sparks coursed through her body at his touch. She moved her arm further away and tried to concentrate on the delicious food.

After numerous toasts and plates of food, the ladies went to the drawing room. Helena hoped the men would join them soon and the evening could come to a close shortly afterwards.

One of the duke's aunts went over to the pianoforte and played several tunes while they had tea. Lady Marian Edgewood broke away from the group and came across to greet Helena.

"I am so happy for you, My Lady. My husband has only the highest admiration for the duke and his work in parliament. I do hope you will be able to continue to come to Lady Cottrell's afternoon gatherings."

"Lady Edgewood, I'm glad to see you here tonight. I do plan to continue all my usual pursuits. The duke and I have agreed."

"Wonderful, sometimes I think Harold would like to stop me. So far he has not, and now that the duke is agreeable to you attending, my husband will hopefully be less concerned."

Helena smiled and moved over so her friend could sit beside her. "I haven't met your husband. You must introduce me."

"Here they are now," Lady Edgewood exclaimed in surprise.

Helena saw Nicholas searching for her. He spotted her and smiled, then headed in her direction. Another shorter blond man waved at Lady Edgewood and also came toward them.

"Lady Helena, may I introduce my husband, Lord Edgewood?" Marian Edgewood said.

"I am pleased to meet you. Your wife and I have become good friends since meeting at Lady Cottrell's gatherings. I always look forward to sitting with her during the lectures."

"I am not sure I approve of ladies attending those particular meetings. The discussions seem more appropriate for gentlemen. What do you think, Your Grace?"

\* \* \*

Nicholas saw the question coming. He didn't miss the warning look on Helena's face and he quirked an eyebrow at her.

"I have attended the meetings and see a small number of women there. They all seem to enjoy the talks and make interesting and thoughtful comments. Lady Helena will continue to pursue her interest after our marriage."

"Oh, well, I suppose if your duchess plans on going, she will lend the mark of respectability to such occasions. In that case, I feel more comfortable about my wife being seen at the lectures."

"Lady Helena, would you care to join me for a walk outside? If you and your wife will excuse us, Lord Edgewood?"

"Certainly." Lord Edgewood took his wife's arm and walked across the room with her.

A questioning look flashed across Helena's face. "Will the guests not think us rude to leave them, Your Grace?"

His hand firm at her waist he walked her toward the French windows leading out to a stone terrace. "Not at all, my dear. They understand I might wish to have a few private moments with you. I have several important issues to discuss." He led her out the door, across the terrace, and onto a stone path lit with many candles.

They continued farther along the walk until it curved and put them out of sight of any guests. He tipped her face toward him. His lips brushed across hers.

"I have something for you. I'd planned to get here early and give it to you before you were introduced, but I was unavoidably detained."

A large square cut Ruby ring slid onto her finger. Then he pulled out a white jewelry case from his pocket and lifted out a Ruby necklace and ear rings. He handed her the ear rings to fasten while he slipped the necklace around her neck.

"These are the Selwyn jewels given to every bride on her betrothal. They might have been made for you." His voice low, he ran his fingers over the cold stones around her neck and her warm satin skin. "I feel your response to my touch and am glad it is only a few weeks before I can claim you as my own."

Confused, Helena stepped back. "This is not a love match."

No, but there is this attraction between us." His lips covered hers and his arms clasped her soft body close against his. He trailed kisses along the side of her neck and down to the top of her breast. "My lips feel your warmth and the fast beating of your heart. This is enough, for now," he whispered against her skin.

\* \* \* \*

Tiny quivers, a yearning, went through her, settling in her lower body. Her legs weakened and she found herself holding onto him, wanting more of this wonderful feeling.

He straightened and moved slightly away from her. "I must stop and bring my thoughts back to more serious matters. Since you are to be my bride, I must protect you. I have hired two men to guard you and your sister."

Pulling herself out of his arms, she frowned. "I do not want to be followed around everywhere I go. That is hardly necessary."

"You will have to trust me on this. It is needed and since you and your sister can easily be mistaken for each other, I must protect her too."

"Protect us from what?" Helena demanded.

"I knew you would want an explanation. Most women accept their husband's decisions without question." He ran his finger down the side of her face. "I see this is not enough for you. The reason I was late is a man took a shot at me tonight."

"Shot at you. Were you injured? When exactly did this happen?" Her eyes flew over him from top to bottom.

"There is no way I could hide a gunshot wound all evening, my dear. It only ruined my new coat by tearing the sleeve. My left arm has a slight bruise. I was preparing to leave the house when the bullet blasted into the wall of my study."

"Do you know the identity of the man who tried to kill you?"

"No, and I suspect from his appearance that he was a hired hand. Someone paid him to do the job."

"Did you question him or are the bow street runners taking care of the questioning?"

He pulled her close again and kissed the top of her head. "You are not to worry. The authorities are on the case, but meanwhile you will allow me to see you and your sister are kept safe." She started to shake her head.

"Don't add to my problems by making me worry about you."

"All right, as long as it isn't forever," Helena agreed reluctantly.

"Good, I will bring the two men by tomorrow and introduce them. You need to know what they look like, before they start following you everywhere." Turning her toward the house, he guided her along the candlelit path.

"Weren't you afraid someone might shoot at us out here tonight?" Helena asked.

"Not at all, we've been guarded every moment."

She gasped. "Every moment?"

He laughed. "They weren't watching us, but watching the paths leading up to where we stood."

Helena flounced into the drawing room and whispered, "I am not going out into the garden with you anymore."

Looking around she saw all eyes on her again, but this time they stared at the sparkling jewels, the well known Selwyn rubies. No one had any further doubt about Helena's status.

She noted the flushed angry face of her future sister-in-law, Prudence, and beside her stood Helena's sister-in-law, Sophia. Sophia's expression showed envy and dislike. Helena shrugged and turned to greet Mary Ann, who hugged her and complimented her on the beautiful jewelry.

"Perhaps I was too hasty, Your Grace. Might I reconsider your offer?" Mary Ann teased.

"Heaven save me, no," he answered, a twinkle in his eyes. "I have found the right duchess for me."

One by one, the guests wished the couple well and said good night. Wearily, Helena meandered to a nearby settee and sank onto it as the last guest went out of the room.

"Excuse me, my dear." Nicholas left her side to cross the room and speak with her brother and Papa.

"Well, you have what you want. Although, if you don't give him a son, he will soon lose interest in you," Sophia snipped at Helena.

"What do you mean, what I wanted?"

"Don't act the innocent with me. You were very clever. Pretend no desire to marry, then after much encouragement, change your mind. I suppose you saw your chance when your silly sister decided to turn him down."

"My sister is not silly and I had no plan to marry the duke," Helena snapped at her sister-in-law. Her head pounded and she had difficulty thinking.

\* \* \* \*

Across the room, Nicholas saw her face pale and a shaky hand go to her head. "Excuse me, sir." He moved swiftly from Lord Steeples' side and across the room to where Helena sat surrounded by Sophia and Prudence.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mary Ann also headed toward her sister and he realized Helena's brother followed close behind.

Nicholas pushed the two women aside. "Helena, are you all right?" He leaned solicitously over her.

"My head is pounding and I feel sick. May I go home now?" Her eyes pleaded with him.

"Certainly, here is Mary Ann. Can you walk with her over to your parents? I need to have a word with these two ladies."

"No need, Your Grace. My wife and I are leaving and I will handle matters." Helena's brother frowned at his wife and took her arm firmly, escorting her out of the room.

Prudence flushed. "She is not worthy of you."

"That is not for you to decide. You will stay far away from her at any other family gatherings and after the wedding you will stay away from my home."

"You don't mean you would ostracize me for that woman?"

"I will and I am." His words were cutting and cold.

Red faced, Prudence stomped away. Shortly afterwards she and her husband left.

Seeing his mother coming in his direction, Nicholas met her halfway. "Mother, have you come to scold me?" Nicholas asked.

"No, I have come to support you. They will accept her, eventually. Anyone you chose would face some jealousy. Prudence is too high in the instep for her own good. I shall give her a good set down."

He dropped a kiss on his mother's cheek. "Thank you. Where are Lady Helena and her family?" he asked, looking around the empty room.

"They left. It is best. The poor girl appeared likely to break into a million pieces at any moment. Not at all like her. What did you say that upset her?"

Nicholas went to a side table and poured himself a shot of brandy. "Would you like a glass, Mother?"

"Yes, I think I would." She took her glass and settled on a near-by chair. Pebbles, let loose since all the guests were gone, ran to her, barking. She reached for him.

"Now tell me whatever you have to say that required me to have a brandy to drink first."

"Nothing slips by you, Mother." He wandered around the empty room while she waited patiently. Finally, he sat across from her.

"Someone tried to kill me tonight. Had I not leaned over at the exact moment of the shot, he might have succeeded."

"I knew something had happened when you arrived late. That is most uncommon for you. You are never late."

He nodded. "I was dressed and ready to leave, but I received a message and stopped to read it."

"Did the shooter get away?" his Mother questioned.

"He's dead. The authorities have been called and I am hiring two men to guard Helena and Mary Ann."

"What about yourself?"

"Someone will be watching me and working with me to get to the bottom of this attack," he reassured her.

She put her hand on his arm. "I have suspected you were involved in some dangerous government business. I am right."

He nodded, but cautioned her to keep her suspicions to herself. "The less you know the better. A man will also be watching your house. I will take no chances with the people I love.

"Don't worry," he said, noting her paleness. "I have to leave now, but I'll call on you later tomorrow." He smiled encouragingly. "You have a wedding to plan." He watched her pull herself together.

"Yes, I do. I'm glad to be busy." Her hand reached out and touched his face. "Be careful."

"Always." Nicholas kissed her cheek and strode out the door.

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## Chapter 12

Helena twisted sideways trying to see what the dressmaker was doing. "Aren't you done yet?"

"My Lady, please have patience. I'll finish soon. I'm trying to make sure your wedding dress will be perfect."

The light pink gown fit snugly across her breast then flowed in soft pleats to the floor. Lace trimmed the neckline, sleeves and bottom of the gown. Her gloves and shoes matched, but she had not decided what to wear on her head. Mary Ann and she were to leave shortly and go to the milliner's shop.

Helena didn't go out often. She hated the necessity of having guards with them everywhere they went. So far, Nicholas had not discovered the person behind the attempt on his life.

She had to admit her first thought would be of Harry. Harry came by at least every other day to invite the two sisters to go walking or riding. Helena and Mary Ann tried to discourage his visits, but he paid little attention.

"Are you ready to leave?" Mary Ann put her head around the corner of the door.

"Almost, Mildred is finished I'm sure." Helena frowned at the dressmaker, who sighed and nodded, then helped her out of the gown.

"I'll do the best I can Lady Helena to finish from these last measurements."

"Good." Helena quickly pulled on a pale mauve gown. "Let me get my gloves and we can be on our way."

The busy streets made Helena want to return to the country. She missed the slower lifestyle. The last few weeks she'd attended numerous parties and teas to celebrate her upcoming nuptials. Nicholas attended, time permitting. More often than not his mother and Helena's family escorted her, a prelude of her future life with him.

"Are you all right, Helena?" Mary Ann asked. "You seem quieter than usual this past week."

"I'm trying to get used to all the attention. I hope I've not ruined my life with the wrong decision. I'd probably do better with a local man from our village. I'd have a normal life without interruptions."

"Hah, any marriage would interrupt your life. At least the duke will not interfere with your painting and other interests. Why with a man from the village you would be having babies, keeping house, cooking, and have no time for anything else." Mary Ann frowned.

"What a horrible picture. I suppose I must admit you are right. Babies, cooking, and cleaning." Helena shuddered. "I shall do much better with boring parties, vain people fawning over me, and men following me to protect me from being shot."

Mary Ann giggled. "I love it when you put things into perspective. Come on. Let's see if we can't find the perfect bonnet for your wedding day."

They got out of their carriage and strolled along the busy street, stopping to study the bonnets in the window of Mr. Ringsly's shop. The sun glanced off something shiny behind her. Helena moved her gaze from the lace trimmed hat to the window's reflection from across the street.

She saw the man step from around the corner of the building. In her mind everything went silent and into slow motion. His arm came up and he pointed the pistol. The shot rang out at the same time one of their guards threw her and Mary Ann to the ground and covered their bodies with his. His partner ran toward the direction of the shooter.

People screamed and ran wildly away from the scene. Horses reared and their drivers fought for control. Slivers of glass rained over them, from the shattered window. For seconds, minutes, Helena and Mary Ann didn't move. The guard finally rose with caution. "Are you both all right?"

Helena sat up and removed her bonnet to shake off the glass then rose to her knees and did the same to her gown. She tried to ignore the rapid beat of her heart and her dizziness.

"Are you hurt, Mary Ann?" Helena reached out a hand to her twin.

"I'm fine, I think." She glanced around. "But what happened?" Mary Ann asked as she brushed herself off and stood, pulling Helena with her.

"Someone hiding behind the large brick building across the street shot at us. I saw a reflection of him on the shiny window pane just in time for me to see him point the gun." Helena clasped her hands tight to stop their shaking.

"I'm sorry my lady, Sparks and me didn't see the man soon enough."

"What is going on? Who broke my window?" Mr. Ringsly stormed out onto the street and stopped abruptly. "Ladies, are you hurt? I didn't realize anyone stood in front of the glass."

"We're fine," Helena lied. "We've come to buy a bonnet. I should like to see a pink one in the style of the one on the floor." Helena took a deep breath, held onto Mary Ann's hands, and forced herself to concentrate on her task. She did not intend to come back after this episode. She would get what she needed now.

"My lady, we need to leave. The duke is going to be very disturbed when he hears what has happened. You must go to the safety of your home." The man named Sparks pleaded with her and took hold of her arm. "Whoever shot at you ran away, but we can't be sure there are no others."

"Release my arm." Helena glared at him. "I fully intend to go home, all the way home to the country, but first I will buy my bonnet."

Mary Ann chuckled. "You might as well give up. When my sister makes up her mind you won't budge her."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas' fisted his hands in an effort to control his anger. He sent a cold focused glare at the two men standing in front of him. They each took a step back.

"She almost got shot and you did not see the assailant, only the flash of his gun? What am I paying you to do? Glass broken all over them, bruised from your man-handling, and you didn't insist they go straight home."

"There were lots of people. We'd been looking all around. The shooter hid well. And begging your pardon, Your Grace, but Lady Helena would not listen to us. Never seen such a determined ...."

Nicholas held up his hand, stopping any further excuses. He went to the window and stood, feet apart, his hands clenched tight behind his back. Watching the carriages go along the street in front of his townhouse gave him time to regain control of his temper. What he wanted to do was knock their heads together.

He spun around. "She is all right? No serious injuries?"

"None, Your Grace. Only them bruises you mentioned."

"No thanks to you two. I'll talk to your boss. I want more men watching her every step. Now get out!"

They hurried out the door. Nicholas rubbed his hand down his face. Tomorrow Helena and her family planned to go home to the country. The families had arranged to meet in a few days and decide on a definite wedding date and none to soon. He could protect her better if she were at his home.

Why did someone want him and his future wife dead? The puzzle became more complicated. Tonight he and his mother would dine with Helena and her family. But first, he needed to check with his runners about the man they followed. His last report said the suspect was still in the country and nothing suspicious had occurred.

I hope Franklin arrives soon. I need the assistance of someone I can trust to help me solve this mystery.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas helped his mother out of the carriage and the Steeples' butler greeted them. "The family is in the drawing room, Your Grace. Please follow me."

Nicholas nodded his head and put his hand under his mother's elbow. The drawing room though smaller than his, had a warm intimacy his lacked. The French windows along one side of the room stood open to let in the fresh air of the early evening. Lady Steeples came quickly to their side.

"Welcome, Your Graces. Please come in and join us." She motioned them inside.

He glanced around the room. Everyone was present except Helena.

"I hope Lady Helena is well, Lady Steeples. I don't see her."

"She will be down soon. Certainly she was shaken from her experience today, but no permanent damage was done, thank goodness."

Nicholas noted Lady Steeples anxiously wringing her hands and glancing furtively at Mary Ann. He excused himself and moved across the room.

Taking hold of Mary Ann's arm, he walked toward an open door, guiding her outside. She pulled her arm loose.

"You are being very forceful, Your Grace."

"What is going on here?"

"Blunt and to the point, then I shall be the same. Your men failed miserably. We had a close encounter with a bullet. Helena saw the flash at the same time they did, and had started to move toward me to push me down."

"I know and I regret the failure of the men to protect you. It will not happen again."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I am changing the guards and increasing the number. The men watching over you from this point on are my own. I should not have hired anyone else. Only the need for expediency motivated me to hire them until I contacted my men and got them in place." They continued to walk down the path carved out between the flower beds and away from the drawing room.

"Now where is your sister?"

"She told Mama and Papa she has changed her mind. She does not want to marry you."

"She can't change her mind. The contract is signed."

"Helena is more upset than I've ever seen her. The gunshot frightened her enough to call off the wedding." Mary Ann looked toward the upstairs, where light filtered down to them. "Perhaps you might reassure her."

"Is there a back way to her room?"

Mary Ann nodded. "Through the kitchen."

He smiled and leaned down, brushing a kiss across Mary Ann's forehead. "I think I shall quite like having you for a sister-in-law after all. I'm very glad you weren't hurt today."

Mary Ann chuckled. "Go on. I'll stay out here to give you time."

\* \* \* \*

Helena viewed herself in the mirror. Her face was almost as white as the gown she wore. She shivered remembering the sound of the bullet and the glass shattering.

Who would want the duke or her dead? By merely accepting his proposal her life became complicated and not in the ways she'd expected. She never really believed she would be in danger.

Her long blond hair fell across her shoulders and down her back. She had no energy to bother with arranging it up in an elaborate style and she'd sent her maid downstairs. She went to the window.

She'd seen Nicholas and his mother arrive. Even from this distance, she'd noticed the shine of his hair as he took off his hat at the door.

Soon they'd be storming out, furious with her and her family. He'd never forgive her for this second insult, first her sister and now her. It was for the best, maybe. She remembered the intense awareness in her body whenever he came near and had to admit she liked the feelings.

Theirs was to be a convenient marriage. But it didn't alter those feelings for him each time they were together. And, what if she came to love him but he didn't love her? She didn't want to think about that.

The door flew open and banged against the wall. She blinked twice, thinking her eyes deceived her.

"What are you doing here?"

He strode into the room and firmly shut the door behind him. His eyes bore into her.

"Mary Ann said you changed your mind. You can't. We have a contract and I will not allow you to break it."

"You should not be in my bedroom."

Helena stepped closer to the window behind her. He seemed to fill the room. His eyes flashed with anger, deep green, like the forest before nightfall. The air sizzled between them.

"I never pictured you as a coward. You were very brave today. The guards following you from this time on will be my men, not hired help. I needed time to call them to town. You will be safe."

"I don't want anyone guarding me. I want nothing more to do with you. My whole life has been torn awry."

He stepped farther into the room. Her heart beat faster with each advancing step. His eyes never left her face. A nerve beat at the side of his firm mouth. She swallowed and moistened her lips with her tongue. His eyes followed her every move.

"As I said, not marrying me is not an option. The contract is signed, sealed, and final."

"Surely you do not want a woman who doesn't want you?" She threw out the words knowing they weren't true.

A sardonic smile flickered across his face and he moved the rest of the way to her. "You want me. To say any different would be a lie."

He bent his head and touched her lips with his. He held himself back allowing no other contact but the joining of their lips.

She took a breath and her lips softened and opened. His tongue slipped inside caressing her mouth. His warm mouth tasted of whiskey. Her body moved closer. His

arms wrapped around her and pulled her tight against him. She molded her body against his and became well aware of his desire for her. Heat rushed through her veins as she clung to him.

He stepped back abruptly. "See? You do want me. Now dress and come downstairs. Your poor mother looks like she might faint at any moment."

Slipping out her door, he disappeared as quickly as he had appeared. She didn't move, couldn't, her legs were too shaky. She touched her mouth. With only a kiss, he totally overwhelmed her.

She crossed to her mirror and pinched her cheeks to give them color. She would finish her hairdo and go downstairs.

He was right. It was too late to change the course of events and if she was honest, she didn't want to alter their agreement. But today the true danger of his life slammed into her. She didn't want to see him hurt or to lose him as she had lost Lawson. She'd thought of nothing else but the shooting all afternoon until her fears had overwhelmed her. Seeing him now, his strength and determination had reassured her as nothing else could.

She was not a coward. She would show him.

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## Chapter 13

Finally, at home, Helena wandered from room to room. She had nothing to do, since Mama hired extra help from the nearby village. The staff filled the house, dusting and cleaning in preparation for Nicholas and his family's arrival. She watched the bustle around her and felt out of place. Alien in her own home.

Arrangements for the wedding were almost completed. They'd attended numerous dances and teas in London to celebrate the upcoming alliance of their two families and no one entertained any notion the marriage was a love match. It was simply two strong families combining into one very influential dynasty.

Envious looks from silly whispering girls had followed her everywhere she went in town. It was good to be home. Nevertheless, she couldn't stay still.

"Helena, my dear, you are getting in the way and making the servants uncomfortable. Go to your turret room and relax." Her mother put an arm around her and led her determinedly toward the stairs. "Go paint, or do something. It's hours before the dinner tonight. You have plenty of time."

"Yes, Mama." Helena waited until her mother disappeared in the other direction before slipping out the door and heading to the stables. Thank goodness, her father convinced Nicholas that they did not need the guards here. He assured Nicholas that she'd be safe.

Her mare, Sparkle, needed exercise and maybe a good run would take away the shivers running up and down her spine. She'd awoken before the first light of day after tossing and turning all night. Her restlessness still hadn't abated.

Sparkle snorted and tossed her head. "Good girl, are you ready for a run?" Sparkle bumped her head against Helena.

Laughing, Helena, with assistance from a groom, arranged herself on the saddle. With little encouragement, the mare raced across the wide open field. After a while, she slowed the horse and headed toward the shade of the trees.

Quiet and stillness surrounded her as she moved between the tall oaks and elms. Not a breath of wind moved amongst the tree branches. Shadows slanted across the narrow path.

Helena raised her head and stopped. The hair raised on her arms. Sparkle snorted. The figure of a man stepped out in front of her. His features unclear in the dim light, she gasped.

"Don't you know me, Helena? Have I changed so much?"

Speechless, she shook her head. A mirage? The man's voice sounded like Lawson, but he was broader and rougher looking.

He came closer and reaching up his calloused hand covered hers. Suddenly, he pulled her down and held her tightly in his grasp. His harsh, demanding mouth captured her lips. One hand moved down her back, pulling her tight against the hard evidence of his arousal.

She pushed at him. This couldn't be Lawson. She was losing her mind. It had to be a stranger and she must fight. She hit, kicked, tossed her head back, and starting to scream. His hand clamped over her mouth.

"Don't. I'll release you."

She nodded and he removed his hand. Up close, she recognized the eyes, the blond tossed curls, but still she found it difficult to reconcile this hard man with the young boy who went off to war.

"Lawson? It is you."

"Sorry, I frightened you. I'd planned to surprise you tonight at the dinner party, but I couldn't resist when I saw you coming into the woods. I had to get a closer look."

"But, you're dead."

He laughed. "Don't tell me after our kiss you still think I'm dead, my love. You'll shatter my illusions regarding my ability to please a woman."

"I'm not your love." She didn't smile. "Why have you been gone so many years? And you never contacted your family or me. Didn't you know how devastated your parents would be at word of your death? In fact, many people thought the news contributed to your father's untimely demise."

"I had no choice." He bent, picked up a nearby stick, and slapped it against his leg. "I was a prisoner, recently escaped and brought back by one of the many spies who work for the king. You don't believe I would stay away a minute longer than I had to, from you or my family?"

"You have seen your mother?"

He nodded. "She is overjoyed."

"I can't believe it." Her fingers trailed along the side of his face, across his lips and down across his throat. His skin was warm. She felt his pulse. He was no illusion.

This time when he reached for her, she let him pull her body against his. Cool lips brushed across hers lightly.

Come, Helena," he said, raising his head. "Let's surprise your parents." He whistled and his horse came to him.

The present flooded back. "Wait. There is something I must tell you."

"We can talk later. I want to see the surprise on your parents' faces when we walk in together."

"I'm planning to marry, soon."

Frozen in place, he stared at her. "To whom?"

"The Duke of Monteroy. I, I..., I waited, but everyone convinced me you'd died and weren't coming home. This marriage will give me a home and children and I have agreed."

"Surely it can't be a love match. Tell the duke I have returned. He won't want to wed a woman who loves another." He placed his hands at her waist, ready to help her onto her horse. "Not to worry, I will talk with him if you wish."

"No!" Helena pushed his hands away. "I must decide what to do and I can do my own talking."

"Decide?"

"I have signed the contracts. My family and his will be distressed and embarrassed if the marriage is called off."

Confidently, he pulled her back against him. "You would be miserable, Helena. You can't marry a man to please your family, and after all, we had a previous understanding."

"I'm planning to move to America, soon. You will come with me. We'll start a new life. It won't matter if your parents are unhappy or if the Ton gossips. You'll be free to start anew."

She pushed against him, freeing herself from his grasp. "Stop. I must think. I will tell my family you are back. Please give them a day to adjust to your reappearance."

"You don't want me to come to dinner?"

He looked surprised and for a brief second she hesitated. Standing there in his brown jacket and leather breeches, time seemed to roll back. She remembered him and the love she'd felt.

"No, yes..." She shook her head. "No, please. The duke will arrive late today. I need time to talk with him and my parents. I'll decide what I'm going to do."

"Not too much time, my love. It has already been four years." His voice sounded cold.

He disappeared and she stared at the empty place in front of her. She almost believed she had imagined him.

Helena rode back home, thoughts swirling in her head. She hurried to the turret room. Breathless after the climb and still shaky, she sat on the seat facing the long expanse of lawn with the forest in the distance.

Lawson had returned. Her dream had come true and yet it wasn't the same as the dreams she'd nourished over the years. He was larger and there was an edge to his tone, darkness in his eyes. He was not her Lawson, the man in her memories.

She should be overjoyed. She wasn't. A lone rider came into her view. Oh no, not yet Lawson. Relief coursed through her when she recognized Lord Gates. Nicholas had said he might come by this week-end. She should go greet him.

Her body wouldn't move and nothing seemed important enough to leave the protection of her sanctuary. She remained frozen in place.

\* \* \* \*

Franklin had hid among the trees and watched as Lawson rode off in one direction and Helena went toward home. He had arrived in time to see Helena and Lawson talking and moved his horse as close as he dared. He didn't hear the conversation, but their actions spoke louder than words. What was the connection between the Steeples twin and the man he believed might be their traitor?

He must connect with Nicholas as soon as possible. He'd ride to the Steeples home and arrange to have himself invited to dinner.

He had resisted coming today, but some information he'd just recently received forced a change in his plans.

It was difficult to imagine Lady Mary Ann as the prospective bride of his best friend, but he might as well get used to it. Nicholas had informed him of his intention and choice before his family made their visit to the Steeple estate.

Franklin didn't plan on allowing himself to care for any woman. Mary Ann was too much in his thoughts and it irritated him that he wasn't able to forget her. Seeing her marry Nicholas should solve his problem.

But, if he told Nicholas about her sister, Helena, and this man, would the marriage go forth? Nicholas might not want to align himself and his family with the Steeples if Helena was involved some way with the traitor to the crown.

Franklin didn't want to probe his inner feelings too closely. He might have to admit that seeing Mary Ann and Nicholas' marriage cancelled would loosen the grip of tension wrapping around his body. He pulled on the reins and turned his horse toward the Steeples home.

\* \* \* \*

"Lord Gates, welcome. Please come in." Lady Steeples stood to greet the tall man her butler had brought to her. "Would you like a cup of tea?" She motioned to the teapot sitting on the table beside her chair. "Please sit and tell me of your travels. The duke mentioned he hoped you would visit this week-end."

Franklin sat in the chair across from her. His eyes searched the room before he brought his attention back to his hostess and smiled.

"I only arrived back in England two days ago. I didn't send a message ahead because I doubt it would have arrived before me. I hope you can forgive me, Lady Steeples?"

"There is nothing to forgive. We are happy you can be with us on this happy occasion. The duke and his family should be arriving this afternoon and there is a dinner set for tonight. You must plan to stay with us. I insist."



"I admit it would be more pleasurable to stay here, rather than coming back and forth from the village."

Lady Steeples laughed gaily. "And the small village inn is not nearly as comfortable as our home and bed. I insist. I will not accept no for an answer. Oh," she looked behind him, "Mary Ann, come in and join us. Do you remember Lord Gates?"

Franklin braced himself as he stood and turned. His memory had served him right. Her bright beauty filled the room. He inclined his head briefly. "Lady Mary Ann."

"Lord Gates." She curtsied. "How nice to meet you again. I understand you and the duke are close friends and have been for many years."

Mary Ann walked around his chair and sat beside her mother. He watched her mother pour her a cup of tea. She kept her eyes lowered.

"You must be happy to know the wedding date will be decided on soon?" His voice reached across to bring her head up.

She glanced up quickly, then back down at her teacup. "I am very happy. Weddings are joyous times for families. The duke's family and mine have been close and this will bring us all together as one, at last.

For the first time, she stared directly at him and showed only the politeness of any lady to a guest. What did he expect? She acted quite proper and that's what he wanted, wasn't it?

"It has been Mama and Papa's greatest wish to see our families joined," she added.

He sat back and let the light, polite conversation flow over him. Desire tingled along his nerves. He berated himself. The marriage will take her out of his reach. He mustn't desire her. She was to be his best friend's wife.

\* \* \* \*

"Franklin, I'm very glad to see you. We have much to talk about." Nicholas clapped his friend on the shoulder. They stood in Nicholas' room, dressed to go down to dinner.

"I too have much to tell you. I believe I know the identity of our traitor."

"Excellent. Sit by the fire and tell me everything."

"This last man I brought back to England supposedly managed to escape from pirates also and after four years of captivity he wanted to come home. We connected through one of my contacts and I brought him with me. The contact was suspicious of him and so am I. He's in excellent shape for a prisoner. I managed to check around and the word is he's frequently been in touch with someone in France. I tried to find out more, but I've not been successful."

"Do you have any definite evidence?"

Franklin shook his head. "No, but something else happened. I've been following him and he lives in this area. Today, he met someone in the Steeples woods."

"Who?" The word came out harsh.

"Your future wife's sister."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Franklin said. "I'm sorry to say, I'm certain."

Nicholas raked his hand through his hair. Mary Ann, somehow connected to their traitor? Silly, vain, Mary Ann or clever and cunning Mary Ann? What a perfect disguise.

"How do you know it wasn't her sister?" Nicholas had to force himself to ask. After all, they are twins.

\* \* \* \*

Franklin was silent. How did he explain he knew intuitively the difference between Helena and Mary Ann? Awareness flooded his body when Mary Ann came into a room, even before he saw her. How to explain when it made no sense to him and would expose a vulnerability he didn't want to admit.

"Her behavior made it obvious and he said her name. I couldn't hear most of the conversation, but I did hear that part."

"What a mess. We're here to set the wedding date and I planned for it to be soon. If he is the traitor and she's involved, which I have difficulty believing, it could be a disaster for both our families."

"Can you delay the wedding?" Franklin felt uncommon warmth on his face, at his question.

"For what reason? What possible explanation can I give to postpone deciding on a wedding date, when I insisted otherwise?"

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas' fist clenched. Mary Ann could not possibly be a traitor. His brain refused to see the picture Franklin's words had drawn.

"Excuse me. I need some time alone to think."

"I understand." Franklin moved to the door. "I'm sorry."

The words hung in the air as the door closed. It was late. Soon everyone would gather for dinner. He must find Helena and talk to her about Franklin's report.

Nicholas stalked down the hall and ran into Mary Ann. "Is your sister in her room? I need to speak with her."

"The eager bridegroom," she teased. "No, I haven't seen her all afternoon. I was going to check the turret room. It's strange that Helena didn't greet you when you arrived."

"I'll find her. She's probably lost in her painting."

"I'm sure she'd rather see you than me." Mary Ann waved him on.

He watched Mary Ann until she disappeared around the corner. He was still unable to reconcile her as helping a traitor. Shaking his head, he strode toward the turret room. Franklin had to be mistaken.

\* \* \* \*

The turret room was unlit. Nicholas started to turn around and look for Helena somewhere else. But, he hesitated; no one had seen her in the house. He'd check before searching other areas. He started up the steps and climbed until he stood in the entrance to her sanctuary.

She sat facing an open window. The room was cold and she'd drawn her legs up against her chest. Her body was motionless and for a second he feared she did not even breathe.

"Helena," he spoke softly. Moving carefully, so as to not startle her, he came closer. His hand touched her cheek and her skin was like marble. Sitting down, he lifted her onto his lap and wrapped his warmth around her.

"What is it, Helena? What's wrong?"

His words apparently penetrated through the distress and coldness, and as if a statue of ice, drops of tears slowly flowed over her cheeks, melting away the image.

Clouded blue eyes stared at him. "Nicholas, you came."

"Of course. You knew I planned to be here today, so we can talk about our wedding. I wouldn't have missed it." He forced himself to speak lightly, softly, as if to comfort a child.

Her breath shuddered through her. She choked out the words. "I can't marry you."

"Why not?"

"He is back. Lawson is home and he has prior claim to me."

"Lawson is the man you loved long ago?" He tried to understand her.

Her head nodded and she looked down at her hands touching his chest. He gently raised her chin and brought her face up to his. His lips brushed across hers.

She snuggled closer. He rubbed his hands along her cold arms and kissed the top of her head.

"I can't." She tried to move away, but he held her fast.

"You can."

"I can't marry you. What kind of woman am I to care for two men? And you don't know the most awful part, my secret." She looked at him so earnestly he wanted to take her away and protect her from all the hurts.

"I suspected something has been bothering you. Some other reason you thought prevented you from marrying me."

Her eyes widened. "How clever you are. And nice," she added in a soft childlike whisper.

"Do you want to tell me the secret and then we shan't bother about it anymore?"

"I will tell you, but it will change the way you feel about me being your duchess."

"Perhaps we should get you to a warmer place first and—"

"No. I must tell you now or I will lose my courage."

He nodded and watched her catch her breath. Tenderness swept through him. Nothing and no one would harm her or take her from him.

She sat straighter and stared directly in his eyes.

"Lawson and I were together, once, the last night before he departed for the war." She stopped for a second.

His body froze. "Together?"

"Yes, I'm..." She blushed and lowered her eyes. "I'm not a virgin."

He wanted to strangle Lawson. How dare he take advantage of an innocent young girl?

"Do your parents know?"

"Oh no, they would never have sanctioned our marriage. They would be so ashamed, only Mary Ann knows. So you see why I did not plan to marry anyone. And then you came into my life and I thought maybe since it was only one mistake that you'd forgive me. I know it was a very big one."

He leaned against the stone wall, still clutching her tight. For the first time in his life, he felt his world rock out of control. He didn't like the feeling.

\* \* \* \*

"I know you must hate me for deceiving you. I wanted to tell you, but the words wouldn't come." She buried her head in his chest, afraid to look him in the eye. He must be disgusted, but his arms still held her tight.

"We will postpone setting the date for our wedding," he said, at last. "You have had a great shock and need time to recover. I have rushed you. We can wait."

"You still want to marry me?" she asked.

"To be honest, I am as stunned as you by today's events. But, I do want you to be my wife and we will work through all of this. I assure you."

"Harry said you never fight for what you want." The words slipped out, remembering a long ago conversation.

"Did he? Well, Harry is not always right."

puzzled, she studied him intently. "Our families will be distressed and the Ton will have a wonderful time ridiculing all of us. I'm sure the gossips have already spread the word about this family meeting."

"I believe you have worried enough about others and feared disappointing them too much. Lawson became so important to you because he was the first person to give you any special attention."

"Such acceptance is difficult to turn away from, especially during emotional times such as his leaving. I don't blame you and I will handle this."

"We shall stand together saying it is our mutual agreement to wait. You'll continue as my betrothed unless you decide otherwise. Nevertheless, I must warn you," he looked directly into her eyes, "I will not make it easy for you to break our contract."

"I don't understand why you are being so kind."

"Someday I'll explain. Come, you need to go to your room and warm up. Dress warmly for dinner. You haven't much time."

Nicholas carried her in his arms all the way to the main part of the house before placing her on her feet. She didn't feel as lightheaded as before. She climbed the stairs slowly on a path to her room to change clothes.

\* \* \* \*

Conflicting thoughts flew around in Nicholas' head, his body rigid from holding his emotions at bay as he watched her arrive safely on the landing above. They'd postponed the wedding, but not for the reason he and Franklin had discussed.

Mary Ann was not sneaking away to meet a traitor. Helena was the woman Franklin saw in the woods. Rage engulfed him when he thought of the man trying to come between Helena and him.

Lawson, traitor or hero, or something in between? Now to discover whether the woman he wanted would marry him or return to the arms of her first lover.

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## Chapter 14

"Helena, where have you been?" Mary Ann stopped talking and looked at her sister. "What's wrong?"

"Lawson is alive and here."

Worried, Mary Ann felt her sister's forehead. Angrily, Helena stepped back. "I do not have a fever and I am not crazy. He survived."

"How?"

"I don't know. Nicholas found me in the tower and has agreed we will postpone our wedding."

"You have a contract. Everyone expects you to be married, soon. Society will ostracize our family. Look at me, Helena. You can't!"

Helena put on the gown laid out on her bed. She pulled a brush roughly through her hair and arranged the long lengths into a tight bun. She had sent Agnes away, wanting to be alone.

"Nicholas has agreed. It is the only solution. I simply," she collapsed onto a nearby chair, "do not know anything else we can do."

Mary Ann rushed to her side. "I'm sure the duke knows best and with his support it will be all right." Taking Helena's cold hands in hers, she rubbed them briskly and the warmth began to return.

Her sister stood close to Helena as they went toward the drawing room. Helena knew the next few hours would be difficult and drew courage knowing Mary Ann supported her. She heard voices coming from the large room and gripped Mary Ann's arm tightly.

"It will be all right," Mary Ann repeated. "Remember, the duke agrees with you. No one will dare say anything," she whispered and stepped into the doorway.

Nicholas walked quickly to Helena's side and tucked her arm into his, thanking Mary Ann. His eyes searched her face. "You are better?"

"Yes."

The butler opened the front door to other guests and Helena glanced in that direction. Lawson stood smiling beside his mother, brother, and sister-in-law. Helena frowned. She had asked him to wait and she had not yet had an opportunity to prepare her parents.

Nicholas took her hand and she grasped hold. A feeling of support and protectiveness wrapped around her. She glanced at him for reassurance before stepping forward.

"Lady Falscroft." Helena curtsied and put her hand out to Lawson's mother. "How surprised and happy you must be."

"It is our dream come true, my dear. How lucky Lawson returned before your wedding."

"The purpose of this party is to introduce my friends to my betrothed, before the actual ceremony. Your Grace, may I introduce you to Lady Falscroft and her family?" The duke nodded. "This is my betrothed, the Duke of Monteroy."

Lawson's mother stared at the tall man at Helena's side. "But Lawson said you would be breaking your engagement."

"Mother," Lawson's brother interrupted the conversation. "You are embarrassing Lady Helena and the duke. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. I am Baron Falscroft and this is my wife, Lady Falscroft. "Also," he indicated the man standing to his side, "my brother, Lawson Falscroft."

Helena noted Nicholas' cold expression, when he nodded to Lawson. Lawson smiled brightly, obviously enjoying the confusion and shock created by his appearance. Helena glanced inside the doorway to the drawing room and sensed their guests becoming aware of something happening in the hallway.

"Your Grace, I'd appreciate it if you and Lawson's family would allow us a few minutes to speak. We'll only be a moment, if you'll excuse us?"

"I'll be right inside if you need me." Nicholas bowed to her and went into the drawing room. Lawson's family followed him, leaving Lawson and her alone in the hallway.

"You did not wait as I requested," Helena accused.

"And why have you not ended your engagement to the duke or did you find it too difficult to give up the title of duchess and all those riches?"

Of its own violation, Helena's hand flew up but he caught her arm. "Now, now, testy little thing, aren't you? I think your guests have enough to gossip about already, don't you?"

"I will not be controlled Lawson. I'll decide whether to end my engagement, not you. Any understanding we had ended years ago."

Blue eyes twinkled at her. "How can you refuse me? Surely, you prefer me to the stoic duke. You will have no joy in your life with him, my love."

Helena's father and mother came to her side and ushered them into the drawing room.

"Please, everyone." Helena's father spoke above the noise of the other voices. "Dinner is ready and I suggest we go to the dining room and enjoy the tasty meal our cook has prepared. After dinner," he spoke softly to his wife and Helena, "we will meet with the duke and his mother in my study. We must sort out the complications arising from the shock of Lawson's return."

He smiled at Lawson as he walked by and patted him on his back. "Not that we aren't happy to see you home, son, but you picked the worst possible time to appear on our doorstep."

Helena tasted nothing. She was aware of the furtive glances in her direction. When she tried to swallow food refused to go past the large lump in her throat. Only the wine slid down easily, wetting her dry mouth. It seemed hours before her mother and father rose and motioned the guests back to the drawing room, and then directed her to come into the study with Nicholas and his mother.

\* \* \* \*

Helena sat in the shadows, near the curtains. Nicholas stood beside her.

"What an upsetting evening," her father stated. "May I offer a glass of Madeira to the ladies? I'm sure you and I," he motioned to Nicholas, "prefer whiskey."

"Thank you." Nicholas took his drink and handed it to Helena. "I think your daughter needs this more than I."

"I'm sorry, Mama and Papa. I saw Lawson this afternoon. I asked him not to come tonight or at all until I had time to tell you and the duke and his family. Obviously, he did not consider my wishes."

Nicholas spoke up. "To save time, I was aware of his return. Lady Helena and I spoke late this afternoon. She and I have agreed to postpone our wedding date for now. I was wrong to rush her and she needs the time to recover from the shock of Falscroft's return."

"But everyone is here and it will cause a scandal," Helena's mother protested and ran a hand across her forehead. "Our families and close friends expect an announcement in the next few days. Of course, Helena must honor her obligation to you. The contracts are signed."

"I agree with my son." The duchess' cold voice brought heads turning in her direction. "We will all return to London. Helena and Nicholas are postponing their decision on a wedding date because my son needs to leave immediately to take care of unexpected personal business that needs his attention."

"I'm sure the Ton already knows about our plans for this week-end. The gossip will be unending." Lady Steeples complained.

"Only until another interesting tidbit of gossip catches their attention. If we all stick together and ignore the rumors, it will end." The duchess stood. "It is settled. Nicholas," she motioned him to her side, "please escort me to the drawing room, but first, I believe I could do with a sip of that whiskey." She walked to the side table, where she poured a generous amount into an empty tumbler.

Helena watched her finish the drink and walk out regally, neither looking to the left nor right. She knew the duchess would not easily forgive this delay. The duchess' behavior indicated her displeasure.

"You have done it now. Even your sister did not cause us such embarrassment." Lady Steeples frowned at her daughter. "Why couldn't you just marry the duke? Lawson has no title and may not want to wed you after being gone all these years. You were both young and immature when he left."

Lord Steeples went to his wife, where she sat sniffing into her handkerchief. Helena sat alone as usual.

She walked to the door. Her father glanced up, gave her a brief smile, and then motioned for her to leave. Tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry, Papa." Stepping into the hallway, she took several deep breaths and blinked furiously to keep from crying. She must return to the drawing room and help convince everyone of the story they would tell about the delay of their wedding.

\* \* \* \*

"Why are you not in the study with the duke and your family, Lady Mary Ann?" Franklin asked.

Mary Ann smiled. "I don't think they need me to help them decide matters pertaining to the wedding."

"But you're the bride-to-be. Surely, you would demand to be involved."

"I'm not the bride!"

"Then who is?" Franklin had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Helena. I thought you knew he decided on her."

"But, he planned to ask you. He told me so before his first visit to your home. I know others thought he would be deciding between the two of you, but he said you'd suit him best."

Mary Ann nodded. "He did ask me. I declined to accept."

Franklin stared blankly at her. "You refused a duke? No one refuses a duke."

"I did!" Mary Ann turned away and glided across the room to the open doors. Glancing back, she stepped outside.

Franklin took his time walking around the room, stopping occasionally to speak with an acquaintance. Cooler air blew across his face when he went through the doors.

She stood a few steps away in the shadows. Silently, he came up behind her and turned her to face him.

"I have to understand what you said. Your sister, Helena, is to marry the duke?"

"Yes."

Franklin raked his hand through his hair. "What have I done?" He saw the anxious look Mary Ann gave him. "I thought you were to wed him. Why would I think otherwise?"

"He and I were never suited. We both realized Helena would make a much better duchess. Why does it matter to you?"

He shook his head. "I can't explain. I've been the bearer of bad news to my best friend, but I can't tell you how."

"There is something very suspicious going on here tonight. You don't have to tell me. I'll find out for myself."

"Don't be foolish. You'll put yourself in danger. Why do women persist in interfering in a man's business?"

She snapped her head back and he knew he'd said the wrong thing. Anger flashed in her eyes.

"I might ask why men assume we have no ability to think. You, want a woman you can place on the mantelpiece for all to observe and envy you the ownership. Excuse me." She swept her skirts out of his way and ran back to the open doorway, stopping to regain her dignity before disappearing inside.

Franklin chuckled. She'd put him firmly in his place. The flicker of desire stirred again. She was wrong. He didn't want her on his mantel, but in his bed. He felt himself harden with need and she wasn't marrying Nicholas.

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## Chapter 15

Nicholas observed the rigid posture of his mother as she walked beside him. "Say whatever you want, Mother. I'm aware you are displeased."

"Why not break the engagement? Enough is enough. You've been patient too long with this family. Never did I think my friends' daughters would be so impolite and unsuited to be your wife."

"Mother, you knew of Lady Helena's situation. She has been open and honest with both of us. This evening was not her wish or in her control."

"She knew he'd returned. A simple definite no, to him, would have prevented this embarrassing debacle. I'm sure she let him see her uncertainty."

"Perhaps, but she is not to blame. I wonder how anyone might react after such a shock."

His mother's sharp eyes searched his face. "You care for the girl."

"Yes, but not so much that I can't get over her, if she chooses to marry Falscroft." He knew when he said the words that they weren't true. He wouldn't admit even to himself how much he pictured her in his home and life and how he would miss her if, she chose another man.

His mother nodded. "Then our plan is for the best. Prudence will be the most difficult to convince to watch her words."

"Prudence has been warned, Mother. You might remind her that what I said still stands."

They stood for a moment in the entrance to the large drawing room. Heads turned looking at them with questions in their eyes. Nicholas smiled watching his mother straighten herself to her full regal posture and enter the room with all her majestic flare. His lips curved in an affectionate smile.

Helena returned shortly afterwards and Nicholas went to her side. Taking her hand, he bowed over it. "I am glad to see you have joined us, my dear."

Tucking her arm into his, he strolled around the room, stopping to speak with each group of guests. They explained to family and close friends they planned to wait until this summer to announce their wedding date. A ripple of whispers followed them around the room. Stopping at the large fireplace, Nicholas held tightly to the small hand on his arm and thanked everyone for joining them that evening.

\* \* \* \*

Helena saw the smile on Lawson's face and his quick look in her direction. She knew he thought she had decided she wanted him instead of the duke and until the day she met Nicholas in her turret room, she'd have been overjoyed to see Lawson home. A few weeks ago, she'd have been excited about his return but her life had changed drastically. A profusion of emotions raced through her. How had she changed so much in a short period of time?

Her answer seemed to be the duke himself. His large hand holding hers was warm and strong. His broad shoulders and upright carriage represented strength and safety in a way she couldn't explain. They barely knew each other, yet she was ever aware of his presence.

His emerald green eyes gazed into hers. She swallowed and forced herself to look away. Lawson stood nearby. A small smile curved his lips, replaced fleetingly by another expression, when he noted the duke's hand clasping hers.

Her Lawson and yet not. At least this gave her time to sort out her mixed emotions and make Lawson aware he couldn't walk back into her life, as though nothing had changed.

Soon, the guests began to depart. Others staying the night said they would leave tomorrow. They obviously couldn't wait to return to London with this juicy piece of gossip.

Sparks of fire and a haughty disdain came from Prudence and Sophia. Cruel smiles covered their faces when they said good night to her, but the stern expression on the duke's face kept their remarks short and polite.

Mary Ann stood on Helena's other side and took her arm after the last guest left. "Let's go to our rooms. I believe you have endured enough for one night."

Helena squeezed her hand. "You go. I must speak with Nicholas once more before retiring."

Mary Ann nodded and reluctantly went upstairs alone. Helena moved into the smaller sitting room, after asking Nicholas to join her.

He leaned his back against the closed door, his stillness unnerving.

"Your Grace," she said, standing straight and holding her hands clenched tightly in front of her. "I must first thank you for your support this afternoon and tonight. Never did I think Lawson would attend tonight's dinner and cause such an embarrassing scene for you and your family. It is obvious your mother and Prudence are furious with me. I am sorry."

He pushed away from the door and moved steadily toward her, his eyes holding hers captive. He stopped in front of her. She felt the heat radiating from his body, and her heart beat raced. She resisted the urge to step back.

"I am giving you time to recover from the shock of Lord Falscroft's return. I am not releasing you from our contract. Do not regard me as a weak man or necessarily as always forgiving."

His hands reached out and pulled her against him. "I do not give up what is mine." His mouth slashed down over hers. Hard demanding lips forced hers apart and his tongue moved inside, touching and demanding a response.

Without a thought, her body moved closer. Her arms went around his waist and she leaned into him. She took a deep breath and smelled his familiar cologne.

"Remember," he said as he stepped back from her. "Harry was wrong. I will fight for what is mine, and you will be my duchess."

"Can you forgive me?" she asked.

"You are not the one who needs forgiveness and no, I will not forgive him."

He strode with firm steps to the door. He turned and stared at her for a long while. His gaze raked across her face and down her body slowly until it reached the hem of her dress. And then he was gone.

His last look had branded her as his. Trembling fingers touched her lips. All thoughts of Lawson fled her memory replaced by the duke who filled her body with such strong needs and yearnings.

\* \* \* \*

Franklin paced around Nicholas' London office. "I'm sorry. When I spoke with you, I thought you were marrying Lady Mary Ann."

"Would you have withheld the information from me, Franklin? I don't think so."

"No, but I would have...oh I don't know how I could have told you any other way."

"Nor do I. Quit worrying, my friend. You did not know of Lady Helena and Lord Falscroft's previous relationship. I know Lady Helena is not part of any traitorous plan. Have you any news for me?"

"There has been an interesting tidbit of information from my man following the first rescued prisoner. He came to London yesterday and met with someone we both know."

"And why do you hesitate to tell me?" Nicholas studied the controlled expression on Franklin's face.

"He visited Lawson Falscroft."

"Where?"

"At an old inn, off the beaten path. My contact said they talked, had several mugs of ale, and parted. The other man left town."

"You are continuing to have both followed?"

"Of course."

Nicholas leaned back in his chair, his feet crossed on the top of his desk. "Perhaps, he heard of Lawson's rescue and went to compare notes?"

Franklin shook his head no. "The report said these two appeared to know each other well."

Nicholas sat up abruptly. "Keep the watch on both of them. Do they both patronize the same bank?"

Franklin looked surprised. "How did you know?"

Nicholas ignored his question. "See the bank president and find out how much they have deposited and any recent transactions they've made."

"That is my other information. Yesterday, Lawson went to the bank and to his tailor. You'll probably see him at the Chatney's ball tonight."

"Do me a favor." Nicholas walked to the fireplace and stirred the ashes while thinking. "Go by the Steeples and drop that bit of information to Lady Helena." Nicholas turned and smiled. "Since Mary Ann will be around, I don't think this is an assignment you'll mind doing."

"Am I so obvious?"

"Only to an old friend."

Franklin grimaced and left. Nicholas hands clenched. If Lawson was the traitor, it would be difficult telling Helena. Would she even believe Lawson capable of such a deed?

Part of him hoped he was wrong. And yet, deep inside he knew he wanted to see Lawson suffer. His anger and disgust for the man had not abated. Thinking of Lawson touching Helena made him want to challenge him to a duel, the old fashioned way of protecting honor. His hand touched the cold steel of the fire tong. Ah, yes. He could easily pierce Lawson's black heart with a saber.

Desire and possessiveness flared through him, all thought of the convenient marriage gone from his mind. He wanted her and planned to have her.

Only one person could take her away from him. Lawson. He didn't like feeling vulnerable to a situation he might not be able to control.

\* \* \* \*

The Chatney's ball was overcrowded and hot. Large groups of people moved restlessly and fanned themselves, while waiting for the music to start.

"I'm going home tomorrow," Helena spoke, determined to get her parents to agree. "Three weeks of being seen and talked about by the Ton is enough. If the duke and I have not convinced them all is well with us, then they will never believe it."

"Do not expect Mary Ann or me to accompany you, Helena," her mother snapped. She was irritated with the heat and the subject.

"Agnes will chaperon me, Mama, and the house is full of staff."

Her father gave her mother a warning look. "I'll go with you, daughter. Your mother and sister can enjoy themselves in all these crowded hot rooms. I'm ready to return to my estate and relax."

Helena turned her face to hide a smile when Mama did not reply. Papa seldom took charge, but when he did, her mother was wise enough not to challenge him.

"Thank you, Papa." Helena kissed him on the cheek.

"Well, eh," he blustered and turned walking off toward the card room.

"Have you told the duke?" Mary Ann inquired.

"I do not need to ask permission from the duke for everything I decide to do." Even to her own ears, her voice sounded snippy. "He is not my husband, yet."

"Not yet, but soon, my dear." His deep voice made her jump and she hoped he had not overheard their whole conversation. She planned to send a note around to his house in the morning, so he would receive it after she left town.

Nicholas bowed. "May I have this dance?"

Helena nodded, noticing the orchestra finally played. She took his arm for him to lead her onto the dance floor. She forced herself to relax and enjoy the opportunity to dance with him once more.

"Thank you for the warning about Lawson coming tonight," she said as the steps of the reel brought them back together, "but I haven't seen him."

"He's here. I'm sure he will make his appearance known to you soon."

Helena swung her head around searching the crowds. When she glanced back to Nicholas, she realized she must tell him about leaving town. She wouldn't be a coward and slip away.

The music stopped and he started to walk her back to where her mother stood. She halted him with a touch on his arm. "Your Grace, there is something I must tell you."

"About your plans to go home tomorrow?"

"You did overhear our conversation?"

"Forgive me for eavesdropping, but you gave me no opportunity to interrupt."

Her face warmed and she groaned inwardly, knowing a blush likely covered her cheeks. How did he always seem to catch her on everything? He was worse than her mother.

"Anyway, I agree it is best for you to have some time alone. You have much to think about."

"Do you think I might choose Lawson rather than you?"

His hand tightened on hers and she saw his face harden. Pulling her closer to his side, he began to walk with her around the ballroom. His lips close to her ear, the warmth of his breath sent chills down her spine. "I have faith in you." Nothing else, only that short statement. Then he returned her to her mother, bowed, and disappeared into the crowd.

She turned her glance away from the direction he had gone. Lawson stood at the end of the room. He waved and rushed to her side.

"We are overdue for this dance, Helena." Tonight, with his sparkling eyes and tousled blond hair, he seemed more the Lawson she'd known from the past.

It was good she planned to leave tomorrow. She needed time to regain her equilibrium and face whatever the future held.

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## Chapter 16

Muddy roads and rain made the trip home difficult. Helena and her father finally arrived, late in the evening, of the second day.

"I will be up early tomorrow to ride over the fields and meet with my manager. I'll see you later in the day, Helena," her father said as he headed to his bedroom.

"All right. Thank you Papa, for coming with me."

"I should thank you." He grinned. "You know how I miss the country, always did hate town with all the endless parties. You did me a favor."

Helena watched him go up the stairs. They had stopped at an Inn for dinner, but she was hungry. She went down the hall to the kitchen. Cook was surprised, but pleased to see her and set about fixing a plate of cold meat, cheese, and bread.

"You go on into the sitting room, my lady. I'll have Ned," she motioned to one of her helpers, "bring you a tray and a glass of wine."

"Thank you, food before a warm fire is exactly what I need this evening."

Helena ate the nourishing food and sat back to sip on the wine. She stared at the small fire, the flames flickering and casting shadows around the room. Watching the mesmerizing light, weariness cloaked her body.

The past three weeks of pretending the whispers and stares did not bother her and always having to present a cool, unruffled manner had taken its toll. She'd had no time to think about Lawson's return and the turmoil it created inside her. She did not expect Nicholas to wait forever.

How ironic. Life had a way of laughing at you. She waited four years and soon after signing the marriage contract, Lawson returns, alive and well. She took another sip of her wine.

Lawson was not the same young man who went to war. His eyes might sparkle with laughter, but she had seen other expressions, fleeting glances of an older, hardened man.

He and Nicholas were such different men, and they were the only two to ever cause her to contemplate marriage. Her confusion and lack of control troubled her. Hopefully, the next few weeks would help her resolve any lingering doubts regarding any obligations she'd had to Lawson.

\* \* \* \*

"Lady Helena, you have a guest." The footman moved to the side and Lawson strode into the room, all smiles, and full of confidence.

"Helena, I am glad to see you are alone. We must talk."

"Hardly alone, Lawson." She indicated Agnes sitting to the side of the room. "You remember my maid..."

Lawson waved his hand to indicate Agnes' unimportance. "How lovely you look sitting at your desk. Come outside with me. I've brought my curricle and it's a sunny day. Please." He gave her his most appealing smile. "You must join me."

Sunshine glinted through the window and Helena needed some fresh air. "I have been too much inside since my return last week. You find me at a weak moment. I would love to go for a ride."

"With the curricle open, you will not need a chaperon."

Helena glanced at Agnes. "You are right. We do have much to discuss. Agnes will get my shawl and bonnet, and then I shall be ready to accompany you."

Dressed in her blue muslin gown with a light grey shawl, and her blue and grey bonnet, Helena smiled at Lawson when he assisted her into the curricle.

"It is a beautiful day. I'm glad you came to take me away from my boring chores. When did you arrive from London?"

Lawson climbed up beside her. "I found town boring after you left." He reached over, touching her face lightly. "You should never have to wrinkle that lovely brow over household accounts. When we are married, I shall have an accountant take care of all the finances. You will only need to enjoy yourself."

"You seem very confident you'll convince me to marry you. I don't think we can act as though nothing has changed. We are different people from the young couple of four years ago."

The curricle moved fast along the lanes surrounded by tall hedges. He glanced over at her words.

"Shall we wait until we stop before we discuss our future? Mama's cook has packed a large basket of food for us. I thought we would ride over to the old Standish place. It's a shame they have let it fall to ruin, but no one will be around and we can talk about our future together."

Helena frowned at him, but he had turned his attention back to his horses. He refused to consider any plans other than his own. A feeling of wariness came over her. To accept a ride with him in the curricle was different from having a picnic at an isolated home site.

"Take me home."

"What?"

"Take me home. Now. I did not agree to a picnic. If you would like, we can enjoy your cooks' food beside the lake at home with Agnes nearby."

"I want to talk with you alone, have you to myself."

"You know that would be highly improper."

He pulled on the horses reins and turned to her. "You felt different the night before I left to join my ship. And you are one and twenty now, not seventeen. You must know I want to have you alone to kiss you and hold you. You can not still be the naive girl I left behind." His last words were sharp and a flash of anger crossed his handsome face.

Sadness filled her and she noticed rain clouds in the distance. "Take me home. I don't think either of us is in the mood for a picnic anyway."

He continued moving at a fast pace along the lane until he came to a crossroads where he could turn around. They didn't speak and a short time later arrived back at her house.

"Let's not part on such terms." She glanced back at the picnic basket. "We can still picnic along the lake. I'll get Agnes to join us and we will be in sight of the house."

She saw a glimmer of annoyance cross his face. "All right, I can see this is my only choice."

"Good, help me down. We must not tarry. It may rain."

They'd finished the food and had only started to talk when the first large raindrops fell. They ran for the house. Agnes hurried along with them, and then once inside she went on toward the sitting room.

"Someone told me you're a fine artist," Lawson said as he reached out to stop Helena from following Agnes. "May I see some of your work?"

Helena hesitated. The stairs to the turret room were close. She only had to take his hand and lead him around the corner and up the stairs. But, the turret room was very isolated.

They were already alone, Helena realized. Lawson took one quick glance around and pulled her too him. His mouth covered hers, hard and demanding. Hands roamed over her back and came around to capture her breast in a tight hold.

Taken by surprise, Helena did not initially move away from him, but now shocked by his behavior, she struggled against his tight hold.

"Let me go," she demanded, pressing hard against his chest.



His face flushed, he resisted her efforts until she stomped his foot hard and punched him in the stomach.

"All right." He stepped away and threw up his hands. "I had forgotten how very provincial you were and apparently still are. Going to London has not given you any polish, my love." His cold words slashed across her.

This was the other Lawson, the one who frightened her the first day in the forest. Glad to be free, she hurried away from him and went toward the main part of the house. She didn't look back.

Thankfully, Nicholas' guards were not around to report back to him. Lawson's behavior might cause a confrontation between the two men and create even more gossip. His mother would never forgive her if that happened.

\* \* \* \*

Lawson went out the door into the rain. He ran his hand across his face. He must be careful to continue his role of the polite gentleman at home, as well as with everyone in the village. At least until he made his arrangements to leave.

But, given the opportunity, he would have her one more time. Even if he had to make her believe he planned to take her with him to America. How dare Helena push him away in favor of her stodgy duke? She and the duke would pay for the scene that just occurred.

His long strides took him quickly to his curricule. No woman had rejected him since he left home. After he settled his affairs, he would leave for the new America and a better future for a man of his intelligence and spirit. Meanwhile, he would enjoy wrecking havoc on the lofty duke and his lady.

Guiding his horses around the curved driveway, he glanced back at the house. Helena, honest to her bones, would be forced to admit their previous relationship to her future husband. Obviously, she had not already spoken to him or he wouldn't still be at her side. No man wanted a loose woman for his wife. If only he had time to stay and see the end of the story.

He urged his horses on and headed to the village to have a pint with his friends. Fields he'd never thought to see again flashed by his curricule.

Things were coming to a close and if the authorities knew how he acquired his fortune, they might not be pleased to see him go free. He must complete his plans and make his reservation on a ship leaving soon. This time he wouldn't ever return.

\* \* \* \*

Struggling with shock and sadness, Helena sighed with relief to see her father come in for tea. She gave him a big hug. He held her close then pulled away and studied her face.

"I've missed the hugs you girls used to give me when you were small. You both came running whenever I returned home. Are you all right?"

"Of course, Papa. I've been lonely and I'm glad you took the time from your busy day to join me for tea."

"I heard you had a visitor this morning. I would think he'd fill your need for company better than me."

She knew her laugh sounded forced. "Papa, you do like to tease me. However do you know everything that goes on around here?"

He sat across from her and the tea pot. "I'm glad to see cook has baked some scones today. They smell delicious." Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes.

"Are you sure you are all right, Papa?"

"I'm tired, Helena. I hoped to see you and your sister married before I got much older. I'd like to see some grandchildren in this house before I close my eyes for good."

Worried, Helena's words rushed out. "Papa, I never think of you as being old. Have you had a bad day?"

"No. I see you prefer to avoid the topic of your marriage and I shall not pursue it except to say remember you are an earl's daughter and you have signed a binding agreement. After having time to recover from the shock of Lawson's return, you will do as society expects and demands. It has never been a question of whether you will marry the duke, but when."

She had signed the agreement after Nicholas agreed with her terms. No one forced her to make her decision. Helena confronted herself with the same honest reasoning she would anyone else.

"You are right, Papa. I am glad to know Lawson survived. I still do not understand how. It doesn't seem to be something he wishes to discuss. His return has not changed my mind. I've been a bit confused and not thinking clearly, but I have no intention of trying to cancel the agreement I signed."

Her father reached across for another scone and handed her his cup for a refill of tea. "I'm glad. This has been a nice respite in the day. I must go to the village this afternoon. Would you care to join me?"

"I have some letters to write, Papa. Thank you for the invitation, perhaps another time."

Soon after, her father arose, kissed her on the cheek, and left on his errands. She would write Mary Ann. She missed her, but knew Mary Ann stayed in town hoping to see more of Lord Gates. He was another mysterious man.

Last season, in town, the men she and Mary Ann met were only interested in the latest horserace or who lost a fortune at cards the previous night. No depth to them and no mystery, but no danger either. She left the drawing room to return to the small sitting room where she'd left her paperwork scattered across her desk. She was sure her father's information about her visitor came from his loyal servants.

Distaste moved over her at thoughts of Lawson. He'd been rough, demanding, and frightening in his actions. She doubted the Lawson she remembered existed anymore.

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Chapter 17

Drops of moisture fell off the trees and down the back of his collar. Dickey saw his contact had left his horse far enough back to avoid any unnecessary noises.

Odell moved into the clearing. "You're sure you weren't followed?" he asked him.

"No one can follow me. 'Tis what kept me alive all these years."

"Good, we are preparing to make our move. You and your friend will help. One of my men will contact you about the exact date. Be ready to act on short notice."

"And what might you be givin' me to follow them orders?"

A heavy purse flew across, caught deftly by Dickey.

"You're a fine man, yes, sir. Me n' me friends will be waiting for your directions."

"Don't let me down. I have other men who will know where to find you," Odell snarled then disappeared into the damp forest.

Dickey watched him go and turned to spit out his chew of tobacco. "You think you're so fine. Don't scare me none. Some other man comes along with more coins and you are done in," he muttered.

\* \* \* \*

"The Duke of Monteroy." The butler stood aside to allow Nicholas entry.

Lady Steeples stood and dropped her knitting from her lap.

"Forgive me for surprising you. There was no time to send my card around." Nicholas picked up the knitting and handed it to her.

"Not at all, Your Grace. You are almost a member of the family and are always welcome. Please be seated and join me in a cup of tea."

He sat in the straight backed chair across from her. He realized how much the twins resembled their mother. She was still an attractive woman, even with the slight evidence of age in the fine lines of her face.

After pouring his tea, Lady Steeples looked questioningly at him. "How might I be of assistance, Your Grace?"

"With Helena in the country, there has been no opportunity for us to discuss a date for our wedding. I have decided enough time has passed. I am planning a small party at my estate, the one nearest your home. Perhaps there, we will have an opportunity to talk and make decisions. Is this agreeable with you?"

"Most certainly. I fully agree." Lady Steeples said. She smiled and took a sip of her tea.

Having Lady Steeples' seal of approval made his plans easier to activate. However, whether she had agreed or not, two weeks apart from Helena was long enough.

Reports had filtered back to him about Falscroft and his visit to Helena. And although he'd expected it, he didn't have to like it. He'd agreed with her father about not having guards on the estate, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to have them in the near vicinity. He was not as trusting about there neighbors as her father.

Putting down her tea cup, Lady Steeples continued. "Your Grace, a house party sounds delightful."

"I knew I could count on you, Madame." Standing he bowed. "I regret I must rush off. Plans will need to be set in motion. The party will be the end of this week. Do you have any problems with such short notice?"

"No, we will arrive Friday afternoon, if that is agreeable."

"Perfect." Nicholas left and headed to White's to meet Franklin. The end of the week could not come fast enough. It was time for him to claim what was his and let Falscroft know he was through being reasonable.

Franklin sat at a back table. Nicholas nodded to acknowledge a few acquaintances, as he moved toward him.

"Nicholas." Franklin stood, his face grim.

"I gather from your expression, your visit to the country has not been pleasant." Nicholas spoke briefly to the waiter, who came to their table. "A bottle of brandy and please see we are not disturbed."

"Yes, Your Grace." The man left and returned with the brandy and two glasses.

Nicholas studied the room. It was early yet and the crowd light. "Tell me what has brought such a scowl to your face."

"Whoever is in charge of this operation is staying low."

"You're sure Falscroft isn't our man?"

"He's involved in some way, but he's clever. His only contact is Miles, the first man we rescued."

"We know from Miles bank account that he is not nearly as wealthy as Falscroft. To assume Falscroft is the one in charge would not be amiss," Nicholas added. "Why do you think otherwise?"

Franklin stared across the room, his expression closed. He looked back at Nicholas. "A gut feeling. There is more to this than meets the eye. The traitor has to be someone closer. A person who knows our moves. He always seems to be one step ahead of me."

"I hate to think that one of our own men might be in charge.," Nicholas said, reluctant to give up on the idea of Falscroft as the traitor.

"I'm going back. I'll keep in touch." Franklin started to stand.

Nicholas reached out, stopping him. "Wait, I'm having a house party. Arrive Friday, as a guest." Nicholas watched the darkening of Franklin's face and his hesitation.

"All right," the words came out reluctantly.

"You must be very frightened of your feelings for her, my friend, to be so reluctant to be in her company."

"This subject is not for discussion." Franklin said, his voice sharper then usual.

Watching Franklin weave his way between the tables and go out the door, Nicholas leaned back in his chair and rubbed his forehead. A key bit of information was

missing. If anyone could find it, Franklin would. But Franklin was fighting two battles right now, one with the enemy and one with himself. They could not afford for him to be distracted.

He'd talk to the head of his guards. He had one more person to protect, perhaps from himself.

\* \* \* \*

Helena heard the horse's hooves and pulled on her reins. Lawson seemed to accidentally meet her almost every time she went for a ride. This Lawson always smiled, complimented her on her appearance, and teased her in the light fashion she remembered. She always gave an excuse to end her ride, so he couldn't join her.

"Hello, we meet again." Lawson pulled up beside her.

"Yes, this is becoming a habit."

"Do you mind?" he asked as he moved alongside of her.

"And if I did?"

"Shall I leave?"

She studied him. "No, race with me."

\* \* \* \*

Breathless, her hair coming loose from her tight bun, she pulled on her reins and stopped. Lawson helped her dismount. Leaves blew across the open area of the knoll.

"You're as beautiful as I remembered during all those long four years. I kept my sanity by keeping your image in my mind."

"Was it very bad?"

"Only at first. They tried to get me to give them information. I wouldn't and they used other means to try and make me comply."

"Lawson, I'm so sorry. I never realized they tortured you."

He held her two hands tightly. "Later they left me alone and finally started to let me go outside into a small courtyard and get some sunshine." He moved his face up toward the sun peeking through the clouds. "I will never be able to get enough sunlight."

"I wondered what happened to you, but I didn't want to ask. It was obvious you weren't comfortable with questions regarding that time. Now I can understand why."

Dropping her hands, he walked to the edge of the clearing. "I don't know if I can ever forgive myself for my behavior last week. My only excuse is I was overcome with longing to touch you after having only had you in my dreams these many years."

Helena wondered if she was finally seeing the true man. She doubted it.

He put out his hands. "Might I hope you can put that awful day out of your memory?" He stepped closer and slowly leaned down to kiss her.

"No." She put up her hand. A rustling sound brought their attention to the nearby thicket of trees and brush.

"It's nothing. Probably the horses stepped on a tree branch. Please don't leave," he said, as she started over to her horse.

Helena turned. "I'm sorry, Lawson. I should have been firm when I told you before that I'm marrying the duke. The time for us has passed. Your return surprised me and I didn't know what I wanted or what to do. I'm over that now and am moving forward with my life. You need to do the same. That's the only reason I agreed to the ride today, so I could make clear to you that it is over between us. She stared up at him. "I'm going back to the house. Do not try to meet with me this way anymore."

Helena noted his pleading look and her throat tightened with sorrow when she remembered previous times. She grabbed the pommel on her saddle and the sunlight captured the red fire of the large ruby ring on her finger. It reminded her she was no longer that seventeen year old girl. She was a grown woman and belonged to another.

Lawson stood where she left him. "Are you riding back?"

"I think I'll stay here." His eyes were guarded and his face solemn. "The sun feels good. I need to think."

\* \* \* \*

Lawson let a smile cross his face when she rode off sight. He chuckled. There was no doubt she fell for his sad story. She was hardly a challenge.

He'd learned his lessons well. After he fell off his ship, he thought he'd drown. When the smoke cleared and the battle was over, he was too far away for anyone to see him. Later, when all his hope was gone, a pirate ship plucked him out of the ocean. It seemed a continuation of his nightmare.

But, he turned it into a golden opportunity. Conniving his way into the pirates' good graces for his fighting and bravery, he won a place in their community.

He'd saved the spoils from his pirating. Odell helped him change them into cash and placed the money in the bank in England. He'd been ready to take off on his own away from the pirates. He just hadn't seen how to accomplish his plan, until the gale that had wrecked the pirate ship against the rocks.

The English rescuing him was a stroke of luck. They'd believed his story of being a prisoner.

Well, everyone except Franklin and his contact. He'd seen suspicion in their eyes. But they had no evidence to prove him wrong. Miles knew, but like him, Miles didn't want his past discovered. He'd implicate himself if he said anything.

But Odell knew that Lawson not only worked with the pirates, but passed information to the French for which he was well paid. The thought of being beholden to Odell made Lawson very uncomfortable.

Lawson stared across the farming land to the village. If he'd stayed here, he would never have had the money he did now. He had a bankroll and connections and he planned to use them to go far.

He went to his horse and saddled up. "Ah, yes, my love," he said softly to the empty clearing, "I may not have you again. Time is running out. But, you won't forget me.

Soon my plans will be complete and I'll disappear."

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## Chapter 18

"We're going to a house party?" Helena asked. Having just returned from her ride with Lawson, she had hoped to retreat to her room and freshen up. She noted her father held a letter in his hand.

"Your mother has written the duke is expecting us on Friday. We're to go to his estate in Lincolnshire, near Bardney. I'm glad. It's high time we made plans for your wedding. You have had time to come to terms with Lawson's survival." Her father frowned. "You don't appear happy with the news you will see your betrothed in a few days."

"Papa, Lawson told me of his difficult captivity. I don't want to marry him, but I'm concerned about him."

"Sit down, Helena." He motioned her to a near-by chair. Then he looked at her thoughtfully.

"You need only be concerned about the duke." He sat across from her. "I'm sorry about what happened to you. First love is special and for some it can last a lifetime. For many it doesn't."

"However, because of circumstances beyond anyone's control you and Lawson were separated. Time has wrought many changes in both of you. I doubt those earlier feelings could ever be recaptured, even if you weren't engaged to the duke."

"Maybe they could, if things were different." If I'd never met and kissed Nicholas, she thought.

"Perhaps for a short time. Do not be fooled."

"I know you're right, Papa. Nevertheless, I have some guilt regarding Lawson. I sent him away believing I loved him and would be here on his return."

"Circumstances changed."

"Yes, they did and I hope Lawson understands now and will quit trying to meet me every time I go for a ride. I'm looking forward to seeing Mama and Mary Ann on Friday."

"What about the duke?"

She smiled, stood and kissed her father's cheek. "Him too, of course." Turning quickly she walked toward the doorway, before he saw the flush on her face as desire coursed through her body.

Nicholas. How would he receive her? Friday couldn't come soon enough.

\* \* \* \*

Helena reached for her papers. Flipping the pages, she came to her drawings of Nicholas and the different expressions she'd tried to capture. She planned to give him a painting as a wedding present. She glanced at her easel, the beginning of his painting set on it.

Her eyes went back to the papers in her lap. His eyes stared back at her. The strong mouth curved slightly. Chiseled cheekbones and a firm jaw told the world this was a man who could handle himself. Only the soft curl of brown hair on his forehead softened the impact of his warrior face.

His strength gave her a protected feeling. She didn't have to be the strong one all the time. His lips sent shivers of delight along all her nerve endings when he moved them over her face in a light caress. Lawson was rough and demanding the day he grabbed her. He frightened her. Nicholas might be a larger man with broader shoulders and commanding height, but she was never afraid of him.

She placed her drawings on her work table. Her feelings for Lawson and Nicholas were completely different. She was prepared to say goodbye to Lawson and wish him well. It would not cause her the grief she felt four years ago. Her heart hurt even thinking about ever telling Nicholas farewell.

Nicholas might invite Lawson and his family to the party. He was a man of action and he would want to end anyone's doubt as to his claim to her. She didn't trust Lawson to behave appropriately. She'd need to be wary of him.

Determined to work on Nicholas' portrait, she went over and picked up her brush. Visualizing him as he looked the first day he came to the turret room, she began to paint.

Agnes' voice interrupted her concentration. "Your Papa says to tell you he is waiting for you to join him."

Unaware of the passage of time, Helena looked surprised to realize how shadowy and cool the room had become the last few hours.

"No wonder I'm having difficulty seeing." She laughed. "Please ask father to give me a few minutes and I'll be with him."

Agnes padded out of the room, her soft slippers almost soundless on the stairs. Helena studied her work. The painting surprised and pleased her. In spite of her jumbled thoughts, she had managed to concentrate and do well today. Nicholas' strong personality came across in the portrait.

His parting words, the evening she told him she planned to leave London, came back to her. "I'm looking forward to having you as my wife and duchess, my dear. I will come for you soon." He had spoken not in anger or demand, but in a calm voice, stating a fact, nothing more, nothing less.

Helena cleaned her brushes and wiped her hands. She glanced at the painting one last time before leaving the room. He was a man that held himself tightly in control. What would he be like if someone pushed him too far?

Would he ever let loose the strong control he held over himself when he was with her? A shiver of fascination and yes, fear caused her heart to flutter. A strange yearning filled her. She desired Nicholas and she feared she might be falling in love with him. She mustn't forget they'd agreed on a convenient marriage.

\* \* \* \*

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Chapter 19

Carriages rolled onto the grounds of Ashton Court, one after another. Helena and her father were third in line to disembark and they waited patiently for the other two carriages to move along. Helena could see Nicholas and his mother greeting guests in the double doorway at the head of the steps.

Lord Steeples patted Helena's gloved hand. "All will work out for the best. Wait and see."

"Papa, what would I do without you?" Her arms closed around him, giving him a hug.

"Humph, you'll do fine. The duke will take good care of you, else I would never have agreed to the marriage contract."

The two carriages in front of them moved away and their carriage moved up. "I suspect you think your mother and I are more concerned in the alliance of our families. The truth is if the duke had been a different man, more like his cousin, I would not have agreed."

Helena hugged him again. "I love you, Papa." She smiled when she saw him blush.

The door on her side opened and Helena moved forward expecting the footman to assist her out of the carriage. Instead, strong hands took her firmly by the waist and swung her to the ground.

"Your Grace, I thought you would meet us at the door." Even to her own ears her words sounded breathless.

Sea green eyes focused on her face and then down over her body. "I have missed you."

A simple statement and Helena's heart beat faster. He took her two hands in his and everything else around them seemed to be far in the distance.

"I'm glad to be here Your Grace," Helena heard the quiver in her voice. She wanted to say more but found herself shy in his presence.

"Good to see you again, Selwyn." Lord Steeples reached out to shake the duke's hand.

"And you, sir," he said, reaching around Helena to shake hands with her father. "Lady Steeples and Lady Mary Ann arrived an hour ago. They will be happy to see you."

Helena glanced up the front stairs, then ran to greet Mary Ann, who had started on her way down. At the top of the steps, her mother and the dowager duchess waited.

Mary Ann wrapped her arm around Helena's as they turned and walked up the steps. Helena received a hug from her mother, but noted the duchess cool expression and reserved manner. She had not forgiven Helena for what she considered an affront to her son.

"Duchess." Helena curtsied. "It is nice to see you again."

"Welcome to our home. Lady Mary Ann will show you to your room, next to hers."

"Thank you, I would like to freshen up."

"Come on." Mary Ann pulled unladylike on her arm and received a frown from Nicholas mother. "Please excuse us."

"The old biddy," Mary Ann whispered. "She hasn't smiled once since we arrived, but she greeted her friends with enthusiasm."

"It is understandable, Mary Ann. The two of us both rejected her son, at first and then I caused us to have to postpone our wedding date. I'm sure I would feel the same."

Helena hesitated and looked down the stairs to view the group in the foyer. Nicholas stood to the side, his gaze not wavering from her. Straightening her posture, she started to turn and follow Mary Ann to her assigned room. But, she didn't miss seeing his lips curve in a slight smile.

"At least she gave us adjoining rooms," Mary Ann stated, throwing herself across the bed. "What happened with you and Lawson?" Mary Ann asked as she turned to face Helena.

"I've been confused since Lawson's return, but I realized that I didn't love him. He followed me around until I got my own thoughts straight and I told him I definitely planned to marry Nicholas.

"Pirates captured Lawson and they tortured him. I feel guilty that I didn't wait for him but I can't and don't want to cancel my arrangement with Nicholas."

"And Lawson accepts what you told him?"

A slight frown crossed Helena's face. "I hope so. He's changed. I see brief glimpses of a darker side of him. Jealousy, anger, and a determination to have what he wants whether it is right or not. And I think Lawson feels I'm obligated to our previous agreement."

"I don't think you have any responsibility to him. Do you care for him at all?"

"Only as a friend," Helena admitted.

"As for the difference you see in him, he's a grown man, Helena. Being a second son it's not unusual for him to want to make his mark on the world and fight harder for it."

"Perhaps, I don't know." Helena moved around the room, picking up a porcelain figurine of a small girl.

"What about you, Mary Ann?" she asked, as she sat the porcelain figure back on the table. She turned to sit in the chair beside it.

"No news. I saw Lord Gates briefly at one party, but most of the time he has been out of town. I'm not even sure he will be here this week-end."

"I'm sorry it has not developed as you hoped."

"I have not given up. The man fascinates me more then anyone I've ever met and," Mary Ann smiled impishly, "he has met his match if he thinks he can continue to ignore me."

"There isn't much you can do if he isn't around."

Helena, have you ever seen me not get what I want?"

"I'm going to change. We will be expected to join the other guests," Helena said and watched Mary Ann go toward the adjoining door. "And one more thing." Mary Ann stopped glancing back at her. "Franklin Gates will not be like your usual conquest to be won with smiles and teasing, Mary Ann. If you think this might be the man you will love, you'd best find a different approach."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas waited in the library for Franklin. Franklin had arrived dirty and disheveled and had gone upstairs to change. Hopefully, he would return soon. Anxious to join the others and see Helena again, Nicholas paced the floor.

She'd seemed pleased to see him. Was she still unsure of what she wanted?

He refused to think she might decide to cancel their contract. Not only did he not want Lawson to have her for personal reasons, but also he didn't like the man and would not trust him to care for her. He was determined to do all he could to keep her at his side.

"Cousin, may I join you?" Harry asked and came in before he received an answer. "People are looking for you in the drawing room. I believe even your lovely betrothed has been searching the room for you... or someone."

"What do you want, Harry?"

"Nothing, only to greet you and thank you for your invitation. I'm aware Ashton Court is your favorite residence and you seldom invite others to join you here."

Nicholas smiled cynically. "There must be more you wish to say or ask."

"Well, I do have one other tiny bit of information. It is rather delicate and I'm not sure how to tell you. I would never want to have something I said bring you pain, cousin."

"For gods sake man, out with it! You don't care a fig about me or my feelings."

"Tut, tut, never did I see such a temper in you before. Well, the gossip is that your darling Lady Helena was seen in the company of one Lord Falscroft. Once in the compromising position of being alone with him. If you wish proof, so you may cancel the marriage contract, I can secure it for you."

"Get out of this room and stay out of my sight. Your meddlesome ways are becoming tiresome. In fact, it might be best if you returned to London. Today." Nicholas moved closer to his cousin and glared at him.

"I knew I should not try to help you. As usual, you are unappreciative. So be it." He straightened his cravat. "I will leave, but mark my word you will rue the day you marry that little tramp."

He never saw the fist coming. Happy to put his boxing skills to practice, Nicholas hit Harry squarely in the face.

"Good job, I've wanted to flatten his face many times. I'm sorry you didn't wait and let me hit him." Franklin came into the room and shut the door behind him. "Won't do for your guests to see the host punching out his cousin."

"Take this pile of trash, dump him on a horse and see he heads to London." Leaning down he grabbed Harry's collar. "If you ever say another derogatory word about my future wife, I'll leave you to Franklin." He straightened. "He's not a fair fighter and has no conscience in a clinch."

Franklin hauled Harry to his feet. "Thanks for the compliment. Come on, you worthless example of a man."

Nicholas watched Franklin half carry his cousin out the back way toward the stables. He rubbed his knuckles. They were sore and red, but it felt good. How many times had he held himself back from punching Harry? It definitely felt good.

\* \* \* \*

Harry set out toward the road to London. As soon as he knew Franklin couldn't see him anymore, he circled back for his planned meeting.

"Lawson?" Harry spotted the man standing under a canopy of trees.

"That's me. You must be Harry. Odell gave me a good description. How are we going to work together this week-end?"

"I've been thrown off the property, so I'm headed for town. The plan has been set in motion and the men paid."

"Good. I'll be available if they have any questions or problems. You told them how to reach me?"

"Of course." Harry pulled on his reins and headed back toward the road.

Lawson watched him go out of sight. Odell was holding his past over his head, but once he finished this job, he'd sail away from Odell and everyone else. He had enough money to just disappear.

\* \* \* \*

Two rooms opened to form one large drawing room and people strolled around greeting each other. Some guests spilled out onto the wide terrace to enjoy the sunny afternoon. Helena and Mary Ann hesitated in the doorway, before moving inside and joining their brother and Sophia.

"Not that I want to speak with Sophia, but I do want to greet James," Mary Ann commented.

James smiled and stepped forward, greeting each sister with a hug. "You both look well." He studied Helena. "I hope we will be hearing good news soon of your impending marriage."

"She will tell you of an impending marriage in good time, James," Sophia's icy voice broke into the conversation. "Whether it will be to the duke is the big question."

James frowned at his wife. "She is speaking in jest. We all know your plans are still to marry the duke, aren't they?"

"Could we speak of something besides my marriage? There must be more interesting topics of conversation," Helena insisted.

"See I told you as soon as I saw Lawson Falscroft arrive with his mother, I knew." Sophia smiled a tight triumphant smile at her husband.

Helena turned her back on her meddling sister-in-law. Nicholas had invited Lawson as she suspected he would. This was certain to make the week-end party more stressful. Surveying each group of people, she tried to spot Nicholas. She noted Lady Falscroft sat beside another older woman and they were busy talking and watching the crowd.

The duchess with her dog, Pebbles, moved regally from group to group, stopping to greet each guest. It was strange Nicholas did not attend her.

Conversation slowed and stopped. Nicholas entered the room. Smiling he nodded at various guests as he made his way toward Helena. The sound of voices speaking softly followed in his wake.

"Your Grace." Helena curtsied.

"I am anxious to hear you finally call me Nicholas. Your Grace is beginning to grate on my nerves." His eyes teased her.

Turning his attention to the others in her group, he spoke with James and acknowledged Sophia. Helena observed the effort he made to make her family feel welcome.

His arm brushed hers when he had reached out to shake James hand. A shock ran across her skin.

"Mary Ann, you're unusually quiet. I hope you are not ill?"

"You are being impertinent, Your Grace. You know I am fine." Mary Ann smiled at him, and then added, "Will your friend, Lord Gates, be coming to the party?"

Her brazenness caused a gasp from Sophia, but Helena only smiled. How like Mary Ann to ask for what she wanted.

Nicholas appeared deep in thought while the others waited for his answer.

"Yes, I believe my mother did send him an invitation. Gates is rather a law unto himself though. I never know if he will show up or not. Do I detect an interest in my friend?"

Helena noted Mary Ann blush, then frown suspiciously at the slight smile on Nicholas' face. A sudden silence around them made Helena look to the door.

Lawson had entered, dressed impeccably in blue trousers and matching coat with a silver vest. His gold hair tousled and his blue eyes sparkled with laughter.

Please don't Lawson, her thoughts screamed out to him. He continued straight as an arrow in her direction.

"Your Grace." Lawson nodded to the duke. "How lovely you look, Helena. I always did like to see you in blue. All those years away I remembered you in the blue dress you wore to the last dance we attended, before I left."

Everyone knew of his recent rescue and Helena heard the people closest to her whispering after overhearing the conversation. Soon the words flew over the room like ripples on a lake.

Frowning at Lawson, she snatched her hand back when he tried to continue to hold it. "Behave," she whispered to him.

Ignoring her, he turned to the duke. "Thank you for inviting my mother and me, Your Grace. I wouldn't be so fair and gracious to an opponent."

"I don't believe we're in a contest for anything, Lord Falscroft. Whatever can you mean?"

Both men silently challenged the other. Blue eyes stared into green. The stillness of their bodies and the stance of their posture held the breathless attention of the inquisitive members of the Ton.

The duke lips curved slowly in a smile, but Helena saw it never reached the steely hardness of his eyes. "You and your mother are very welcome. I hope you will enjoy your visit."

He turned to Helena and placed her hand on his arm. "Come, my dear, I've been looking forward to showing you the beauty of the grounds outside my home."

She felt the movement of hard muscle under her hand and saw the look of possessiveness on Nicholas' face. He led her out the French windows and onto the terrace. They heard the rush of conversation behind them.

Helena hadn't missed the flash of hostility Lawson directed at Nicholas when they walked by him. She was relieved to be outside away from his animosity.

Realizing she'd been holding her breath during most of the conversation between the two men, she took a deep breath of fresh air. She was also unaware of tightening her hand on Nicholas' arm, until his other hand reached over and covered hers.

"Are you all right, Lady Helena?"

"Yes." She refused to meet his eyes and continued to study the various plants and flowers as they strolled along the walkway.

"I have a particular place I'd like to show you. Do you mind taking a little walk off the regular path?"

Curious she looked up.

"That's better, my dear. You're not to blame for other people's bad manners."

She noticed him glance at her soft shoes. "I will replace those lovely shoes if you ruin them on the walk."

"Nonsense, you have my curiosity aroused."

Tugging at her hand, he stepped off the path and they walked into a group of trees. The musty smell of dampness from the rain last night rose from the leaves disturbed by their steps. In the distance, a trio of peacocks screeched.

"I've always thought they make the most ungodly noise. Why my mother ever wanted them is beyond me," Nicholas said.

"They're lovely to look at, but I agree they make an awful racket." He took her hand and guided her across a clearing and over a bridge spanning the lake. Two regal white swans floated by on the still water.

"Wherever are you taking me?"

"We're almost there. Be patient." His face reflected a bit of mischief.

Another new side to this man, there seemed to be layers and layers to him. Very interesting, not at all the staid, boring man Mary Ann described that day at their home.

Reaching the far end of the lake, backed up into the surrounding trees, she saw their destination.

"It's lovely." A small Grecian style building of white stone, with purple chrysanthemums planted around the front, sat edged against the forest behind it. White pillars stood at the entrance.

"Would you like to see the inside?"

"Very much. I've seen several of these types of buildings on other estates, but none so lovely."

"My father gave it to my mother as her present on their tenth wedding anniversary. It's been the family joke. No one could imagine my stern father having such a folly built."

"Did she like it?" Helena had difficulty imagining his mother enjoying such a gift.

"I believe she did. They often disappeared for hours on end. We suspected where they were, but none of us were brave enough to check. My father did have a powerful temper."

"I would have liked to have met him. Perhaps I did when I was younger, but if so I don't remember."

"Come." He led her up the steps and inside the one room building.

A small window at the back let in lilac light through the colored panes. Curved seats ran along the sides covered in soft pillows. A table sat in the middle. Today a white cloth covered it and fruit, pieces of cheese, and bread along with two glasses, and a bottle of wine covered its surface.

"You planned this?"

"I hoped to bring you here. Lawson gave me the opportunity." A devious smile crossed his face. "Won't you join me in some refreshments before we have to return to our guests?"

"They will miss us and be wondering. It is not at all the proper thing to be gone too long."

"It doesn't matter. We will be married soon," he added. "The people who love to gossip will turn to another topic. The Ton is always looking for fresh news. Please give me this private time."

Pleasure moved through her. "All right." She went to the table and took a piece of apple and cheese to taste.

Nicholas poured two glasses of wine and held one out to her. His gaze never left her face as she took her first swallows.

They sipped wine and the air sparkled with tension as their eyes met. Helena's heart raced. Having realized how much she did want to marry him filled her with quiet joy.

Finally, he sat their glasses on the table, brushed his lips over her fingers, and then pulled her against his body. "I have dreamed of having you here. The softness of the light only enhances the silken beauty of your skin." His lips moved feather light across her face and she closed her eyes.

Strong arms held her tight. "I want you." Her eyes flew open. "I want to touch and taste every spot on your body." His husky voice sent shivers across her jangled nerves.

Hard lips met hers. She opened her mouth welcoming the caress of his tongue and mouth molding to hers. A hand moved along her throat and across her shoulder, then closed over her breast. His lips followed the trail of his hand, leaving a path of fire. His finger flicked across her hardened nipple.

When her knees weakened, he swept her into his arms and sat on the cushioned seat. He pushed aside the light muslin material at her neckline, moving his lips across the top of her breast. Heat and need rushed further down her body. Her hands moved around his neck, pulling him even closer.

They both heard the sound and froze.

Her senses returned and she hurriedly straightened her clothes. He motioned her to silence.

"All clear." a familiar voice came outside the closed door.

"Lord Gates?" she asked accusingly.

Nicholas sat her to his side and stood. He moved to the opposite side of the small room. "Someone must have been snooping around or he would never have disturbed us."

"He knew we were here? Did you plan to compromise me?"

"You were not objecting." He ran his hand through his hair disturbing the usual neatness of it. "But no, I only wanted some time alone with you. Should I apologize that I was overwhelmed by my desire?"

Angry both at him and her self, Helena stalked to the door. "I can find my own way back, thank you. It would be best if we not arrive together after so long a time."

He didn't comment as she went out the door. She sensed he watched as she sped back through the trees. She only slowed when she reached the walkway. Smoothing her hair, she strolled along the walk and around past the terrace toward the door. She'd go upstairs and decide on her gown for this evening. She wanted time alone. Some of the guests still wandered around outside, while others must have gone to their rooms.

Nodding and smiling at people she passed, she finally reached the house and closed the side door behind her. She managed to get to her room without meeting anyone else.

Her mirror reflected a flushed face and rosy lips which looked thoroughly kissed. She hoped no one saw the guilt on her face in passing. Her gown did not look too rumpled. She never expected the strong overwhelming feelings that his touch had brought forth.

The experience with Lawson had been embarrassing and hurt. One of the reasons she hadn't wanted to ever consider marriage. But her body reacted very differently to Nicholas right from the first. A flame of heat went through her at the thought and her breasts tightened at the memory of his warm mouth and fingers touching her.



She lay against her bed and gazed out the window as fluffy clouds floated by and visions of Nicholas filled her mind. They'd plan their wedding and everything would be fine, except she remembered Franklin calling out to them and a cold chill swept over her

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## Chapter 20

Nicholas took his time straightening his clothes and hair. His uneven breathing slowed. A knock brought his attention to the half open door. He wished Helena had returned to talk out their misunderstanding, but he knew that wasn't going to happen.

"Nicholas?"

"Come in, Franklin."

"Sorry about earlier."

"Your timing is always impeccable, my friend."

Franklin's gaze went to the window, anywhere, but at the man in front of him.

"I debated interrupting, but I followed a strange man in this direction and lost him. I couldn't chance another shot at you or Lady Helena."

"You lost him?"

"Yes, one minute I saw him and the next he faded into the trees. Whoever I've been following these past few days knows his way around."

"Or has information given to him by someone else," Nicholas added. "Keep an eye on Lawson. He probably knows this area."

"And your cousin, Harry?"

"He grew up at the main estate, Covington Chase, but we did visit Ashton Court during the summers. Do you really think he hates me enough to be involved?"

Franklin shrugged. "You know I don't trust many people and think the worst of the rest."

"Follow me, Franklin. It has occurred to me how your suspect might have disappeared so easily."

Nicholas led the way along a small dirt pathway behind the folly. A tall crop of rocks sat off the path a hundred yards.

"Pull your gun, Franklin. I don't have mine."

Quickly, Nicholas rolled the front rock away revealing a small area concealed by the surrounding rocks. It was empty.

"He wouldn't have stayed here long," Franklin said. "How did you know about this?"

"I found the strange arrangement of rocks when I was about ten. I remembered getting Harry to help me put the other rock in front making a great place to hide. We used to drive my sisters to distraction when they couldn't find us."

"Did anyone else know about this?"

"Not unless Harry told them."

"Well, he left for London, but my guess is he did tell someone before today," Franklin glanced around. "It makes sense. Who else would benefit from your demise? He wouldn't want you to marry Lady Helena and have an heir."

They rolled the rock back into place. "I hope you're wrong. Mother would be very hurt to find the boy she raised had betrayed us. Come on. We'd better get back. You can join the rest of my guests," Nicholas smiled at Franklin. "Someone is anxious to see you arrive."

Franklin cocked one eyebrow at his friend. "You enjoy seeing me suffer through the social demands of this job."

"Correction—the social demands of your title and heritage. The lovely Mary Ann is waiting and hopeful you will attend. Have some fun, man. There is little time for dalliance in our job."

Nicholas laughed out loud at the muttered words Franklin threw in his direction on leaving. The smile quickly left his face when he thought of Helena.

He'd prefer to find the traitor and the ones who shot at him and Helena before their marriage. He didn't want to be looking over his shoulder when he would rather be giving his full attention to his wife.

Today revealed what he always suspected. Her cool rational side hid a warm receptive woman. He would uncover that woman and relished the challenge.

But first, and he stared again at the rocks, he would get rid of his rival and the enemy. Both had sadly underestimated him. He would take pleasure in seeing their shock and surprise when he removed or destroyed them. Whichever, it would be their choice.

\* \* \* \*

Crystal chandeliers cast prisms of light around the room. Soft music accompanied the hum of people talking.

"The dowager duchess invited every old member of her family," Mary Ann whispered to Helena. "And they are all frowning in our direction."

Lawson smiled as he arrived at Helena's side before Nicholas came across the room. "Helena, you're lovelier every time I see you." He bowed with a flourish.

"Lawson, quit acting the gallant," Helena snapped her fan together. "And stop trying to make Nicholas angry."

"He had all your attention this afternoon. It's my turn. Let's walk outside. Several other couples are already enjoying the fresh air of the terrace."

"This one time," she said and frowned. "But only because I need to have a word with you."

He took her arm and led the way. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a look of displeasure cross Nicholas' face. She refused to let it bother her. She needed to make Lawson understand he must not continue to behave in such a manner toward her .

"Here," Lawson said. As they stopped in an area away from the other guests. Most of the couples drifted back inside. "At last I have you to myself."

His hands reached toward her face and she slapped them down. "Don't!"

"Please reconsider your decision to stay with the duke. You can come with me to America or where ever we choose to go."

Helena stared at the man she thought she'd known so well. He was playing some type of game and she no longer had any trust in what he said. She walked back toward the doors of the drawing room, forcing him to follow, then stopped and faced him. "I'm not going to marry you and I certainly am not going to leave my family and go to America or anywhere."

"Are you very sure, my love? Life with the duke will be formal and confining."

"Stop, right now. I mean what I say. I hoped we might be friends. I'm glad you're alive. But, I don't understand how you can leave your family again. Your mother will be devastated."

"I can't stay."

Helena shook her head in puzzlement and walked the few steps to the doorway. She spotted a strange man standing at the far end of the terrace.

"Helena," Mary Ann called. "It's time to go in to dinner."

"I'm coming." Helena hurried inside, as the man disappeared into the brush. "Thank you," she whispered to her sister. "Your timing was perfect."

"My dear." Nicholas stepped from behind Mary Ann and put out his arm. "The guests wait for us to lead the way." Flint green eyes met hers. His mouth held taut and a muscle in his cheek pulsed, but his hand was gentle when he placed it over hers.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, Helena followed her sister and mother into the drawing room. The room filled with women relatives and close friends of the duchess. Prudence, a gleam in her eye headed in Helena's direction.

"Haven't you done enough damage to our family? It is obvious you prefer your country gentleman to my brother. The proper behavior would be to release my brother from his obligation to marry you." Her green eyes, so like her brother's, sparked with her disgust.

"I'm sure Nicholas will not hesitate to tell me if he wishes to end our contract."

Prudence threw back her head. "He is a gentleman, unlike the man you've brought into our home. What is his name? Ah, yes, Lord Falscroft, second son, no evidence of any future. He is exactly what you deserve." With those words stated loud and clear, she moved across the room to a large group of young matrons.

When laughter and quick looks came from them, Helena held her head high. She had to take Mary Ann's arm to hold her from going across to confront Prudence.

"Don't. It will only cause more gossip."

Mary Ann flushed red. "Some day I am going to punch her right in the mouth. Her mother didn't even come over to stop her ranting like she did previously."

"I think she is saying what the dowager duchess and most of the others are thinking. I can't blame them. Hopefully my message got across to Lawson this time. Let's step outside, away from all this unwanted attention."

Helena, pretending a nonchalance she didn't feel, hooked arms with Mary Ann and walked through the open doors. Several steps further and they were out of sight of the gossiping women.

"It's black out here tonight," Mary Ann commented. "There's only a sliver of moon."

"Good, I want to be invisible for a few minutes anyway. Everywhere I go in the house someone stares at me or tries to pump me for information about whether our wedding is being rescheduled. I understand their curiosity but it is tiresome."

\* \* \* \*

"There they are, Dickey. Now which one did he say for us to take? Bother, 'tis no tellin' them apart."

"Don't matter. We'll grab both and run like hell."

They snuck around behind the bushes until they were close to the women. Then, seeing their chance they jumped out and grabbed Helena and Mary Ann around the waists and mouths.

"Stop your struggling or I'll knock you in the head."

The twin he held gasped once, when his hand closed tightly over her mouth. She tried to hit him with her elbows and feet, kicking backwards.

"What's that? Someone's comin'," Dickey moved his hand up and covered the nose of the twin he held. He tried to drag her into the darkness, but her struggling hindered his progress. "I'll kill you if you don't stop fightin' me."

Several men were gaining on them. They turned holding the women in front. "Stop, we don't care about your women. Come closer and we'll break their necks."

One twin's sudden sagging body threw her captor off and as he let go of her face, she fell forward.

\* \* \* \*

Helena watched in horror when Mary Ann fell. Had he killed her? She was looking at the captor's face when a bullet went into the man's skull, right between his eyes. A brief startled reflex on his face and he fell backward.

Helena glanced around and saw Franklin with his gun outstretched. His eyes fierce, an expression on his face that told her he would like to kill the man again.

"Now, if you wish to join your comrade, my partner and I will be glad to oblige you," Franklin said in a slow controlled drawl.

For the first time Helena realized another man stood to the left of Franklin. She saw Nicholas walking toward her and her captor. He stared at him with cold, hard eyes.

"Let her go."

"Hah, you think me the fool. You won't hurt me as long as she's coverin' me front. You all step back and let me go. I'll release her at the edge of the woods."

"You think I'm a fool," Nicholas responded. "You won't take her anywhere."

Helena glanced around frantically trying to find a way to bring this to an end without more violence. Was that another shadow? It must be another guard. She strained her eyes to see. Suddenly a gun shone from around the edge of the tree.

She bit her captor's hand and threw herself sideways, throwing him off balance. She screamed out as his hand slipped from her mouth. "A gun, Nicholas."

Gunfire erupted and bullets flew through the air. She hit the ground hard and rolled into a ball. The silence afterwards was deafening. Cautiously Helena raised her head.

The man standing beside Franklin had turned toward the tree, his arms still outstretched with the gun pointed. Nicholas stood over the last captor, his gun at his side. He moved to Helena and knelt down.

Pushing back her hair, he touched her face. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, I'm all right, but Mary Ann?"

They both looked over to see Franklin holding her. Mary Ann gasped for breath. Helena ran to her.

"Mary Ann, oh Mary Ann." Tears ran down Helena's face.

"I'm just catching my breath," Mary Ann said in a whisper .

"She'll be fine. He was smothering her, passing out probably saved her life," Franklin said. "Give her a moment."

"Mary Ann, Helena." Lady Steeples ran to her daughters. "Oh, Mary Ann." Lady Steeples fell in a faint, almost hitting the ground before her husband caught her.

"Go inside," Nicholas commanded, as the guests surged toward them. "It may not be safe yet." Helena noted a slight cynical twist of a smile cross his face on observing the quick turn around of the crowd.

"Well done," Lord Steeples said. "That will turn a crowd around most any time. Let's remove my wife and daughters from this scene."

Nicholas agreed and picked Helena up in his arms. She watched as Franklin followed with Mary Ann and their father helped her mother to her feet, supporting her.

"We'll go in the back door and take them to their rooms," Nicholas instructed, holding her close against his chest. "Then we'll meet in my study."

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## Chapter 21

"Gentlemen, I believe we all need a brandy." Nicholas handed glasses to Franklin and Lord Steeples. "After tonight it is imperative we find out who is the enemy and soon. Too bad we had to kill all three of those men. They might have been able to give us some information, but I have another idea." He looked at Lord Steeples. "Believe me, sir, we are and will be working on finding out the leader of this gang."

"I'd like to know what you plan to do, Your Grace. It is quite unsettling to see my daughters in danger twice now."

"I understand, but I can't tell you more." Nicholas held up his hand to stop Lord Steeples from interrupting. "National security is at stake and although I trust you, Lord Steeples, I won't put you in danger or expose any further information."

He moved behind his desk. "You can help us though. Please get my mother and the two of you reassure our guests everything is all right. Tell them robbers tried to steal your daughter's jewels. That should suffice for now."

Nicholas waited until Lord Steeples left the room. "Whoever is after us is getting more daring. It is best Lord Steeples not know yet, that we suspect his neighbor, Falscroft, of being an accomplice in this affair."

"I agree. I was just coming to talk with you when all of this happened. One of our guards reported two men meeting earlier at the back of the property. One was Harry. The other man's description fit Falscroft. What do you want to do now?"

"Ask Falscroft to join me. It's time for a confrontation. In fact, it's long overdue."

Franklin nodded and slipped out of the room. Nicholas stationed himself by the fireplace. In his mind's eye, he saw the men with their arms wrapped around Helena and Mary Ann and that man's filthy hands gripping Helena tightly to him.

A smile crossed his face at the memory of her bravery, throwing the man off and yelling to save his life.

One of his men spun around and instantly took the man out, at the same time Nicholas shot the man trying to hold onto Helena. Even now, he clenched his glass tight to calm the tremor in his hands. So close to losing her, enough was enough. Lawson Falscroft would help them or face his wrath.

"Your Grace, Lord Falscroft is here to see you." Franklin motioned Lawson into the room. "Shall I stay?"

"No thank you, Franklin. Lord Falscroft and I have personal issues to discuss."

Lawson entered the room with a sly smile on his face. "Nice of you to ask me to join you for a drink."

"You may not think so after we talk." He poured a glass of brandy and handed it to the other man. "Have a seat."

Lawson sat, crossed his legs, and appeared relaxed and confident. Nicholas stood in front of his desk.

Tonight was a sorry mess. Three men dead and Lady Helena and her sister almost kidnapped." Nicholas watched Lawson's expression carefully.

"I wonder who had the nerve to invade the grounds of such a prominent member of our parliament," Lawson retorted. "I'm sorry I missed all the action."

"Yes, I was surprised you didn't rush to Lady Helena's aid."

Lawson took a sip of his brandy and brushed a fleck of lint from his sleeve. "I feel terrible that I was not there to rescue her. I had returned to my room for a moment and missed all the excitement."

"Excitement is a strange term to use when the lady you profess to love so deeply almost lost her life."

"Oh, I doubt it was anything but a kidnapping for money. Once you paid the ransom, she'd have been returned unharmed."

His fierce dislike for this man rushed over him. "How can you be so certain? Unless of course you knew the men involved."

Lawson laughed. "Me, know such rabble? I've only recently returned home."

"Ah yes, you recently escaped from being a prisoner. How convenient you arrive back home right now."

Steely blue eyes clashed with green. "What are you insinuating, Your Grace? Surely you do not seriously think I'm involved in any of this?"

Nicholas sat in the opposite chair so their eyes met on the same level. "I know you are involved. No," he waved his hand, "don't deny it. My men have been investigating. In the past four years, you've had regular deposits made for you into a London bank. You've accumulated a large sum of money and become a wealthy man. How could a prisoner accomplish such a task?"

Lawson's expression didn't change. His eyes held a steady regard of Nicholas. He's good, Nicholas thought.

"You are a traitor. Admit it. You worked for the French. That pirate tale was a lie to cover up your spying."

"No!" The word exploded from Lawson's mouth and he stood.

"Sit down." Nicholas stood to confront him.

Lawson swallowed, hesitated, and took his seat.

"I'm not a traitor. I got shot during the battle of Trafalgar and fell off the ship. The waves bounced me around and I thought I would drown. After the battle ended, no one saw me amongst the debris."

"So how did you manage to live?"

"Two pirate ships moved in, after the other ships left, to look for any spoils floating in the water. One of the men saw me and pulled me in." Lawson took a swallow of his brandy. "After I healed, they forced me to join the crew."

"You were a pirate? You think I will believe you?"

"It's the truth."

Nicholas paced around the room. His mind sped around the many scenarios he could envision.

"The money came from pirating?" he snapped at Lawson.

"Yes, from the spoils of our adventures," Lawson said.

"You are no better than a traitor. Innocent people are killed by pirates on the high seas and you were part of it."

"True, but I had no choice. I admit I didn't refuse a part of the spoils. Enough to get a start in America or one of the islands. I won't have to stay here and see my brother with his riches and privileges of being a baron."

"You know the traitor."

"No, I don't. What traitor and why do you think I'm involved in any of this?"

"But you can find out. You're as comfortable in the underworld as you are in society."

Lawson did not reply.

"Here is my only offer." Nicholas sat back down in front of Lawson. "You are going to help me find the traitor and his men, the ones who are trying to kill Helena and me."

"No one tried to kill Helena tonight," Lawson protested.

"Someone shot at her in London and tried to kidnap her tonight. Are you involved in any of this?"

Lawson took the last sip from his glass and stood. Then paced around the room. "What makes you think I want to harm Helena? I love her and I want her to marry me."

Nicholas strode across the room and faced Lawson. "No, you don't. You never loved her, but you don't want anyone else to have her."

Lawson laughed. "That's absurd."

Nicholas grabbed Lawson's collar and pulled him up close to his face. "I've watched you. You don't love her. There is some other agenda in your scheming evil mind. Now," he pushed Lawson into a chair, "you will help me or I'll have you arrested tonight for being a traitor and a pirate.."

"You have no evidence to prove I'm a traitor and I'll claim the pirates forced me to work for them."

"I'll take my chances on finding what I need before your trial. I'll put all my men to work on finding out about your activities these past four years. And if anything happens to me, I've written a note stating I suspect you are the traitor or working for him. I've written the letter in such a way that you'll be the prime suspect if I die. All my communications regarding you are in a safe place."

"You're blackmailing me into helping you."

"Blackmail is such an ugly word. Let's just say I'm using a little gentle persuasion," Nicholas said softly.

"You've left me with no choice."

"Right." Nicholas noted the perspiration on Falscroft's face. "You can leave now, but keep in touch. I want the identity of the traitor within the month"

Franklin stepped into the room just after Lawson left.

"You think he will help us or betray us?"

"I don't trust him. But, we'll use him, Franklin."

"He had a scowl on his face, when he left your study. Watch your back, Nicholas. Whether or not he was your enemy before, he definitely is now."

Nicholas sank into the chair behind his desk. "It's late and I'm exhausted. You must be too." He glanced at Franklin. "He didn't like my options. I told him I had written everything I know about him and placed the notes in a safe place. That if anything happened to me he'd be the first suspect. At least for now, he'll cover my back."

"How long does he have to help us?" Franklin asked.

"I plan to marry Helena within the month." His lip curved up in a wry smile. "If, I can convince her. He has that month. We'll get this settled before my wedding day."

\* \* \* \*

Helena slipped out of bed and put on her riding habit. She needed an early morning ride. Of course, she couldn't go alone. She'd ask Nicholas to accompany her.

She'd been surprised when his mother came to her room last night to thank her for saving Nicholas' life. She'd apologized for her cool reception since Helena and her family arrived. Helena was glad. She did want her future mother-in-law to like her.

Helena slipped out of her room and walked toward the stairs. Her parents expected her to marry Nicholas, and her heart demanded it. She'd find him and discuss their wedding date.

"Helena, I didn't expect to see you so early."

Nicholas stood at the bottom of the stairs. Helena admired his tall lean figure dressed in buckskin trousers and a white shirt. He held a riding crop in his hand.

"I was hoping to go riding with you this morning, Your Grace," Helena said.

His lips curved. "I'm still Your Grace, I see. Come join me." He held out his hand. "I'm headed for the stables."

After saddling their horses, they rode out across the open fields. Dew drops shined like crystals on the blades of grass. Fluffy white clouds floated overhead and the wind blew in Helena's face as she raced alongside Nicholas on his black stallion.

He moved ahead and led her toward a stand of trees lining the edge of a small stream that curved through his property. After dismounting, he reached up and his hands circled her waist. He lifted her down in front of him. "It's shady in this spot." He put her arm through his and walked along a narrow path beside the stream. "I used to come here as a boy and fish or wade in the cool water on a warm day."

"We have a similar stream at home. Papa took me fishing with him several times." She glanced up at him with a smile. "At least until I caught a bigger fish once and more fish another time. He said it was embarrassing to have his daughter best him in fishing." She chuckled.

"We must have a fishing contest after we're married. I thought we'd stay here at Ashton Court, after the wedding, until we need to return to London."

"That's why I wanted to speak with you, Your Grace."

"And I you." They continued to stroll along the path by the water.

"You go first," she insisted, but he shook his head no. Helena swallowed, trying to clear the tightness in her throat. "I don't know how to say this. Perhaps you have changed your mind about marrying me since Lawson's return and the subsequent confusion."

"Not at all. I suggest we set a date to stop all the gossip and settle any questions others have."

"What date do you suggest?"

\* \* \* \*

For a second, he couldn't speak. He'd expected to have to encourage her.

"In a month. That will give us time to make all the arrangements, again, to be married in your village church."

"The end of June sounds fine to me."

He paused in his stride and turned her to him. His hands reached up and pulled off her bonnet, then pulled the pins holding her long hair up in a tight bun. He threaded his fingers through the long curling locks.

"I don't ever want to see that tight bun after we're married. I love the softness and the fragrance of your hair." He wrapped it around his hands and leaned toward her face.

His lips brushed lightly across hers. His hands left her hair and caressed her throat and shoulders, then his arms wrapped around her body.

\* \* \* \*

When Nicholas held her tight against him an unfamiliar sensation of belonging and that other indescribable ache went through her.

"Come." He picked her up, carried her to her horse, and set her on the saddle. He retrieved her bonnet and handed it to her. "Follow me."

The horses picked their way through the trees and went across the stream. Helena knew where they headed.

Nicholas tied the horses to a nearby tree, then picked Helena up in his arms and carried her inside the small white building. He kicked the door shut and let her body slid against his as he put her down.

"I want you...." His eyes bore into her, as his warm hands on either side of her head gently caressed her hair. Hard lips covered her mouth urging hers to open and then his tongue tangled with hers.

Her fingers touched his hair where it lay curled against his collar. He smelled of the outdoors. His lips roamed across her cheek, nibbling at her jaw and along the length of her neck.

"I want to make love to you," he whispered in her ear. For a second she stiffened. "It's all right, we'll wait, he added.

"No. I-it's just that my memories are not good ones."

He turned her and kissed the nape of her neck, sending shivers down her back. "If I frighten you, stop me anytime."

His hands quickly unfastened her dress and let it drop. He started to work on her short corset, while he alternately scattered kisses along her neck.

Helena moved to better accommodate him in his task. Finally, the corset came undone and off, then he pulled her chemise over her head. Kneeling at her feet, he slid off her shoes and stockings and held her small foot in his hand, while she balanced herself holding onto his shoulders. His hand slid over her instep and up along her calf. Ripples of heat spread over her body.

She gasped when he came up in front of her and his hand covered her breast, his lips followed, his tongue moving gently across her tightened nipple. He stepped back.

Her arms reached across to cover herself.

"No." He pulled her arms away. "You are beautiful." Moving her arms behind her, he brought his mouth back to her breasts and moved between them with kisses and light nibbles. "You taste like sweet nectar."

"Let my arms go. I want to touch you." She pulled his shirt over his head and ran her hands across his hard chest lightly covered in soft brown hair. A hint of pine and woods filled her nostrils. She brushed her mouth across his chest and heard the sharp intake of his breath as she covered him with kisses.

When she reached the band to his pants, he pulled her back up against him.

She moaned and moved herself from side to side, igniting a yearning and demand for more. This was not like the first time. She was older now and finally knew what she wanted. Her body reacted to Nicholas in an entirely different way. She ached for him, hungered for his touch.

"I have on too many clothes, my dear." He chuckled and quickly disposed of the rest of them. Beams of colored light came in through the back window shining across his strong firm body. His eyes glowed as he picked her up and placed her on the cushioned bench.

"This is what we suspected brought my parents to the folly so much. I see we will also put it to good use."

And then his hands and mouth took over covering every spot of her body. His fingers touched her intimately. She moaned and her body moved restlessly under him.

"Please, please."

"Please what, my love?" he whispered.

"Don't stop, oh..." She moved her hips toward his fingers that moved gently over her and in her.

Her hands explored his back, shoulders and down the front of his body. She nipped little bites along his skin and her tongue flicked across his nipples. Her fingers circled his hot, hard maleness. A thrill of power went through her when she heard his groan.

He nudged her thighs further apart until she felt him hard between her legs. For a second, she stiffened again, remembering the pain she'd experienced her first time. He ran his lips across hers, whispering soft words of reassurance and her body melted into his.

She felt him surge toward her and he filled her with silken heat.

\* \* \* \*

She was tight, hot, and wet. He raised a little and smoothed her hair back off her brow. "I'm sorry, my love. I hope I didn't hurt you. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Don't stop."

He heard her whispered words and his body ached to plunge again and again into her sweetness, but he held still a moment, letting her body accommodate to him. She brushed her lips across his and down his throat, licking his skin.

Unable to remain still, he began to move inside her. The sensation of heat and his hunger continued to build as her body rose up to meet him, demanding more and more.

His mouth covered hers and his tongue moved in and out, the same way his lower body was claiming her for his own. Her soft touches and kisses and the little sounds she made only increased his hunger.

Her little moans and gasps fueled his fire. "Follow me, darling," he whispered and she raised her hips and threw her head back.

The pleasure, almost pain, hit him as he surged into her one last time. They lay intertwined, he to the side, to take his weight off of her. His hand brushed the damp hair off her face and he marveled at her softness.

He watched her breathing slow to normal. His own body pulsed with satisfaction. He had hoped to make love to her today, to bind her more closely to him. However, he didn't know this coming together would be such an explosion of want and need. He'd always held a part of himself back. This woman had slipped past his defenses.

A flash of guilt went through him at the thought that he had planned to seduce her. But most of all, he had a keen sense of satisfaction knowing she would be his wife. The instinct to possess her had filled him from the first day he saw her at her home. On some level, his body had known before his mind.

But letting her close to him had increased his vulnerability and that was not an emotion he knew or wanted. When he gazed into her soft, sky blue eyes, he doubted he had any choice.

He pulled away and picked up their scattered clothes, then acted as her lady's maid and helped her dress. He pulled on his breeches.

She braided her long hair and put it up under her bonnet while he finished dressing. A faint flush covered her cheeks when she glanced at him from under her thick lashes.

"You seemed frightened at first." His voice broke the quiet between them.

\* \* \* \*

"One of the reasons I've avoided marriage is because of my first experience. I didn't want to experience the pain or embarrassment again." She looked at him timidly through her lashes. "And I could no longer consider myself an innocent maid, as a future husband would expect."

He pulled her over to stand between his legs and took her hands in his. He touched each one lightly with his lips. A tremor ran through her body.

"Are you upset with me?" She spoke softly, watching his face for every expression

"Oh no, my dear, definitely not upset. I just didn't realize how much of an innocent you still are," he said, and he sat her down on his lap.

His lips covered hers again and he ran his hand down her back. She leaned against his chest and cuddled close to him.

"If we're not careful I will have you undressed again," he warned. A slight smile crossed his lips.

"What if I don't mind?"

A sharp stab of desire swept across him. "Never dare me, My Lady." He smiled, as he turned her to sit across his lap. His fingers moved their clothing aside and he quickly slid into her softness. "Your dress will be mussed and it will be your own fault."

He felt her chuckle as her hips followed his motions.

"I take all the blame, Your Grace," she whispered in his ear.

\* \* \* \*

Helena leaned against the back of the high backed tub. The warm water soothed her sore and achy body. She and Nicholas had made love.

Nicholas arranged today's events and to be honest, she was glad. She had wanted him, except for the fear she felt from her previous experience. However, Nicholas reassuring words pushed her fear away. She'd been happy to follow his lead. Desire took over, taking away any doubts or restraints. She'd never been so free with her feelings, still marveling at all the many sensations their loving had created. Even now, her body still pulsed with awareness.

She picked up the wet cloth and rubbed her skin with scented soap, while she continued to recall the afternoon.

Later, when they rode back to the stables, reality had returned and she felt shy and awkward. She'd said goodbye quickly and had come to her room and ordered her bath.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her maid lay out her light blue muslin day gown. How could she act normal around Nicholas? Even though the time she and Lawson were together had blurred some over the years, she remembered enough to know being with Nicholas was completely different. Everyone would guess what had happened just by looking at her.

She got out of the tub and her maid helped her dress. She wore her hair up in braids and put on a blue and white bonnet to match her gown. Looking into the mirror reassured her. She saw no outward sign of her inward changes. No one would notice. Well, maybe Mary Ann. They were so attune to each other it was usually impossible to hide a secret.

A stab of desire flowed through her at the thought of Nicholas. But he didn't say he loved me. Her hand fluttered up to the high neckline of her gown. He might never love me. It was too late now. Her heart was full of him. She hoped someday he'd feel the same.

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## Chapter 22

Franklin and Nicholas rode out to the edge of the Ashton Court property. "Lord Falscroft left early this morning. His mother will return home with her friend later today," Franklin stated.

"He is being followed?" Nicholas said.

"Yes."

"I want word of anyone he contacts and we will do background checks on them. Meanwhile ask Harold Odell to meet us in London. He lives near here. Perhaps he will have some suggestions to help us."

"He's contacted me wondering when we will be starting to work again. I'm sure he'll be glad to have something to do," Franklin added. "When do you plan to return to London?"

Nicholas thought of Helena. He didn't want to leave her, but knew if he stayed close, he would not be able to refrain from making love to her. He didn't like his feeling of need and vulnerability. He wanted, no he needed space and time to clear his head.

"We leave first thing tomorrow morning."

"The guards will stay with Lady Helena and her sister?"

"Of course. I will suggest they stay at home until the wedding a month from now. We will draw the traitor to us in London, away from them."

"If the traitor and the person trying to kill you and Lady Helena are the same."

Nicholas frowned. "As much as I hate to admit it, I believe Harry might be involved in part of this. I plan to solve that problem first, upon my return to town."

"I'll leave now and see you in London, soon." Franklin said, and turned his horse around.

"The lovely Mary Ann can't keep you here one more night?"

"That's why I'm leaving."

"I believe she cares for you."

"I don't want any woman in my life." Franklin's face darkened and he stared off in the distance. "I could have killed the man that hurt her with my bare hands. Never have I felt such anger. I don't like being out of control." He turned back to Nicholas, a bleak expression in his eyes. "Caring for someone is not in my plans."

Nicholas watched his friend ride fast across the field in the opposite direction of the house. Mary Ann would be very disappointed, but he understood Franklin's statement. It was terrifying to let your walls down and let someone inside.

\* \* \* \*

The last day of the house party, everyone packed and prepared to leave. Helena knew her parents planned for them to be on their way home right after breakfast.

She still couldn't understand Nicholas' behavior yesterday. He was polite and at her side during the rest of the day and evening, yet he held himself aloof and said little. She wanted to reach out and touch him, but his manner kept her at arm's length.

Mary Ann noticed nothing. Franklin leaving early without a word had upset her so much that she seemed unaware of the confused emotions tormenting her twin. Helena was relieved. She didn't want anyone to know what a fool she had made of herself. Obviously, Nicholas quenched his desire and was satisfied with the distance between them.

Is this what she could expect of their marriage, closeness in the marriage bed and coldness the rest of the time? Maybe after an heir was born he wouldn't even want her. Hurt and confused, she was determined to have words with him before she left today. Dressing in a hurry, she went downstairs ahead of the others.

She searched all the rooms, including his study without success. She hoped to find him in the dining room having breakfast, but only her mother and the duchess sat at the table.

"Please join us, Lady Helena." His mother smiled and motioned her to a seat. "You are early as usual. I told Nicholas you would be down soon. Nevertheless, he said he must leave right away and head for London. He asked me to tell you he would see you in a month, for the wedding."

Helena sank into a chair. He left without speaking to her. Their time in the Greek Folly had meant nothing to him. She blinked, fighting back tears.

The dowager duchess clasped Helena's hand. "I see you are disappointed. I must tell you a man has to learn that we ladies like to speak to them directly when they leave for an extended period of time. They are so independent."

"She is right, dear. I'm sure the duke did not mean a discourtesy to you."

Helena went to the sideboard and filled her plate with eggs, sausage, and a muffin. She wasn't sure how she would swallow any food past the lump in her throat. However, she did not intend to have others think that Nicholas upset her.

She forced a smile and returned to the table. "It is perfectly fine. This gives me time to plan the wedding and," she looked around the room, "I shall start to make plans to refurbish Ashton Court. It could do with some changes."

The duchess laughed. "A woman after my own heart. Use their money and it will always get their attention. I quite agree we must have a complete overhaul of Ashton Court."

\* \* \* \*

Pacing around the turret room, Helena frowned and stopped herself. She went back to Nicholas' painting. His intense green eyes stared at her. She had painted his mouth with a small curve, not quite a smile. Brown hair looked as though he recently ran his hand through the curls.

She was pleased with her efforts. A few more touches and it would be finished. But peace eluded her. They had been home two weeks and she had received one short note from Nicholas. Her parents were determined they stay here until the wedding. She felt an overwhelming need to go to London and face Nicholas with her doubts and the uneasiness aroused from her dream last night.

"Helena, I knew I'd find you here. It's time to join the rest of us. Are you going to stay cooped up here the whole month before your wedding?" Mary Ann smiled at her from the doorway.

"You're the very person I wanted to see, Mary Ann." Helena followed her sister down the stairs. This gave her an opportunity to convince her sister to support her decision to return to London.

"Let me understand," Mary Ann said, after Helena told her of her determination to make the trip. "You want to leave tomorrow?"

"I do. I can't explain why. I only know there is a deep need inside me to see Nicholas and be nearby."

"Are you worried about something specific?"

"No... Well, I do want to discuss a concern with him, but... There is something else."

"Very mysterious." Mary Ann stared at her twin. "All right, I'm game. Mama and Papa will not be able to resist the two of us. We'll talk with them now."

Helena grabbed Mary Ann, hugging her. "I knew you'd never let me down."

"I hope we don't end up regretting this decision," Mary Ann murmured.

\* \* \* \*

"Go to London? Tomorrow?" Their father frowned at them. "No, it is not a good idea. There is plenty to keep you busy here the next two weeks. I'm sure your mother will agree with me."

"I'm sorry, Papa, but I have to go, with or without your permission."



Helena," her mother gasped. "You have never refused to follow your father's wishes."

"Please understand I don't want to hurt you, Papa. I can't explain but I must return to London and see Nicholas. It is imperative."

Her father leaned back in his chair and put his fork beside his plate. Silence filled the dining room. Helena held her hands tightly in her lap.

Her eyes silently pleaded with him. How could she explain the feeling of anxiousness she awoke with this morning and the driving need she had to be in London?

"Helena, join me in my study." He turned to his wife and Mary Ann. "Please excuse us. Helena and I need to discuss this issue further."

"Of course, dear. Mary Ann and I will have our dessert and tea, and you can join us later."

Helena remembered previous meetings with her father in his study, sometimes for a lecture, but more often to play chess with him during their quiet evenings at home. She followed him now, as he strode briskly down the hall.

"Sit here by the fire, Helena." Her father moved a chair closer to the warmth of the fireplace. He sat in a nearby chair.

"Explain why you feel such an urgent need to leave home two weeks before your wedding."

"I don't think I can make you understand, Papa. You will have to trust me. It is urgent. I must go to Nicholas tomorrow."

Her father picked up his favorite pipe. "Will the smoke bother you?"

She smiled. "You know I love to watch you smoke and smell the pipe tobacco."

He nodded and proceeded to fill his pipe and light it. She watched the procedure closely, the same as she had done many times in the past. The sweet scent of tobacco filled the room.

"I have always trusted you in making decisions," her father said.

She hoped he did not see the guilt that filled her at his words. Her face flushed with heat. She took her father's hand.

"I love you, Papa, and thank you for your belief in me." She stood and moved with a restless gait around the room. "I fear something is going to happen in London. I don't know if my going can stop it or help the matter." She faced her father. "I only know I must be there and try." She shook her head. "You must think this sounds very strange. In some ways I feel like I'm losing my mind, but I can't ignore this feeling of dread that has come over me since last night."

"Then we will leave first thing in the morning." He stood and emptied his pipe in the fireplace.

"Oh, Papa, thank you." Helena ran to him and hugged him.

"Now, now, I'm sure it is nothing, but we will check it out and then return home in time to finish your preparations to marry the duke."

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## Chapter 23

Lawson sat in the back of the Grey Goose Pub, his eye on the front door. He had taken a devious course here to make sure no one followed him. He hoped Miles would be as careful. They'd arranged to meet at nine o'clock. He should have arrived by now.

The short plump waitress came to his table. "Want another beer, love, or maybe you have other desires I can help you quench?" She moved her hips seductively toward him.

"Perhaps later, my girl." He smiled and threw her a coin. "For now, fill my mug again and keep it full."

She took his glass and sashayed toward the bar. Turning his attention to the door, he spotted Miles and Odell stepped in right behind him. Raising his hand, he motioned them over.

"Lawson, Odell suggested he join us. I told him last week that we planned to meet here." Miles explained.

Lawson shook hands with Odell, but was fuming inside that Miles had let Odell know about their meeting. Odell acknowledged him with a nod and sat.

Lawson studied Odell. Although short, he had broad shoulders and a thick chest. Large square hands picked up the mug placed in front of him and he took a long swig of his beer.

"Satisfied?" Harold asked, lowering his mug to the table and eyeing Lawson.

"Miles, I thought we were keeping this business between us." Lawson said, ignoring the other man's question.

"Harold wants to help and I knew he could. Trust me. You'll be glad I brought him along."

"How will you help us?" Lawson swung his attention to the man sitting across from him. "I've already helped you by passing messages to Harry, the duke's cousin, and helping arrange the unsuccessful kidnapping. It's not my fault that the hired men were idiots. We're even. You said you'd forget what you know of my past indiscretions."

"I will tell you when I'm finished with you. If the authorities knew of the spy work you did for France while pirating, you'd hang. Humor me and listen to what I have to say. Miles tells me you still want to have revenge on the Duke of Monteroy and you want to leave the country. Correct?"

"Yes."

"I also wish to see the fall of the duke," Harold said, and his jaw tightened.

"Why?"

"You don't need to know."

"Oh no." Lawson shook his head. He took a last swallow of his beer and stood to leave. "I don't like my partners knowing all my business and I don't know any of theirs. If you expose me, I'll tell the duke about you. Looks like we have an even draw." He started to walk off.

Harold Odell's voice stopped him. "Wait. Sit down and we'll discuss this further."

"With all our cards on the table?"

The other man squinted at him with his cold eyes. "With all our cards on the table," he agreed. At least all you need to know for now and when I'm finished with you, I won't have to worry about what I've told you..

\* \* \* \*

The family arrived in London two days later, early in the afternoon. Helena encouraged her mother to send a note to Nicholas asking him to dinner that evening. Lady Steeples upset over the hurried trip to town didn't want to have a guest so soon. But, she gave in to her husband and daughter's insistence.

Helena feared Nicholas would send back a note regretting he was unable to come tonight. If so, she had an alternate plan in mind, and with Mary Ann's help, they were set to use it.

"If Mama and Papa found out we are planning to make a visit to Nicholas' home, they would lock us in our rooms," Mary Ann warned.

"There is no reason to worry them. They will never know. Perhaps you will get to see Lord Gates. I believe he often stays with Nicholas when he is in town."

"Lot of good it will do me. He is simply not interested. I suppose I deserve it. Look at all the men I turned away and now I am getting my comeuppance."

"Nonsense, I saw the way he looked at you the night those men almost kidnapped us. For whatever reason he is keeping his distance, it is not because he lacks feelings for you."

Mary Ann stepped completely into Helena's room. "You didn't tell me this right after our rescue."

"Mary Ann, what I observed of his behavior and his expressions seemed too personal to share with anyone. However, I see you're serious about your feelings for him and you've been sad since he left." She squeezed Mary Ann's hands. "I don't think you should give up hope yet."

Mary Ann took a shaky breath. "I hope you're right."

Nicholas's note came back within the hour giving his regrets and suggesting dinner tomorrow evening.

"Are you sure we can't wait?" Mary Ann asked.

"It took us two days to get to London. Too much time has passed. If you'd rather not come with me, I'll understand."

"Nonsense, I won't let you go alone. What will we do about our bodyguards or do you plan to let them follow us?"

Helena whispered, "I have been considering that problem. Do you remember Mama's little bottle of sleep medicine?"

Mary Ann nodded.

"I've seen her use it. She puts exactly two drops in a cup of tea before bedtime and you have seen how quickly she starts getting drowsy. Well, I slipped into her room and took a small amount." Helena pulled a small bottle out of her reticule.

Mary Ann's eyes widened. "You're going to drug our guards?"

"I can think of no other remedy. We don't want them to know we went to Nicholas' town home."

"Are you my sister, Helena, or has a witch taken hold of her body?" Mary Ann squinted at her sister.

"Silly, I'm only doing what I've seen you do over the years. Go after what you want."

"I knew somehow this was going to be my fault." Mary Ann groaned. "I hope we don't kill them or we'll be in jail or worse."

"It has never hurt Mama and she is much smaller and frailer than those two big men."

"True. All right, but you have to add the drops to their drinks."

"They always have an after dinner drink in the kitchen. We'll go in and you can divert their attention while I put the drops in each of their glasses. It will be easy."

"I don't like this plan, but I suppose if I don't help, you will try it anyway and get into all kinds of trouble."

Helena ignored the fast beating of her heart and her dry mouth. She knew her plan could backfire badly on her sister and her.

Agnes arranged to have a hackney waiting on the next corner to take them to Nicholas' home, but insisted on accompanying the twins or she would tell their parents. Reluctantly, Helena agreed for her to come with them, but she warned Agnes she'd have to stay in the carriage.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas frowned at Franklin. "I admire Lady Helena's independent nature, but I hoped this time she would follow my directions and stay in the country."

"Our men said her father agreed, and the whole family came to town."

"One more thing to worry about just when things are heating up."

Franklin stared into the darkness outside Nicholas' French windows. "You talked with Harry?"

"I did. He did not admit any part in the attempted kidnappings or shootings. Nevertheless, he has agreed to move to the continent, where he will receive an annuity to keep him comfortable in his new surroundings."

Franklin whirled around, his body tense, anger tightening his mouth. "You are letting him go free? You know we could find evidence of his involvement in the attempt to kidnap Lady Helena. He has the most to gain from your not marrying and having an heir."

"It would hurt my mother immeasurably and cause undo gossip. He will not return or his allowance will stop. Also, I informed him a letter addressed to the authorities telling about my suspicions of his involvement in the kidnappings will be given to them, if he returns or causes anymore problems."

"I don't like his getting away without any punishment., Nicholas."

"You are a good friend and I appreciate your concern. When you have time to consider it, you will admit my decision is best."

Franklin returned to his previous spot by the window, facing the small garden surrounding the side of Nicholas' town home.

"Whatever are you studying so intently?" Nicholas questioned.

"I'm making sure no one takes advantage of your candlelight to take another shot at you. We've spread our men so thin, I'm your only protect— Blow out the candle," he ordered.

\* \* \* \*

The carriage stopped at the corner of the block. Mary Ann and Helena sighted Nicholas' house and the few lights shining out the windows.

"He is probably getting ready for bed, Helena. This is insane."

"Insane or not, I will talk with him tonight. Are you coming?"

"Bother, you are getting worst than me. I never did such a dangerous stunt as this one." She jumped from the coach and waved at Agnes to stay inside. "Wait for me," she whispered at Helena as she strode ahead.

Helena slowed so Mary Ann could catch up. They had dressed in long cloaks, with the hood pulled forward to cover most of their face and hair. Heart tripping, hands holding tight to the edges of her coat, Helena ducked behind the nearby bushes and crept toward the lights at the back of the house. She heard Mary Ann's heavy breathing behind her.

"Thank goodness for the light, otherwise it'd be black as pitch out here tonight," Mary Ann said.

Helena nodded and continued to creep forward.

The sudden loss of light caused Helena to stumble and Mary Ann crashed into her, tumbling them onto the ground.

"What the—"

"Shh," Helena warned.

"He's going to bed, silly. Do you realize the time," Mary Ann whined softly to her sister, but shut up when she saw two shadows come out the French windows, with what looked like guns in their hands.

Both girls fell flat on their stomachs, barely breathing. Helena tried to see if the closest man was Nicholas, but the walk seemed different. She debated yelling out, but seeing the gun caused her to hesitate.

A hand reached down and dragged Mary Ann up against him, the gun pointed to her head.

"No, Lord Gates, it is us." Helena cautioned.

He shoved Mary Ann away. "What the hell? Nicholas, bring a light."

The other shadow moved into the doorway and room. A scrap of flint and light lit the room, moving toward the door.

Lord Gates put his gun in his pocket and reached down, helping Helena to her feet. "Look who I found admiring your plants."

"Lady Helena? What are you doing here?"

Helena brushed her skirts off and straightened. "Do you think we could have this conversation inside?"

"Certainly my dear." Helena saw Nicholas frown, "You have chosen to visit me in quite an unconventional way."

"You gave me no other choice," she said. Her voice trembled from nerves frayed with anxiety.

Nicholas motioned for her and Mary Ann to enter his home. Helena felt his regard on her the whole time as she settled herself into one of the chairs in front of his desk.

Franklin stood with his back to the now closed French windows. His facial expression blank, but Helena saw him stare intently at Mary Ann.

Helena turned her gaze back to Nicholas. "Your Grace, I can explain."

"I should hope so, my dear. And I see we are back to my being, Your Grace."

Helena flushed. "I'm sure you'll understand when I explain." She moved her arms along her sides and down her dress. "As you can see we did not come armed. Although the thought did cross my mind," she admitted.

"Thank the Lord you didn't or you might have shot each other," Franklin stated cryptically from his stance at the door. Helena caught his quick smile when Mary Ann frowned at him.

"My sister pleaded with our father to bring us to town because she was worried about you," Mary Ann spoke up.

"I suggest we put them in irons in the dungeon until morning, Your Grace," Franklin added smoothly after Mary Ann's statement. "A little company with the rats down there should give them cause to think before they act."

Mary Ann gasped and started to rise from her chair. Helena caught her hand. "Don't worry, Mary Ann. He and Nicholas are making jokes at our expense. There is no dungeon."

"I do have a cellar though," Nicholas added, in a dangerous tone of voice.

"I will fight you to the death," Helena said.

A smile broke across his face. "I'm sure you would and you might hurt yourself, so we will not risk such a feat. Although, it might teach you a lesson in the future, such as to follow my directions. You were to stay at your home in the country."

It was too much. All of the anxiety to see him, the rush from home, and the danger of going out tonight. Helena bowed her head and started to sob.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas went to her and started to pick her up. "Don't touch me." She put out her arms warding him off. Nicholas straightened, unsure how to proceed with the tearful woman sitting in front of him. Part of him wanted to hold her and comfort her. The other half wanted to turn her over his knee for the risk she took coming here tonight.

He heard Mary Ann yell out. "Keep away from me, you big bully." Franklin laughed, picked her up, and threw her over his shoulder.

"We'll be outside if you need us," Franklin said. He grinned as he carried Mary Ann out, her fists beating against his back.

Helena stopped crying to watch with shock as Franklin carted her sister out the door and shut it. Nicholas waited and saw her tearful gaze come back to him.

"Now do you want to tell me what this is all about and the reason you had to see me tonight?"

Desire flickered along his nerve endings while he watched her chest move rapidly up and down from her hard breathing. Her red rimmed eyes and tangled hair did not dim his wish to throw her down on his nearby sofa and take her. His memory of the taste and feel of her had not dimmed one iota.

He smiled when she tilted her chin upwards. "I had a very important reason or I'd never have come."

He studied her face, then leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. Sitting close, his full attention tuned to her, he nodded for her to proceed.

\* \* \* \*

Why had he kissed her? Her body yearned to move against him and be close. She forced her mind back to the more immediate concerns. The quiet of the room, with the blue drapes closed, gave Helena a feeling of intimacy and peace for the first time in days.

She hesitated. "I know this will sound weird."

"You can tell me anything." His words evolved a feeling of trust.

"Three nights ago I awoke with a feeling of dread. My room seemed darker than usual and I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or awake. Later when I awoke in the morning, I was still unsure what occurred during the night, but I felt intense fear and the certain knowledge that I needed to come to London."

Nicholas poured a small amount of whiskey in a crystal glass. "Here." He handed it to her. "You can use this and if my mother can enjoy her toddy occasionally, it should not hurt you. Now, continue."

Helena took a sip of her drink and felt the warmth curl inside her. "In my dream, or whatever it was, I saw a man. I couldn't see his face. He is someone you know and trust, but he will betray you. There is a plan. Others are involved, and they want to kill you."

Nicholas smiled and took her hands into his. He rubbed his thumb along the top of her right hand. "You had a nightmare brought on by all the recent shootings." He saw her start to interrupt. "Wait, let me finish. I'm not surprised after what you observed on the night of your attempted kidnapping. It is amazing to me that you and Mary Ann did not fall apart at the time."

"I don't think it is just a nightmare, Nicholas," she protested.

"Also," he continued. "I left without seeing you the morning of my departure. The morning after we made love. You must have thought I had forsaken you and I can't blame you."

Helena pulled her hands free. "Do not be condescending to me. You had business to take care of and you had appeased your need for me, for the time being. I am fully aware, Nicholas, that we will have a marriage of convenience, nothing more."

\* \* \* \*

He caught the hurt in her eyes and the quick bite of her teeth along the edge of her lip. Never had he wanted to hold her and reassure her more. But, she had erected a wall between them and he wasn't sure how to proceed. He felt like a scoundrel for creating this turmoil on top of the many other dangerous problems swirling around them.

"I'm not certain anything I say tonight will make you feel better. Please give me time and I will explain everything to you. Trust me. Go back to your home in—"

"No." Helena stood and stamped her foot. "Nothing you say will convince me to leave town. I'm sorry, Nicholas, but this time you are wrong. There is a reason I need to be here and I plan to find out what it is with or without your help."

Nicholas walked around his desk and sat in his chair. "I will call your guards to see you back home." He noted her flushed face. "Where are your guards?" His voice although quiet, held a hint of steel in it.

"You must understand, Nicholas. They would have tried to stop us." She ended in a rush of words. "We had no choice but to drug them."

\* \* \* \*

At any other time, the incredulous expression on his face would have brought a smile to hers. Not tonight. The crackle of tension spread between them.

"You drugged my men?"

"They will be fine. I only gave them a few drops of Mama's sleeping tonic."

Slowly Nicholas came toward her. "I have never laid a hand on a woman in my life, but there is a time for everything."

Turning away from him, she tried to run but his hands grabbed her and he sat, pulling her across his lap. She didn't believe he'd hit her.

"Let me go. Papa has not spanked me in years." She yelled at him and wriggled trying to get loose.

"Then it is obvious that it has been too long."

His large hand came down, hitting her across her backside.

"Stop," she demanded as tears filled her eyes.

But his hand came down three more times before he turned her over and glared into her eyes. "You had better hope, my dear that my men are all right or I may not be able to protect you from your actions."

He stood abruptly and set her on her feet. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"I will have Franklin see you home."

She watched him go the door and tell Franklin to take them home in his carriage and to pay for the hackney sitting somewhere outside. He also instructed Franklin to check on their men. He didn't look at Helena again.

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## Chapter 24

Franklin, as furious as Nicholas after he heard the story, glowered at both girls all the way home. Agnes snuggled close to the twins as they all three sat across from the large angry man.

They slipped in the back way. The guards sat at the table with their heads down, sleeping. Franklin aroused them and directed Agnes to make coffee.

With a last withering look and a sharp, "Go", he sent Helena and Mary Ann away.

"And tonight was supposed to help my relationship with Franklin?" Mary Ann said in near tears when they collapsed in Helena's room.

Helena sat with her hand over her heart. It might beat right out of her chest at any moment. "Thank goodness the guards are all right." She took a deep breath. "Not that I didn't expect them to be, but Nicholas got so upset about them that it frightened me."

"I heard you yell. I tried to get to you, but Franklin held me back. What did the duke do to you?"

"He hit me."

"Hit you? How dare he? You must break off your engagement. Mama and Papa would not want you to marry such a man."

"You must admit he did have provocation."

"There is no reason to ever beat a woman."

"He didn't beat me, Mary Ann. He spanked me, as though I was a five year old child. It was more humiliating then painful.

Mary Ann sat with her mouth open, speechless as laughter began to bubble up.

"If you must laugh at me, cover your face with this pillow," Helena said, handing Mary Ann one of her bed pillows. "Otherwise, you will wake our parents and we don't want to face their wrath."

Mary Ann wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm sure sometime in the future you will see how funny this whole evening has been."

"Funny or not, at least I got my warning to Nicholas. We are not through yet though. We must still try to find out more information to help Nicholas and Franklin."

"Are you mad?"

"No, and I promise we will not drug the guards again or go out in the middle of the night. I have to admit I have not the nerves to repeat such an outing."

"Thank Heavens!"

"Except if we can stop the attempt on Nicholas life and in that case, we would have to do whatever is necessary. Of course we would take the guards with us, if that occurred."

"Why do you not leave it all to the duke? I've no doubt he is quite capable."

"True, but I find I rather like the excitement of being involved."

Mary Ann stood to go to her room. "Did you learn nothing tonight?"

"Yes, if I tell Nicholas something I know he won't like, I best prepare to run." She grinned. "Go to bed, we have a busy day tomorrow."

"Don't tell me what we will be doing. I prefer happy dreams, not nightmares."

\* \* \* \*

Dawn found Helena awake. Outside, a dull yellowish color caused from a mixture of fog and smoke colored the day. It suited Helena's mood.

How could she protect Nicholas when he ignored her concerns and refused to give credence to her feelings? She headed to Mary Ann's room. They'd go shopping and make visits. Perhaps they'd overhear information to help her understand what was going on.

"Mary Ann, wake up." Helena shook her shoulder.

"Go away. We didn't get home until almost morning. I'm sleeping."

Helena pulled Mary Ann into a sitting position and went to pick out a gown for her to wear.

Mary Ann frowned at Helena. "I will be glad to see you married. I'll finally get some rest. You've gone daft this past week."

Helena handed her a pale yellow muslin gown. "Put this on and quit complaining. You did get to see Lord Gates last night."

Mary Ann snatched the gown. "A lot of good that did me. Even before the final fiasco, he manhandled me out of the room and lectured me on the perils of stupid stunts." She pulled the dress over her head. "He said," she added with emphasis, "if he were my husband, he would lock me in my room. The nerve of the man. He and Nicholas are apparently very much alike. I'd never marry him!"

Helena turned so Mary Ann wouldn't see her expression. No one ever dared to speak so firmly to her sister. Lord Gates was most definitely the man for Mary Ann.

"You are already dressed. Did you sleep at all?"

"Not much," Helena admitted. "I awoke at dawn."

"What are we going to do at this ungodly hour?"

"We will be detectives. During our shopping and visits we'll listen closely to the gossip and see what we can learn."

Mary Ann looked at Helena, her eyes staring and her mouth gaping. "Do you even know what we're trying to find out?"

"No," she put her hand up to forestall Mary Ann's reply, "but that is part of the adventure."

"If we are not dead when this is over, I believe the duke and Franklin may shoot us," Mary Ann pronounced on leaving her room behind Helena.

\* \* \* \*

The horses worked their way through the trash and spoiled food littering the streets. The pungent odor of rotten food and unwashed bodies made more than one of the riders cover their noses with a handkerchief.

"You're sure these men will do the job?" Lawson asked.

"Yes, they've done other jobs for me satisfactorily. And they are not squeamish when it comes to killing women." Harold Odell moved ahead, not looking back at Lawson and Miles.

"Whoa." Lawson rode up beside him. "What women?"

"Surely, you know we will have to use bait to draw the duke and Gates out of their protective circle."

"You mean Helena Steeples and her sister?"

"Yes. My men have watched Gates. They think he cares for the other twin. It will be a strong motivation for the duke and him to come after us."

"They're protected by guards all the time," Lawson said.

Pulling up, Odell shifted in his saddle and faced Lawson. "They were careless the other night. I've heard reports the two women were able to sneak out and go to the duke's home. I wish I'd had my plans made and we'd have easily captured them. As it is, they'll be careless again or we'll find a way to grab them. Whichever." He shrugged.

A chill ran down Lawson's spine. He'd met men before who were cold and hard. Men, who didn't mind killing, sometimes they killed even when it wasn't necessary. Odell was such a man.

He had hoped to have his revenge on the duke and Helena and then escape to America. It was not going to happen. It went against his grain to help the duke. He'd think Lawson was trying to save his own skin. He would be wrong, Lawson thought. He might want to do something to annoy the duke and Helena but he'd never agree to assist in killing her.

Lawson stared across at the man facing him and nodded agreement. For now. He'd need to contact the duke soon. They continued on their way, to meet the men they would hire to help with Odell's plan.

Damn Odell. In many ways, Lawson had changed, but he wasn't able to stand aside and let Odell's plan go forward. Not if he could help it. He didn't care for Helena as he once did and he knew she did not love him. /But his conscience wasn't completely gone. Perhaps she kept him from becoming like Odell because she'd been a part of his youth, a part he still held deep inside of him. One of his good memories that kept him from becoming the man riding in front of him, that kept him from losing the last remnant of good in his soul.

\* \* \* \*

The Westerly ball was a huge success. The crush of people milled around greeting each other. Ladies with decorated fans opened them and fanned themselves to combat the heat created by the mass of bodies.

"Do you see the duke or Franklin?" Mary Ann asked.

"No." Helena looked all around the room. "Perhaps they decided to stay away. Neither cares for balls and such."

Helena saw disappointment flicker across her sister's face. "But the gossip we heard this morning was correct. Lawson is across the room surrounded by an admiring group of young women."

Mary Ann did not bother to glance in the direction Helena indicated. "Harry will probably show up too. This is going to be another boring ball."

Helena did not hear her sister's words. She stared across the room at a man entering from a side door. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Helena, what is it?"

The man slipped into a room before Helena could see him well enough to place him. She glanced back around and smiled in relief. "Nicholas and Lord Gates have arrived," she informed Mary Ann.

The men spotted them almost immediately and worked their way toward them. Helena smoothed the skirt of her orchid colored silk gown, her hands trembling. She was not at all sure how Nicholas felt about her and their marriage after last night. She looked over at her sister. Mary Ann, dressed in a deep blue gown with silver trim, had her heart's desire showing through the expression in her eyes. Before Nicholas and Franklin got across the room, a man stepped in from of the twins.

"Ladies, how lovely you look. Lady Helena, may I have this first dance?" Lawson made a low bow.

Helena saw Nicholas had stopped to speak to an older man. Music started and couples began to fill the dance floor. "Yes, thank you, Lawson."

This was a chance to pump Lawson for information and give her more time to regain her composure before facing Nicholas. Lawson was a good dancer and Helena enjoined the movements of the dance and the music, but it left little time for conversation.

"Walk with me to the dining room? You can cool off, while I get you some lemonade."

Helena saw Nicholas and Franklin standing with Mary Ann. Her opportunity to converse with Lawson would be gone if she returned to the group.

"Yes, I am hot and lemonade sounds delicious."

Lawson put out his arm and led her away. After finding her a seat, he left to get her drink.

"Lady Helena Steeples, am I correct?" The short blond man made a bow in front of her.

"Yes, but I'm afraid I do not remember meeting you, sir. Though you do look familiar."

"We met once briefly several years ago. I do not expect you would remember. We were in a crush at a ball, such as tonight."

"Odell, I didn't know you planned to be here tonight." Lawson frowned at the man.

"I forgot to mention it when we talked yesterday. Good to see you again, Lord Falscroft. But I see I am interrupting, please excuse me." Before either one of them could reply, he left the room.

"Such a strange man. I don't remember meeting him."

\* \* \* \*

"He's been abroad most of the time over the past few years. Here is your lemonade. Tell me how you are doing." Lawson attempted to draw her attention away from Odell.

Did Odell suspect he didn't agree with his plan and was only playing along? The man had been watching him closely the past few days and he was not a man to be crossed. Lawson felt his throat tighten, as though someone had a noose around his neck and gently pulled on it. He walked a thin line, a dangerous line if he betrayed Odell. Not for the first time, he cursed at himself for getting involved with the man. It had been financially advantageous at the time.

Lawson saw a couple coming in their direction. "I see some of your friends coming to speak with you. Please excuse me for a moment."

He walked across the room looking for a pen and paper. On a desk, that was pushed aside to make room for the table of food, he found what he needed. He quickly wrote a short message and slipped it up his sleeve. He was relieved the couple had diverted Helena's attention.

After the couple left, he walked back and sat beside her. Helena's reticule sat on the table by his hand. Lawson leaned his elbows forward to better look at her and knocked it to the floor.

"Forgive me." He reached down and handed it back to her. "Shall we wander back inside the ballroom? I'm sure there are others looking for you. Or I could sit here all night admiring your good looks."

"Silly, you are too lavish in your praise, Lawson. No reasonable woman will believe you."

"I am being very honest, my dear."

\* \* \* \*

She caught the catch in his voice and glanced at him sharply. For a second, he had switched back to Lawson of long ago.

"There you are, my dear. The musicians are preparing to play another dance. I hope you won't mind, Falscroft, if I take my betrothed away."

"Not at all," Lawson bowed deeply to both of them. "I plan to retire to the card room."

Nicholas guided her to the dance floor, his warm hand touching the curve of her back. His eyes flashed with anger. She refused to respond to the look on his face.

"I do love dancing. Thank you for coming to get me."

"Was Lord Falscroft annoying you, my dear?"

"No, he was very pleasant and took me to get a cool drink. There was another man though, who came by and spoke to me." She leaned her head back and looked at him.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas caught his breath. Her long slim neck looked enticing, creamy white skin, with a small gold chain fastened around it. He could smell the faint hint of honeysuckle. Her lovely bosom rose and fell with her words, words that did not penetrate at first.

"...Odell, but I don't remember the meeting," he heard her say.

He raised his eyes and stared at her. "I'm sorry, I missed something. Did you mention Odell?"

"Yes." She frowned. "Do you know him? He came into the room and spoke to me while Lawson was away from the table. He said we had met before, but I don't think so. Although, I do think I've seen him somewhere. Lawson was not happy to see him when he returned with my lemonade."

"I have met him a few times. I know the family."

"Good, then he is respectable. That is a relief. I had the distinct impression he did not belong here and he had an aura of danger around him." She laughed and shrugged. "I am being silly." She hesitated. "I suppose you expect me to apologize for last night, but I felt such an urgency to speak with you."

He swung her around and held her firmly against his body, his hand holding tight to hers. She smiled an impish grin.

"You must be thinking you are not getting the sensible woman you contracted to marry."

He lowered his head and whispered in her ear. "I'm getting the woman I desire."

Nicholas puzzled over the expression that crossed her face. What was wrong? Did she resent his behavior last night? He'd berated himself several times since the incident. He would have to talk with her later.

For now, he must find out why Odell would be at tonight's ball and introduce himself to Helena. Surely, Odell, one of his most trusted men, was not involved with the traitor.

He escorted Helena back to her sister, and bowing, went to find Franklin. Spotting Lawson, he moved in the opposite direction.

They had not talked since the night at his estate. Tonight was not the time to confront him about whether he planned to help them discover the identity of the traitor. It might be dangerous, for Lawson, if the wrong person saw him talking to Nicholas. He'd have Franklin bring him in for a meeting.

Nicholas watched as Helena danced by him. Soon, she would be his and he would not take kindly to her smiling so warmly at her dance partners. Other couples might accept such behavior but not him. He was jealous. This surprised him. Had his plan for a sensible convenient marriage changed somewhere along the way?

The newness would wear off soon enough. They'd go their separate ways as most couples, presenting a united front when needed, and raising his heir and other children amicably. The thought brought a bad taste to his mouth and put a frown on his face.

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## Chapter 25

"Good night, Helena. I'm retiring. Do not wake me before noon tomorrow, unless the house is burning down," Mary Ann warned.

"All right." Helena chuckled as she went to her own room.

Helena threw her reticule on the bed and heard the crackle of paper. Perplexed, she picked it up and opened it. A small piece of paper lay inside folded in half. The outside had Nicholas name printed across it. With shaking hands, she read the cryptic message. Dawn, stable, horse, urgent. That was all.

She peeked out her door. One of their guards leaned against the nearby wall. He roused from his relaxed stance. They weren't going to take a chance on another trick. She had apologized, but she knew they'd never trust her.

Helena tiptoed by him and motioned for him to follow her. Another man stepped up and took his place.

Leading the first guard into the kitchen, she turned to him. His expression was wary, especially when she put a pot of water on the stove to boil.

"Nothing for me, my lady."

She held the folded paper out to him. "I found this in my reticule. I'm not sure how it got in there, but someone must have put it in my bag at the ball tonight. You must take this message to the duke. It mentions dawn. Hopefully, he will know what it means."

The guard read the note. "How do I know you didn't write it yourself, my lady?"

"Why would I do such a thing?"

He shrugged and held the paper gingerly between his thumb and forefinger.

"If you do not take it to him, I shall. You will not be able to stop me."

"I could stop you. It wouldn't be pleasant."

"For goodness sakes, my good man, this is important. Take it."

Suspicion shown in his eyes. Reluctantly he went back up the stairs. She followed him to the bottom of the steps and watched him talk to the other guard. They both looked over the railing to stare and whisper. The other man nodded and came downstairs, seating himself between the kitchen area and the second landing.

"You will sit here with Tom." The first guard motioned to his partner. "That way he can watch for your sister and you. I'll return shortly."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas related the story Helena told him about Odell speaking to her at the dance to Franklin. They both heard the faint knock at the side door. Franklin pulled his pistol out and went to check on who was calling so late.

Seeing the guard, Nicholas snapped at him. "What? You left the women with one guard?"

"Didn't have a choice, or the one lady threatened to come here herself."

"Lady Helena?"

"Yes, Your Grace." He pulled out the paper and handed it to the duke. "She says she found this in that tiny bag the ladies carry. Said you had to see it cause of the word dawn is on it."

Nicholas scanned the note and handed it to Franklin. "You were right to bring it. Now quickly go back to the house. I don't feel comfortable with only one guard alone with the Steeple twins. Something tells me he would be helpless if they ganged up on him."

The guard touched his hat and went to leave. "That's what I think, makes me blood run cold to think how dangerous those two women could be."

Nicholas and Franklin held their laughter until the door closed. Catching his breath after a good hard laugh, Franklin said, "Maybe we should hire them and send them out after the traitor. Whoever it is would probably leave the country to save his worthless life."



"I'm sure you're right, Franklin. I shall be afraid to sleep if I ever make Helena angry after our marriage. I shall have to be on my best behavior."

"They are amazing women." Franklin admitted reluctantly. "If they don't get themselves killed, Lady Helena will be a wife that will never bore you. I've never known two women harder to protect."

"Nor I," Nicholas agreed, "and that is what keeps me awake at night."

\* \* \* \*

The crisp morning air blew across his face. Lawson hunched over and pulled the brim of his hat farther down to cover more of his face. The coolness of the morning made him shiver. Cautiously, he stepped inside the stable. Plenty of places to hide if needed. Walking amongst the stalls, he admired the duke's horseflesh. The door creaked and he hid behind several bales of hay.

Nicholas came into the stable followed by Franklin. His glance roamed over the stalls and the shadowy areas of the large barn.

"Be careful, Nicholas. This could be a trick." Franklin whispered.

Lawson stepped out from his hiding place. "He's right you know. A trap is being set for both of you, but not today."

Nicholas strode farther inside. "You know who the traitor is and what he is after?"

"Yes, but before I give you the information, I want to know how soon you will see me on a boat to America or the islands. I don't care which direction. I just want to get away from here fast. ."

"As soon as you wish."

"Good, I think he distrusts me and I'd as soon be long gone before he realizes I betrayed him."

"I can find out today when the next ship is leaving," Nicholas answered.

A large black horse with a white diamond on his nose moved to the front of his stall, tossing his head and watching the men. Nicholas smiled and rubbed the head of the mighty horse. "Warlock, we have disturbed your rest."

Franklin leaned against the closed stable door. Shadows cast across the length of the building.

Lawson stepped closer and spoke softly. "The plan is to try and kidnap the women again, thus drawing you two out from your cover. They will threaten to kill the women and they mean it."

"Who is the traitor?" Nicholas spoke.

"One of your own men."

"Harold Odell?" Nicholas asked.

"How did you know?" Lawson said.

"I began to suspect when Lady Helena said he spoke to her at the dance last night."

Franklin moved away from the door. "How do they plan to get Lady Helena and Lady Mary Ann? They must know we have guards with them at all times and it will be even harder to get to them this time."

Lawson nodded, slowly working his way back to the door. "They also know about the visit to your house the other night. They are waiting for the best opportunity and they will strike."

Reaching the door, Lawson looked out. "It's getting light, I must leave. Find out when I can sail and I'll meet you here two days hence with any more information I can acquire. I'll expect a sailing date and passage arranged." He disappeared around the door.

\* \* \* \*

"Morning, Mama." Helena brushed a kiss across her mother's face, on her way to the sideboard.

Helena returned to the dining table with a plate of ham and eggs and tried to ignore the close scrutiny her mother gave her.

"You look tired. Have you not been sleeping?"

"I do have many concerns right now, what with the wedding and all."

"You should have slept later, as Mary Ann is doing."

"Oh, Mama, you know I have never been able to sleep late. I love the early mornings and it's the time I do my best painting."

"Have you finished the duke's portrait?" her mother asked.

"Almost, I hope to finish it before the wedding, but if not, I will complete it soon afterwards." Bending her head to concentrate on her food, Helena hoped to discourage further questions.

"Which brings up the question of when we will be leaving London for home? Your wedding is in less than two weeks and there is still much to be done."

"Mama, I need to be here a while longer. Why don't you go ahead and complete the plans without me?"

"Surely you want to be in on the decisions about your wedding day."

"Anything you decide will be in the best of taste, Mama," Helena said.

"I think Mama is right and we should all go home." Mary Ann spoke from the doorway. "You know Helena that we have done more than enough since we arrived in town. The duke would agree with me, I'm sure."

Helena was startled to see her sister awake at this hour. She glanced from Mary Ann to her mother. Perhaps they were right. Neither Nicholas nor the guards would allow her any further involvement in whatever plans they made. She'd had no more nightmares, a good sign.

"We can leave as soon as you wish, Mama. I would like to finish the portrait before the wedding." Stunned by her easy agreement, Mary Ann and her mother stared at her.

Finding her voice, Mary Ann spoke as she left the doorway and walked to the sideboard. "Thank goodness. Never did I think I'd want to leave London, but I'm ready."

Lady Steeples eyed both her daughters with curiosity. Helena held her breath, fearing a rain of questions, but Mama reached for her cup of tea. Then as in an afterthought said, "There are some things I believe I would rather not know." She finished her tea and left the room.

"Will you send a note to the duke letting him know of our departure?" Mary Ann asked.

"Yes, after we are on our way. Otherwise, he might come by to give me another lecture. He is still angry about my doping the guards. Hopefully he will be in a better frame of mind by the day of our wedding."

Helena leaned forward, placing her elbows on the table in a quite unladylike manner. "It was exciting though, wasn't it? No wonder you have been so outrageous and daring all these years. I didn't know what I was missing."

Mary Ann's eyes widened with shock. "Don't blame me. I haven't ever done anything like our escapade the other night." Looking around and noting no maid or footman nearby, she whispered, "But yes, it was almost too exciting."

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## Chapter 26

"They left town, guv." The short squat man smelled of sweat and smoke. "Early this morn."

"Great, they are falling right into our hands." Odell threw several coins at the man and waved him off. He turned to Miles and Lawson. "Their parents are creatures of habit. Tonight they will stop at The King's Knight Inn and we will be ready."

"I'm sure the guards have gone with them," Lawson said.

"They won't be in their room. We'll climb up the side of the building and go directly into the room after they're asleep." Odell smiled broadly. "The duke thinks he will find out my identity and stop me from working for both sides. Hah! I've made a tidy profit and I don't plan to let him interfere with my success. We'll see how he likes it when his future wife's life is threatened."

"He may sacrifice her for his country," Lawson interjected.

"No, he will come. He will come to rescue her and to get the traitor. He does not believe he can fail and that will cause his downfall." Odell rubbed his hands together with glee.

Miles spoke up "What about the other one, Lord Gates?"

"The other sister will draw him out, that and the fact the duke is his best friend. He won't let him come alone."

Voices and the clatter of glasses drowned out their conversation. Lawson watched Odell sit back in his chair a look of satisfaction and excitement on his face. Odell will kill them all. The women, the duke, Lord Gates, and the men who knew of his plan. Maybe he'd let a few trusted men survive, but he doubted that would include Miles or himself. He'd seen the looks Odell gave them, one of dislike and distrust. No, once Odell succeeded in his plan, he and Miles were of no more use to him.

A shrewd expression on his face, Odell motioned to Miles, Lawson, and two of his men sitting at his table. "You will stay with me today. We leave within the hour for the Inn and tonight we capture the women."

Lawson's heart sank. He had no way to get a message to the duke. Hopefully, the duke knew the Steeple family planned to go home and maybe he'd added men to their regular guard. If not this night would be dangerous for them all.

He watched for an opportunity all morning to speak with anyone who he could send to the duke with a message. Finally, on a stop to change horses Lawson saw his chance.

He scribbled a note and placed a large coin in the young boy's hand. "Get your father to ride to London now. I will pay for a horse to be saddled and ready. Run and tell your father to be of the utmost haste to deliver this note, only to the Duke of Monteroy. He will be well rewarded."

Lawson turned away and casually walked around the side of the Inn. One of Odell's men gave him a strange look. He breathed a sigh of relief when Odell motioned for them to be on their way again.

Would the boy go to his father? Even if he did, the man might laugh and take the coin not bothering to deliver Lawson's message. Well, he had done his best. Time and events were moving quickly. He needed to be very careful.

The horses galloped along the road making good time. They weren't far behind the coach and daylight was beginning to fade.

A light drizzle of rain started and soon raindrops soaked the men and water ran down the collar of Lawson's coat. The chill of the rain and another type of chill swept over him, fear

\* \* \* \*

Concerned he had not heard from Lawson, Nicholas and Franklin came to the Southerly afternoon tea in hopes of seeing and speaking to him. Nicholas felt a prickle of uneasiness along his tense muscles.

He'd received Helena's note early this afternoon, after his return home from their unsuccessful morning hunt for Lawson. He considered immediately striking out to follow after the Steeples carriage, but they did have the guards, who had also sent a note. It seemed equally important to reach Lawson, but it soon became obvious he was at none of the usual places.

"Let's go." Nicholas said. "Get as many of the men as you can and saddle up. We leave shortly to follow the Steeples. Something is up."

I feel it too." Franklin strode briskly out behind Nicholas, who didn't take time to make the proper courteous goodbyes.

Nicholas' sense of urgency increased and he wasted no time on arriving home. He was halfway up the stairs to change when the butler hailed him.

"You got my message, sir?"

"No, what message?"

"I sent it around to Lady Southerly's house. There is a man in the kitchen. He has a note and will not give it to anyone but you."

Nicholas flew down the stairs and into the kitchen. The thin man jumped, dropping his fork.

"You have a message for me?" Nicholas asked and held out his hand.

"You are the duke?"

"Yes."

The man drew out a wrinkled slip of paper and gave it to Nicholas. Nicholas read the note.

"Who gave you this?"

"A fine gentleman gave it to me son. He says he would hire a horse for me to come here and deliver it to only you."

Nicholas ran a hand through his hair. Damn, another late message.

"What time of day would that have been?"

The man shrugged. "Late morning, thereabouts."

"Thank you, finish your meal, and rest here tonight. You must have ridden your horse hard and I appreciate it. My butler will see you have food for your trip home tomorrow and a reward for your promptness."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Nicholas raced upstairs, tearing off his fine clothes as he went. Tonight, they would need to be dressed in black clothes to better hide out of sight. He groaned to himself. Tonight the traitors were after Helena and her sister.

If ever Helena needed to be quick in her actions, it was now. He failed her. He had little time to stop their kidnapping. But he was prepared to trade places with her and he would eventually kill any of the men who dared touch her.

Relieved to find Franklin changed and their men ready, he showed Franklin the note. "We must ride fast. I hope we can arrive in time. We have to try and be ready to do whatever is necessary to save them," Nicholas said.

Franklin glanced up at the sky. "Luck has not been on our side this day."

The two friends urged their horses into a gallop and the men followed fast behind.

Nicholas knew where the family planned to stop. The guard had mentioned the inn's name in his note. The light faded fast and they dare not run the horses as hard as he'd like. They'd be lucky to get to the inn by one or so in the morning.

The Steeples had probably not arrived until early evening in their slow moving carriage. Nicholas and his group had changed horses an hour ago. Cold determination filled his body. He would get to them in time.

Franklin pulled up beside Nicholas. "You think they'll wait until the early hours?"

"Hope so. They will want to be certain everyone is sound asleep. I think we have a few hours or so to go before they do anything."

"Odell is clever. He has to know we are on our way by now."

"Not necessarily. He kept Lawson with him or we would have heard directly from him. If Odell knows nothing about the note sent to us, then we're in luck."

"Or if he does know, we are riding into a trap."

"I've thought of that and I want us to split up outside of the area around the inn and come in from two different directions."

Franklin nodded and dropped back into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

After a satisfying meal of thick stew and big slices of warm bread spread with butter, Helena took a last swallow of tea and stood.

"Mama and Papa, I am going to retire. The riding and this good meal has made me sleepy," Helena said and proceeded to kiss her parents on their cheek.

"I'll be up shortly," Mary Ann said.

Helena could hear the laughter and rumble of conversation coming from the main room of the pub. Looking through the small opening of the door, she saw men sitting at tables while several scantily clad bar maids carried trays of beer to the customers.

Ribald comments filled the air and Helena felt her face flush at some of the jokes. Her parents would be most displeased to see her peeking, but she was interested in seeing how others enjoyed themselves.

An especially pretty barmaid, with long blond hair and a low cut dress, stopped at a back table. Helena almost gasped out loud when she saw a man reach up to put his hand into the maid's top.

Helena started to back away, but watched as the woman slapped his hand playfully and stepped neatly out of his reach. The man turned his face to speak to the woman and Helena felt her breath catch. Odell.

She looked again. The poorly lit, smoke-filled room made it difficult to see, but she was almost certain and—was that Lawson sitting two men over from him? What a coincidence that they would be here at the same inn tonight.

Shivers went down her spine. If not for Lawson, she'd consider they were in danger. But, would Lawson be involved with anyone planning to do her harm? It was hard to believe.

Carefully, she stepped back from the door. Her thoughts raced. There was no time to waste. She must confide in her father.

She hurried to the sitting room and stepped inside. "Papa, would you walk with me?"

Lord Steeples blinked his eyes at Helena. "Excellent idea, a few more moments and I'd been sound asleep."

Mary Ann looked at Helena with questioning eyes. Helena shook her head. "Mary Ann, please stay with Mama. When I return we'll go upstairs."

Closing the door securely behind him, Lord Steeples whispered to Helena. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but there is a man in the pub room with Lawson. A strange man who spoke to me at the ball the other night and said he knew me. He looked familiar. I think, Papa, I might have seen him around the night of the failed kidnapping. I can't believe Lawson would be involved, but he is sitting at a table with that man and four others."

Lord Steeples hesitated before speaking.

"We don't have enough men to defend ourselves, do we, Papa?"

"I 'm counting in my head. The two guards, two coachmen, and me. If they have six men we are not in bad shape. My guess though is there are more men outside. I have a plan. We'll go talk with the innkeeper's wife."

They found her in the hot kitchen and Helena's father requested room changes.

"We would be glad to accommodate you, but there are no other rooms and you have the best." The woman looked confused.

"Quite all right, we will manage." Lord Steeples and Helena left the kitchen.

"I'm sure these men have already scouted out our rooms. This is what we will do.

"Get your Mother and Mary Ann and go upstairs. Call out good night as though you are saying good night to both of us, then all of you go inside together.

"Lock the door and have your mother pull the curtains down. After a few minutes blow out the candles and wait for me. Do not leave the room."

"What are you going to do, Papa? Set a trap for the men?"

"Don't worry. Now go and do as I said." He pushed her forward with his hand.

Helena watched him start toward the back door. He stopped to motion for her guards to go with him

Helena found her mother and Mary Ann waiting impatiently. "What is going on, Helena?" her mother asked.

"I will explain, Mama. First I have orders from Papa to get us to your room."

The three women climbed the stairs in a manner as not to arouse any suspicions. Lord Steeples surprised them coming up behind them and going to the room with them.

"Good night, daughters." His voice boomed out. "I hope you will rest well. The innkeeper has assured me we have the very best rooms he has to offer." That said he motioned for both girls to go to their room.

Helena wrinkled her brow in puzzlement. This was not in the plan. She and Mary Ann did as told, closed the door, and waited. The minutes crawled by. Finally, they heard the whisper of their father's voice.

"Quickly now, slip into my room, go. I'll be in here with most of our men. One guard will stay in the hall," he whispered.

He put a finger to his lips to stop any questions. The girls nodded and staying close to the wall, they crept to their parent's room. Their mother let them in, shut the door, and blew the candle out.

"Do you have a gun?" Helena whispered. "Yes." Her mother pointed toward the bedside table. "Your father loaded it, in case we need it. I'm as scared of guns as I am of whomever we are hiding from. I doubt I could use it."

"I can." Both Helena and Mary Ann spoke in unison.

"Shh. Helena, what are you doing?" Her mother whispered.

Helena's eyes had adjusted to the dark and she moved toward the table, took the gun and then headed toward the door. "I can't just sit here and wait, Mama. I have to help."

"There is a guard right outside our room," Mary Ann reminded her.

"He can't stop me without making noise. He'll follow me and it will be two more to help Papa and the other men."

"Why did I know you would say those words? I am going to have to go with you."

"No. Stay with Mama."

"If you go, we all three will," her mother stated. "Let's see what other weapons we can find in here."

Mary Ann found a long stick in the armoire. She held it up in triumph. Helena watched Mama roam the room, picking up various objects, and finally settling on a large vase.

"It is better than nothing," she said.

They listened at the door. Silence. Hoping the door wouldn't creak, Helena turned the knob and pushed it open. The hallway was dark. Helena waited a second before slipping out with her mother and Mary Ann right behind her . A tall shape came out of the shadows and motioned for them to go back.

Helena recognized the guard and shook her head no. She crept along toward her room and had to hold back a nervous chuckle. How they must look, four in a row creeping down the hall, the guard bringing up the rear.

They each found a hiding spot, mostly in corners and waited outside the door, listening for any noises. A creaking board and the snoring of a nearby guest made Helena want to jump out of her skin.

Helena had no doubt if they survived tonight, her father and Nicholas would be displeased with the chances she and the others took. They would find out it was her idea and the grief would come down on her head. But she was not a frightened miss to stay safe while those she loved were in danger. Evidently, her mother and sister agreed. All they had needed was a little encouragement. Her mother hardly protested. Nevertheless, if things went wrong she would not be able to forgive herself and neither would Papa and Nicholas.

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## Chapter 27

Lawson removed his coat and pulled on the black shirt Odell handed him.

"We'll blend right into the night," Odell assured him.

"I don't know why I have to go into the bedroom with your man," Lawson protested.

"Because I said so, I'm the boss."

Relief flooded through him. He wanted to be there to prevent them from harming Helena, but he didn't want Odell to suspect. Not sure what he could do to protect the twins, he knew he had to try. If he survived tonight, he'd get his money and run as fast as he could to the nearest ship.

"Where are the rest of your men?" Lawson whispered to Odell.

Odell chuckled, "Tis for me to know and you to wonder." He motioned for Miles and Lawson to follow him. They moved to the back of the inn. A large tree towered over them.

"You two stay here with Clyde and the others." Odell motioned to the three burly men standing to the side. "Two of them will climb up to the room and you'll follow," he said to Lawson. "When they get to the window, you'll be able to help bring the women down." He studied Lawson's face. "You'll probably have to knock them out to get them down without any racket." His glance fell to the gun stuck in the front of Lawson's pants. "Use the butt of your gun. That should do the trick."

Before Lawson could reply, Odell disappeared. He was helpless to stop the upcoming events. Even if the duke got his message, he probably wasn't going to be here in time.

The two men boosted each other toward the lower hanging limb. The third man stayed on the ground with Miles. The other two and Lawson inched along toward the tallest part of the tree. The bark cut their hands and the front man swore out loud.

"Hush," the man behind him growled. "You'll wake them up."

The front man frowned, but continued to climb upward. Lawson's hand touched his gun. He glanced down at Miles. They'd talked earlier, and Miles agreed to help him. Miles had also sensed the danger from Odell. Now he watched Lawson's every move. If they shot now, they could get at least two of the men and arouse the house.

Lawson noted the man with Miles had his attention focused on the men above him. With a slight nod to Miles, he took a quick breath, pulled his gun, and shot the front man.

Miles shot the man standing beside him. The man standing above Lawson pulled out his gun. Lawson grabbed the man's legs and toppled him from the tree. Shimming down, Lawson pulled rope from the man's pocket and tied his hands, while he trashed around in pain.

As they ran for cover, they dodged shots fired from the upstairs window. Once out of sight they took time to reload their guns. Staring toward the twin's window, Lawson spotted armed men surveying the area.

"We may get out of this with our skin yet," he whispered to Miles as they finished reloading.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas and Franklin heard the gunshots and separated, urging their horses to move faster. Coming to the edge of the clearing, Nicholas halted. Candlelight shone from the windows of the inn, but he didn't see anyone moving about. Probably afraid to at this point. Good.

Dismounting, Nicolas motioned for his men to follow. Darting between trees, they moved farther apart to circle the one side of the yard.

"Odell," Nicholas yelled into the silence. "I know you're here. It's over. You can't escape, come out."

"No way. We have your woman and we're going to kill her, in front of you."

"Prove to me you have her. Show me," Nicholas shouted.

Nicholas saw a slight movement, but motioned for his men to hold their fire. If Odell did have the twins, he didn't want them injured or killed by mistake. He strained his eyes, trying to see if Franklin's group was in position, but the starless night held them all sightless.

\* \* \* \*

"Where are the women?" Odell asked his second in command. "Go check out back. From the sound of the gun shots, something has gone wrong. We'll blast into the inn and find them. We have to have them, now."

The man went toward the back and a gunshot rang out as soon as he turned the corner. Odell winced. They betrayed him and if it was the last thing he did, he would kill those two.

Where are the women, Odell?" Nicholas shouted.

"They're with my men. They have orders to shoot them unless you come out in the next five minutes."

"I want to see them first."

"Maybe you don't understand. I have nothing to lose and I don't have to do anything you say any more. And believe me I have no qualms about shooting them. I'd enjoy it," Odell snarled. A harsh laugh filled the night air.

"I'm going to kill you, Odell for being a traitor to your country and especially for considering you can harm one of mine," Nicholas shouted.

"Try and she dies."

\* \* \* \*

Helena's father and the guards came bursting out of the room and ran by so fast they never saw the four hidden in the hall. Helena motioned and they all sped down the stairs behind them. The one guard grabbed her arm and yelled at her and the other two women to stay upstairs.

Helena raised her pistol. "I will not stay here and do nothing."

"This is the last assignment I take to guard a woman. You are a menace." Pushing her aside, he ran toward the men stopped at the front door.

Helena, her mother, and Mary Ann followed close behind. Helena saw her father frown and move his head for them to get back, but all three stood resolute with their weapons.

Time stood still. The landlord came out to the pub room. "What the devil is goin' on here?"

"Get down and be quiet," one of the guards snapped. The landlord frowned, but moved behind his bar, waiting with the others.

\* \* \* \*

Harry had been very wrong, Helena thought. Nicholas would fight for what he wanted. He sounded like he would kill, if necessary.

Helena heard the men's voices. She crept to the window. Nicholas' calm cold voice sent shivers down her spine. The warrior, hiding under the polite well dressed duke, was out tonight. A flush of warmth went through her body as she thought of his determination to save her.

Only Nicholas didn't know she was safe and at any moment he might come out from his cover to rescue her. Helena crept quietly toward the other door to the pub room. Everyone stared out the windows.

Her guard saw her too late. He yelled, but she slipped outside and leaned breathless against the wall. Holding her gun in sweaty hands, she squatted and yelled.

"I'm safe, Nicholas. Don't come out."

"What?" Odell ran in the direction of her voice.

"Helena, get inside," the duke's voice rang out.

Helena edged back against the wall, trying to see into the darkness. A sudden break in the clouds let moonlight show through. A tall shadow loomed in front of her. Odell.

He grabbed at her. She brought up her gun to shoot him, but he twisted her wrist until she dropped it.

"Bitch, I have you, finally. She's mine, now," he shouted as he raised his gun to her head. Pushing her along in front of him, he placed himself where Nicholas could see his captive. "You see her now? Come out or I'll blast a bullet into this pretty head."

"Let her go, Odell. This is between you and me. Meet me man to man," Nicholas, shouted back.

"I'm not a fool. The cards are all in my hand."

Suddenly shots rang out from the stable area and horses fled through the open door.

Odell jerked around and for one split second, the gun moved away from Helena's head. The shot blasted her ears and blood flew all around. Helena felt the reverberations of the shot and fell to the ground.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas ran and picked her up. She felt light, frail in his arms. "When, my dear, will you learn to follow instructions?" he whispered.

"Is she all right?" Franklin came rushing to his side.

"I believe her female sensibilities finally came forward and she fainted. Thank goodness. She didn't need to see anymore. She's already seen too much." Nicholas motioned to the still body lying at their feet.

"Not a pretty sight," Franklin acknowledged. "It's a good thing you've always been the best marksman around."

Nicholas glanced at his hands. "None of my shots have ever been as important." He started toward the inn with Helena held close against him. "Thanks to you, my friend, for causing the stampede that distracted Odell and thank goodness the horses didn't go in their direction."

"I had help with the distraction." Franklin pointed to Lawson and Miles standing in the opening to the barn.

Nicholas nodded briefly in their direction, before stepping inside with Helena.

Lady Steeples directed him up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms.

"I'll take over from here, Your Grace."

He shook his head. "I won't go."

Lady Steeples studied his face. He stood resolute.

"Don't you think you might be needed downstairs, young man?"

Mary Ann gasped at her mother's remark. Nicholas smiled. "You sound like my mother and I very often didn't obey her either. If you're afraid of the impropriety of me being here, don't worry. As soon as I can, I plan to marry your daughter before anything else can possibly happen to deter it."

Helena opened her eyes and took a short breath. "Stop fussing over me, both of you." She moved her head toward the duke. "Are you sure after all of this that you still want me for your wife?"

"I admit to some trepidation seeing how poorly you follow orders, but if I can manage a group of unruly men I should be able to handle one small woman." He grinned at her, waiting for her response.

Helena tried to rise.

"Lie down. You might faint again."

"I never faint." She fell back against the pillows Mary Ann had placed behind her head.

Nicholas raised an eyebrow at her.

She frowned. "Well, almost never."

"Now that that's resolved I want both of you out of the room," her mother said, eyeing the duke and her husband.

Nicholas hesitated. "I would prefer to stay until I'm sure she is fully recovered," he stated in his most firm voice.

"She will recover quicker once she is cleaned up. Have the landlord send a maid and a tub of warm water up. Now!" Lady Steeples glared at her future son-in-law. Stillness fell over the room.

Nicholas bowed and turned walking briskly out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas requested the maid send bath water upstairs. He stepped outside into the early dawn. Water dripped from the trees after a sudden early morning downpour. The rain soaked the ground and puddles stood in the large muddy courtyard. He saw Franklin had rounded up the other men working with Odell and had them ready to send to the nearest jail.

He turned and strode into the inn's common room. Lawson and Miles sat at a table with glasses of ale and plates of ham and eggs.

"Care to join us?" Lawson indicated a chair.

"I'll take a glass of ale, no food for me," Nicholas spoke to the landlord. "It seems I need to thank you two for the message and the help last night."

Lawson laughed. "Always the gentleman, even when you hate thanking me. You'd much rather knock my teeth in."

Nicholas studied the man in front of him. "You may be right, but I will not forget your assistance. Even though I had to force you to help us at the beginning, I believe last night you could have helped Odell and perhaps gotten rid of us. That is why I'm thanking you. It doesn't mean I don't remember other less favorable behavior. And that, I won't forget or forgive."

\* \* \* \*

Lawson glanced to his side at Miles.

"All right, I can take a hint." Miles grabbed his drink and food and moved to a table across the room.

"She told you?" Lawson eyed the stern faced man in front of him.

"Yes."

"Thought so. We were young."

"True. But, as a man you understood better what you were doing and the possible repercussions. And still you took advantage of her innocence."

Lawson shrugged. "I'd do it again."

Nicholas lunged across and grabbed Lawson by the collar. "Nothing would give me more pleasure than to throttle you."

"Let...me go," Lawson stammered and took a deep breath of air when Nicholas threw him back into his chair. He pulled his collar away from his throat. "Is that anyway to treat a man who helped you last night?"

"Yes! And your helping is the only reason you will have your passage to America. I'll meet you in London next week with the arrangements. In the meantime, stay away from what is mine."

The duke slammed his chair back and marched out of the room.

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## Chapter 28

"Mama is looking for you, Helena." Mary Ann was out of breath from climbing the stairs to the turret room too quickly. "She is going to fuss when she finds you up here."

"It has been over a week since my fainting spell. I can't stand anymore fussing over me or I shall go mad."

Mary Ann chuckled. "I'm surprised you've lasted this long. Let me see what you're working on."

Helena had turned the canvas away from her. "I'd prefer you didn't."

"You're working on his portrait, aren't you?"

Helena slumped down onto one of the benches against the turret wall. She remembered how desolate she felt on finding out Nicholas had left the inn soon after her mother assured him Helena was going to be all right.

At first, she thought he'd only left the room. Later her mother said he'd returned to London with the captured men.

Mary Ann sat beside her. "Are you all right? I'm sure he has been busy and he'll contact you soon. Mama said he had requested to be notified of your condition and she has written him at least once."

"I know. I worry he is angry about my actions that night. Well, I suppose it is too late to be upset. I did what I did. Would you like to ride with me over to the Falscroft's estate? I'm concerned about Lady Falscroft and how she is handling the news Lawson is leaving the country."

"Mama will have a fit if you try to go riding. She is very worried about your reoccurring nightmares."

"We'll go in the carriage and Mama can come with us. She shouldn't be surprised about the nightmares, not after that horrible scene I saw when Odell died."

"Something that could have been avoided had you stayed inside as directed. You don't follow directions very well, sister."

"Something the two of you seem to have in common." Lady Steeples said.

Helena smiled at her mother standing where the light glanced off of her pale blond hair, her blue eyes trying to stare sternly at her daughters. Her soft blue muslin gown and white lace shawl accentuated her good looks and denied her forty-six years.

Her mother sighed. "I suppose if I don't agree to go with you to the Falscroft's today, you will go anyway."

"Yes, Mama," Helena admitted.

"Then we will leave later this afternoon. Come and have some refreshments. We need to talk."

Helena hesitated and looked longingly at her canvas, but seeing the tilt of her mother's head and her determined expression, she gave in and followed them down the stairs.

Lady Steeples led the way to the small family sitting room and a maid followed bringing tea and pastries. She sat across from Helena and Mary Ann.

Helena sensed she was about to say something or ask her a question she didn't want to hear. Determined to ignore the look on her mother's face, Helena took a warm scone, filling her mouth with the sweet filling in the bun.

"I must say something, Helena, although I see from your expression you would rather I not. Speculation is rife about whether you and the duke will marry. Your wedding date is less than a week off, the gown is ready and the invitations sent."

"I have no idea how Nicholas feels, Mama. You know I have not heard from him since the incident at the inn." Helena remembered his closed expression that day. He seemed worried about her. Nevertheless, after Lady Steeples ordered him from the room, he quietly slipped away.

"After your behavior that night, he might have thoughts of your not being a proper duchess, but his note to me only expressed concern for your health" Lady Steeples put down her dainty Sevres tea cup. "You are not the quiet, calm, woman he asked to marry him. I hate to say it, but you and Mary Ann have acted more like twins then ever before. Have you changed your mind about wanting to marry the duke?"

Helena glanced at Mary Ann sitting beside her and staring into her tea cup.

"No, I haven't. You are probably right though and he is tired of the whole idea of taking a wife."

Mary Ann spoke for the first time. "If you want him, it is up to you to let him know."

Helena studied her sister's expression. "Are you talking about me alone, or both of us?"

Mary Ann shrugged, not answering.

"Normally I would not agree with Mary Ann," their mother said. "And I don't understand the reference to Mary Ann. Nevertheless, Helena, you should write the duke. Let him know how you feel and ask him his decision regarding your marriage."

Helena nodded, knowing full well she had a different plan in mind.

\* \* \* \*

The ride to the Falscroft's brightened Helena's spirits. Summer had come fast to the country and flowers bloomed, birds flew amongst the trees and scrubs, and cows stood in the pastures with baby calves at their side. Clear blue skies and fluffy white clouds filled her vision for as far as she could see. A feeling of almost contentment filled her. The only thing that disturbed her thoughts was the questions surrounding her marriage.

The old butler led the three ladies to the drawing room.

"How nice of you all to come for a visit." Lady Falscroft stood and took Lady Steeples hand, complimenting the bouquet of flowers she held out to her.

"You always did have the best gardens, Claudia," Lady Falscroft told her old friend. "Come in, girls." She motioned to Helena and Mary Ann. "I'm sure you must have heard Lawson arrived home late last night. Sit, please. Let me pour you a cup of tea and send for him."

Helena glanced at the door, as she took her cup. Lawson watched the ladies, a smile on his face.

"Good afternoon." He came into the room and greeted each of them. When he got to Helena, he held her hand longer. "You are well?"

"Yes, and you?"

"Except for having to tell Mama goodbye again, I am excited and ready for my new adventure."



His mother beamed at him. "At least this time I know he is well and happy. It makes it a little easier to see him go."

Helena watched him captivate his audience as he had so many other times. She'd been too young before to understand how he always managed to cajole others to whatever he wanted with his cleverness and charm.

He caught her staring. "Helena, would you come for a walk with me?"

Helena glanced at her mother and she nodded yes. Standing she put her arm through Lawson's and he led her out. She heard Lady Falscroft's loud whisper.

"They do make a lovely pair."

Lawson laughed. "Mama would have us married tomorrow, if she had her way."

Helena ignored his statement and lifted her face to the warm rays of the sun. They wandered along a wide path toward a small gazebo in the distance.

When they arrived in the shade of the white gazebo, Helena sat down. Vines of lush red roses twisted around the columns holding up the roof and the rich sweet smell of the flowers blew across her face.

She directed her gaze at Lawson as he stood leaning toward her, one leg on the bench beside her. "Your mother seems to be handling the news of your departure better then could be expected."

"It is difficult. She has been so happy to have me home." His blue eyes stared off in the distance.

"Could you not make a life for yourself here?" she asked, hoping she wasn't giving him the wrong impression.

He put his leg down and turned, glancing toward the house. "This can not be my home, but I do have enough money to build one of my own." He faced her. "I don't suppose you'd want to marry me and join me in that house?" His lip curled up. "I thought I'd ask one last time. I see the answer in your face."

"Lawson..." Helena stood and stepped to his side. "I wanted to thank you for helping—" He stopped her, putting his fingers over her lips.

"Don't. I can't bear to hear you thank me. I did it because I had no choice. I realized that in spite of the changes in me, I couldn't be part of a plan to harm you. You are one of my best memories. Perhaps with you I could have been a better person." He spoke rapidly and reached out to take hold of her arms, but she stepped quickly aside.

That cynical smile briefly flashed across his face.

"I'm too late. He is the one you love."

"Yes, I don't know how it happened. Ironically, if you had returned a few months earlier we might have been married by now. I don't think it would have made either of us happy. We've both changed." She stepped back and sat. This time she looked away from the taut expression on his face.

\* \* \* \*

He kneeled at her feet and took her hands. "Part of me will always remember you, my first love."

She smiled at him. "How gallant and dashing you were."

"Your decision is right. He is the better man." He raised his hand to stop her words. "I am being honest for once. Let me finish. I did not earn my money in the most respectable way and sooner or later, here, it would catch up with me. Leaving and going to America, I can have the comfort of knowing my family still thinks I am a fine man." He chuckled softly. "Maybe even a hero in their eyes. Nevertheless, there is restlessness in me and I have an ambition to want more. In America those are good traits."

They had no words left to say. The duke had arranged his passage and he would leave early the next day. He did not plan to come home again. He took her arm and they started to walk toward the house to join the others. She stopped him at the door.

"I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for and I'm sure we'll hear of your grand success from your letters home to your family." She removed her hand from his arm and faced him. "Goodbye, Lawson. Thank you for your help last week." She slipped through the door and disappeared. He walked off alone in the other direction.

\* \* \* \*

Helena and Mary Ann left for London the next day, with their parents, two maids, several groomsman and the one guard Nicholas insisted stay with them.

The heat and stink of London wafted into the carriage on the breeze. "I don't know why anyone would stay in town this time of year, unless they had to." Mary Ann put her handkerchief up to her nose. "Will you send a message around to the duke right away?"

"Yes, I will ask for a meeting at his townhouse. I hope he is still here. His last letter to Mama came from town and he did not mention going to the country. Will you try to see, Franklin?"

"Only if I accidentally run into him when out shopping."

"You never told me what he said that day at the inn."

\* \* \* \*

Mary Ann watched the crowded roadway give way to the less crowded streets, where the fashionable lived. Her father rode ahead of the carriage.

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"He said we were both spoiled and unmanageable, making clear he meant we didn't know how to do as told. He frowned the whole time he lectured me, then seeing no one else in the private dining room, he pulled me to him and kissed me." Mary Ann touched her lips recalling the hot hard kiss, melting against his body and putting her hands around his neck. The next moment he'd pulled away and rushed out of the room.

"Whatever is he scared of, Mary Ann? He must know Mama and Papa would approve of him as a suitor."

"It's nothing so simple. There is a mystery about my Franklin and I intend to find it out. Whatever it is will not let him commit to me and I fear I have done a foolish thing."

"What?" Helena took her sister's hand.

"I've fallen in love and you heard Mama. I need a husband by the end of next season." Mary Ann glanced across at her mother, glad to see she still slept, her head resting against one side of the coach.

The carriage pulled up in front of the town home. Mary Ann saw the carriage with the maids and their baggage right behind them. "We're here. Let's implement your plan."

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## Chapter 29

Helena wrote a brief note and sent it to Nicholas. After unpacking, she joined Mary Ann in the sunny sitting room at the back of the house.

"We need to find out what is going on in town," Mary Ann said. "Let's go shopping."

Helena hesitated. "I would hate to miss a message from Nicholas."

"He is sure to be at his club and then he may go to parliament. He won't even see your message until much later in the day."

Helena sipped her tea. She could use a new gown. In case Nicholas did not come to her, she would go to him. After all, she caused much of the problems between them. It was up to her to solve them.

"All right, let's go shopping for a new gown."

Mary Ann rose immediately. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Helena leaned back in her chair enjoying the restful scene of the outdoors seen through the large ceiling to floor windows. Mary Ann was never ready in a few minutes. She had plenty of time to have her breakfast and read the paper.

Nicholas Selwyn, the Duke of Monteroy, has been seen about the town in the past few days, bringing up the question of his marital status. Has the very eligible duke decided to not get married? Many anxious mothers would love to see him back on the eligibility list. Yet, the wedding date is still set for the end of the week. Hopeful mothers never give up. Consequently, many of the Ton remain in town and continue to have their dinners and parties with the duke being an honored guest.

Helena lowered the paper. Nicholas? He, who had never been fond of the social scene? Her mission may be more difficult than she imagined. But, he had not asked for the rubies back, nor talked with her about ending their contract. She had come to town in time and she would definitely need a new gown for her plan.

\* \* \* \*

They headed directly to the dressmaker's shop. "I need something different," Helena tried to explain. "I'm not sure what I want, but I need it for tonight."

The dressmaker studied her customer. "It will have to be a gown already made or one almost finished. Let me go to my back room and see what I can find."

Mary Ann sat nearby studying fashion plates. Helena paced the small room. Giggles at the door brought their attention to the entrance. Two very young debutantes came in, laughing and whispering.

"He asked you to dance, Sara," the brown haired girl said.

"Mama is beside herself. Of course, he must first get out of his present entanglement before he is eligible. But, I hear she is a very coarse woman, independent and demanding. Mama says you must not show such temperament to a gentleman or he will not make an offer." The young blond-haired debutante spoke to her friend.

"I can't believe that he showed you attention, Sara."

"I know, my heart raced during the whole dance and everyone stared."

"A broken wedding contract is considered scandalous, but no would snub a duke regardless. You might have a future as a duchess."

The girls glanced around, only then noticing the two women on the left side of the room. They smiled and rang the bell on the table to bring Mademoiselle from her back room.

"Ladies, how lovely and refreshing you look this morning. I am helping Lady Helena Steeples. I will have Marie bring your gowns out and you can go with her to try them on."

The blonde, Sara, stared at Helena and Mary Ann. "You are the twins?"

Mary Ann laughed, "That isn't too hard to notice."

Sara's friend whispered to her, and then Sara moved closer to Helena. "You were betrothed to the Duke of Monteroy?"

"I am betrothed to the duke." Helena stated in her most haughty voice.

The blonde straightened her spine and cast a cold look over Helena. "The on-dit is that will not last much longer."

Helena forced herself to laugh, a tingling, casual sound. "Don't always believe what you hear from gossips or even the papers. I can assure you we still plan to be married."

Sara had the grace to flush. Spite showed in her eyes. "I wouldn't discount your competition, Lady Helena. After all, you must be twenty or older. You should try putting cucumber slices over your eyelids to take away some of the puffiness and lines." Turning, the girls marched off regally, following the dressmaker's assistant into the dressing room.

"Lady Helena," the dressmaker spoke from the curtained opening of another dressing area. "Please come with me and try on these three gowns. I believe the ivory satin may be the best."

On arriving home from shopping, they found no message from Nicholas, but they did receive an invitation from Lady Woodbridge to her last ball of the season. Good, this would help her implement her plan. Tonight, one way, or the other, she'd settle things with Nicholas.

She took the ivory gown to her room and tried it on. The top cut deeply down between her breasts, barely covering her, and ended in small puffy off-the-shoulder sleeves. The soft satin material hugged her figure to her waist then softly flared around her hips. When she walked, pleats separated showing ruby red lace in between. The perfect dress to complement her rubies.

Her rubies. She would not allow them or Nicholas to go to that young, cold as ice debutante. If she wanted a battle, she would have one. The time had come to show Nicholas, in no uncertain terms, how she felt about him.

\* \* \* \*

He saw her as soon as she entered the ballroom. Candlelight flickered over her golden hair piled loosely on top with curls dangling along her neck, the ruby earrings sparkling from her small shell-shaped ears. His gaze roamed over her creamy white shoulders. His blood red rubies lay around her neck, the large egg-shaped ruby nestled between her breasts.

"Quite striking, isn't she?" Franklin murmured at his side.

"Yes," Nicholas felt the dryness in his mouth and the hunger in the pit of his stomach.

Franklin stepped around him and headed toward Helena and Mary Ann. Nicholas barely glanced at Mary Ann, but realized Franklin had not been speaking of Helena. Mary Ann wore ice blue with a single strand of pearls around her neck.

Nicholas still felt the residue of anger from his guard's report of Helena's visit to see Lawson. Would she never get the man out of her mind?

Deliberately, he moved in the opposite direction from Helena, toward Lady Sara. Her eyes eager, she and her mother greeted him with much enthusiasm. Bowing, he invited her to dance. Young and too full of herself she might be, but she would be complaisant and make him a competent duchess.

Since he'd returned to London, he'd had some qualms about Helena's behavior since their betrothal. And after hearing of Helena's last visit to Lawson, he'd decided he had no desire for a wife who cared more for another man than him. Even with Lawson gone from England, he did not know if she would forget him. Jealousy ate at his insides. He didn't like the feeling.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to meet with Helena and discuss ending their relationship. He felt certain that was why she had come to London and what she wanted all along. This would be best for both of them. But, it didn't stop the ache in his chest.

As he twirled Lady Sara around the ballroom, he felt no joy. They would have a true rational arrangement. Lady Sara understood the rules.

\* \* \* \*

Helena watched as Nicholas danced by with the young blonde woman from the dress shop. Lady Sara Perkle, someone told her, a most sought after debutante.

Nicolas did not look her way, but he knew of her presence. After all, Franklin had surprised them by coming right over and asking Mary Ann to dance. And if Franklin saw them, Nicholas did too.

Her hands itched to go over and pull Lady Sara from his arms. She chuckled to herself that would certainly give the Ton something to talk about for a long time. Aware of the whispers around her and the looks darting from the duke and his dance partner and back to her, Helena kept a smile pasted on her face.

She knew many of the ladies who stopped to speak with her hoped she'd give them a tidbit of gossip, something to talk about on the other side of the room, where the matrons sat. She didn't. She kept her posture straight, voice soft and polite, and directed questions to the ladies. She asked about their families, carefully sidestepping any inquiries regarding the duke.

I vow, Nicholas, you will pay tonight for ignoring me. She was determined more then ever to follow her plan. She would have to enlist Mary Ann's help to slip away without their mother's knowledge. Even if she did want her daughters married, her mother would definitely not agree to a late night visit to a bachelor residence.

Once the gentlemen saw Nicholas go to the card room, they began to ask Helena to dance. Mary Ann and Helena moved to the refreshment room half way through the evening and sampled the sweet lemonade.

"Franklin disappeared after the first dance," Mary Ann complained. "I simply do not understand the man. At times he looks at me like he wants to carry me away, instead he disappears."

"Well you have not been at a loss for partners."

"Neither have you. Don't you think it strange that Nicholas would ignore you so pointedly?"

"His behavior is causing much speculation. I didn't dream he'd not ask me to dance at all. One dance would slow the gossip."

Mary Ann patted Helena's hand reassuringly. "Not to worry, there's plenty of time."

Helena wondered how long Nicholas planned to stay. He usually left long before the last dance.

She wanted to leave herself and motioned to Mary Ann when the orchestra finished another dance and the crowd began to dissipate. She hesitated and looked around the room one more time.

Their eyes met. He began to work his way toward her. Her tongue moistened her dry lips.

He bowed. "May I have this dance, Lady Helena?"

"Yes, Your Grace." She curtsied and took his offered arm.

His warm hand touched the side of her back and his other wrapped around her right hand. Soon they glided around the dance floor.

"We are giving the gossips much to talk about tonight, Your Grace."

"It seems we are. How have you been, Lady Helena?"

Deep green eyes studied her face and then her shoulders, darkening even more when they stared at her bosom and the ruby stone lying between. He glanced up,

waiting for an answer to his question.

"As you have observed, Your Grace, I am fine." She fought to keep the tremble in her body from showing in her words.

Angry eyes met hers. "I think I may strangle you if you say, Your Grace, one more time."

She laughed and turned to the next partner in line. She found herself directly across from Lady Sara. That young lady sent darts of anger and envy in her direction. Helena nodded her head and smiled.

When Helena and Nicholas came back together she added, "She is much too young for you, Nicholas. She will bore you to death within the first month of marriage."

"And you think you know what type of woman I need to marry?" he snapped, his hand tightening on her hand and back.

Helena moved her head back, slightly opening her mouth, deliberately tempting him. She could see him pull himself straighter, fire sparking out of his eyes.

"We will discuss this further at my house. You wanted to have a meeting?"

"Ah, you did get my note. I wondered. Shall we meet tonight, after the dance?" she asked.

"It would be most improper," he said.

"Not much more than some of our other escapades."

"Our? My dear, they were your escapades. My wishes were never considered."

"Oh, you are in a huff. Shall we leave soon, so we can discuss this more comfortably?"

"I plan on leaving at the end of the ball. You will do whatever you wish, as usual."

The music stopped as though in timing with his last words. He walked with her to Mary Ann, bowed, and blended into the crowd.

"Did things go poorly?" Mary Ann asked.

"Let's go home. We can do nothing more here and I need you to help me slip out, later, without mother being aware."

"Here we go again. This is the last time."

"Yes, it is. I promise."

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## Chapter 30

Nicholas paced across his study and poured himself a drink. It was long after midnight. He left the ball shortly after Helena. He'd considered speaking with Lady Sara and her parents before he left, but knew that might give them false hope. Helena was right. Lady Sara would never suit. Actually, no one would but Helena. His body ached with wanting her. It had taken all his presence of mind not to cup her face and cover it with kisses tonight.

He thought briefly again of fighting Lawson in a duel for her, like the knights of old. He smiled to himself. But he wanted her heart, not only her body, and Lawson Falscroft appeared to hold that.

He came back to London determined to take care of all his pertinent business and then with a special license in hand go to her home and claim her. Then, he'd heard from the guard of her visit to see Falscroft. Damn the man. Did Lawson still hold her heart? He had not thought so, but his usual rational mind seemed unable to understand Helena's behavior.

"Your Grace." His butler interrupted his thoughts. "There is a young lady at the door, Lady Helena Steeples." The butler showed his astonishment and disapproval in his bearing and face.

So she braved all the lions and came to his front door. Somehow it was an oddly warming gesture, as though she dared all to see him. His heart rallied with hope and he squashed it. Too many other times disappointment had followed. This time he'd not be so easy to control. Still, a flicker of desire stirred in his body.

\* \* \* \*

She entered his study and found herself confronted by his hot glare. Her breath deepened. They watched each other warily across the paneled room. He stood by the fireplace, where a small fire burned, his hand holding a crystal glass with amber liquid. A single lit candle sat on his desk.

The butler backed quietly out of the room, shutting the door.

"You came. I'm not surprised. Very little surprises me about you anymore. I wonder how my first impressions could have been so wrong. The reserved twin, calm and comfortable to be around. Nothing like her volatile sister."

"You were right. However, the change came after I met you. Perhaps you brought out the more daring side of me."

He laughed harshly. "Please do not even consider blaming me for your antics."

"My antics, as you call them, were done to try and help you."

"How crushing to my ego, my dear, to think you did not believe me capable of taking care of myself and you." Flint hard eyes stared across at her.

Stepping away from the door, Helena strolled in his direction. His eyes burned a path over her shoulders to her breasts. She smiled and very slowly took off first one of her long white gloves and then the other, flinging them onto a side table.

When she stood close in front of him, she whispered, "May I have a glass of your brandy?"

\* \* \* \*

He forced himself to put space between them. Her fragrance of honeysuckle taunted his memory. Annoyed with the clumsiness of his hands, he spilt a drop of brandy filling her glass.

"I don't make you nervous, do I?" He heard her breathless voice right behind him. Pivoting around, he stared down on her, before handing her the tumbler of brandy and stepping away.

"What brought you here tonight that could not wait for the morning?"

"I am aware you are angry with me, otherwise you would never have shown such flagrant disrespect tonight" She stopped talking and took a deep breath.

Her gown moved even lower across her bosom. A flash of heat burned through his body. He took a swallow of whiskey giving him time to regain his control.

"You hardly danced with me," she added.

Setting his glass aside, he faced her.

"Shall we dance, now?" He put her glass on a nearby table and took her in his arms.

"We have no music."

Putting his head close to hers, he hummed a tune and whirled her around the room.

\* \* \* \*

Heat flowed from him into her. His long legs gliding against hers, their bodies connected physically, if not emotionally. She loved him and she had to convince him, otherwise she might lose him. A mixture of fear and hope swirled around inside her.

His head turned and he stopped humming. She shivered and he pulled back, staring into her eyes. Her breath caught and she pulled his face down.

They stood intertwined, touching from head to toe. She wanted to flow into him and become part of him.

He pushed her away and strode across the room. "What did you come to say tonight? I must tell you I have considered releasing you from our agreement."

"I thought you definitely wanted to be released after hearing the latest gossip and seeing you dance tonight with Lady Sara and..." She came up close to him again and put her hand on his chest. Her heart pounded. She was determined to get through to him. "I have it on her authority that I am too old for you. My eyes have lines and are puffy."

He took her hand and drew her toward the lit candle. "Let me see." He leaned close staring into her eyes. "No, she is mistaken. I see nothing, except lovely blue eyes, with flecks of gold."

He sat down on the chair next to them and pulled her into his lap. "How is Lord Falscroft doing? I heard you had been to see him."

"Your guard reported on me."

He nodded. "Yes."

"I didn't know Lawson was home. We went to see his mother and yes, I did tell him goodbye. He planned to leave the next morning to board the ship to America."

"Nothing could have made me happier. You are not sad he left?"

"How could I be?" She stood and moved closer to the warmth of the fire. "You see," she glanced over her shoulder at him, "I am working hard on my soon to be wedding to the man I love." She smiled, her heart beating faster when she saw Nicholas come out of his chair. "But I'm not sure my duke still wants me."

Nicholas wrapped his arms around her. Lowering his head, he stopped his mouth just above her lips. "I have it on the utmost confidence that he adores you and wishes to marry none other than you, my love."

She whispered softly, before he covered her lips, "then I must hurry home and prepare for him."

Nicholas laughed and swung her up into his arms. "Your preparations can wait," he said, and headed to the door.

"Tonight, you will sleep in my bed. Tomorrow will be soon enough to prepare for our wedding."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas slammed the door shut with his foot and strode to his bed. He lay Helena on the silver satin bedspread and pulled the pins out of her golden hair to spread it out across the pillows. Burying his face in its softness, he took a deep breath and filled his lungs with her special essence.

His mouth moved from her hair to her forehead, then her lips. He kissed her gently at first until the rising tide of desire spurned him on and his tongue slipped into her soft warm mouth. She tasted like strawberries on a warm summer day. Slowly he moved from her lips to her luscious white throat. He nibbled along the curve of her neck and shoulders tasting her sweetness. Heat, as hot as a fire shot through him. Pushing aside the top of her gown, his hand found the soft satin feel of her breast and his lips followed. He licked and suckled both breasts, growing harder as he heard her moan. Raising his body away from hers, he stared down at her beauty. Her white skin flushed with desire and her blue eyes glowed. Golden hair sparkled like real gold and his ruby lay nestled between her rose tipped breasts. She lay like the most tempting fest just for him.

\* \* \* \*

Helena was on fire. Every nerve ending in her body yearned for him. She pulled him back down to her. His hands slid along her body and he groaned when they tangled in the long skirts of her gown.

He turned her on her side and began to unfasten her dress. He pulled it down and away, and then removed her undergarments, kissing each spot as he uncovered it. The cool air failed to cool her fevered skin.

Her gaze followed his movements as he rose and pulled off his shirt, pants, and the rest of his clothes. He was beautiful. She'd like to paint him as he stood now. All male arrogance, his feet apart, standing still while her eyes roamed over him from his tousled hair, down his broad chest, across his abdomen to his maleness and his sturdy long legs. She'd never painted a nude, but she would paint him someday, as he stood now, towering over her.

He lay back beside her. His hand trailed along her hairline and moved to her lips, touching them gently. She opened her mouth and ran her tongue over his finger,

tasting the salty flavor of his skin.

She watched his eyes darken and his nostrils flare. His mouth came down hungrily onto hers, nipping at her lips playfully, while his hand caressed her breast and moved further to the juncture between her legs.

A jolt of excitement ran up her body. She pressed herself closer against him. His body covered hers. Reaching between them her fingers wrapped around him. He was hard and soft at the same time. She blushed at her boldness and started to move her hand away.

"No, don't." He placed her hand back on him and moved her hand, showing her how to give him pleasure. She watched the tightening of his mouth and heard him moan. Something released inside her and she moved more freely against him.

He pushed her legs apart and placed himself against her. "Ah, love, I must have you."

He surged forward and she felt herself stretching to accommodate him. He began with slow movements, becoming quicker. She felt something building up in her. She rose up against him, moving harder and harder to reach...

\* \* \* \*

He held her tight as their breathing slowed. His eyes met hers, he scattered soft kisses over her face before he moved to lie beside her.

She felt his withdrawal as he turned from her. Her face flushed. She had behaved as a wanton woman. Of course, she'd embarrassed him with her forward behavior. The wonderful feelings dissipated and she waited to hear what he would say. He got up and put on a black robe.

"I'm going into the adjoining sitting room. I have something I need to do. Go ahead and sleep." The proper duke was back, all evidence gone of the dangerous lover she confronted in his study.

He went into the next room and closed the door. Was that it? Did he desire only her body?

She wasn't finished yet. Picking up her thin white lace chemise, she pulled it over her head. Then knocked and entered his private domain.

He was adding wood to a fire in the fireplace. The cold room made her shiver. He straightened and turned when she shut the door.

\* \* \* \*

Even in the poor light, he saw her pale skin underneath the flimsy bit of lace she had pulled over her. Golden waves of hair fell around her body to her waist, a fairy princess, standing still and regal in his room. He groaned, as doubts tried to linger in his mind. But when he looked in her eyes and saw her lips curve into a smile that warmed his whole body, he knew she was truly his

Quick steps brought him to her. "What's the matter? I don't want to see you unhappy."

"What will it take for you to believe I love you?"

Relief flooded his being. "A few more encounters, like we had, might do it," he whispered.

"It will be difficult," she teased, "but, let me see if I can succeed with practice."

Nicholas threw off his robe, pulled her chemise over her head, and carried her to the bed in the other room. Leaning over her, he whispered, "Practice, my dear."

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## Epilogue

All the neighbors agreed it was the finest wedding ever in their village. Friends, family, and villagers laughed and yelled happy wishes to the couple as they left the church after the ceremony.

"I am so happy, Your Grace." Helena said, watching the expression on his face.

"You will not call me Your Grace ever again, unless absolutely necessary, at a very proper social affair," Nicholas threatened.

"But I love to see the expression on your face, Nicholas, and I do love the way you show your displeasure afterwards."

"You mean like this," he asked and kissed her, as their coach took them to the Steeples estate for the wedding lunch.

"Yes, exactly like that. Now we have to be pleasant and proper," Helena said, sitting straight when the house came into view. "I can hardly wait for later today, when we are finally alone."

Nicholas took her small hand in his and kissed each finger. "Nor I, my love."

They wandered through the rooms greeting the guests and accepting congratulations. His mother beamed at them. "I knew you would make a lovely couple. I'm so glad everything has worked out for you both." She kissed Helena on both cheeks. "Please let me know if I can be of help."

"I'm sure I will be calling on you." She smiled at her new mother-in-law.

"Nicholas." His sister, Prudence and her husband followed closely behind the dowager duchess. "I hope you will be happy and," she glanced over at Helena, "will not find you have made a mistake."

Nicholas started to reply, but Helena tightened her hand on his arm and he moved his attention to her. "It is not necessary to defend me, my love. Prudence and all your family will forgive my previous behavior when I have convinced them I will be a good wife to you. Thank you for coming today, Prudence." Helena smiled and nudged her new husband forward.

"Handled well, my love. I believe you are already getting the hang of this duchess thing," he teased.

Helena saw Mary Ann wave. "I think that is my signal to go upstairs and change. Soon we can leave."

"Good. Hurry."

Helena felt his warm regard on her as she and Mary Ann climbed the stairs to her old room.

"I'm so happy for you, Helena." Mary Ann hugged her sister. "Who would have thought a few months ago I would be seeing you married before me? So much has happened."

"It has. I hope you will be doing the same yourself soon."

Mary Ann shook her head. "I love Franklin. I don't know how he feels about me and he won't let me get close enough to know him better. It all seems hopeless."

"Nonsense. You taught me to reach out and grab for what I wanted. Follow your own advice."

"Come on." Mary Ann finished fastening Helena's dress. "Don't be worrying about me. You have an anxious groom waiting downstairs."

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas, Franklin, and Lord Steeples slipped away from the crowd and went into the library to have a congratulatory drink.

Lord Steeples made the toast. "Glad to have you in the family, Your Grace."

"Call me Nicholas, please. Your Grace is much too formal for us."

"Thank you." Helena's father smiled. "Oh dear, here comes my wife. I will leave you two to finish your drink." He stepped out and closed the door.

"I hope, no, I know you will be happy, Nicholas. I'm glad for you." Franklin raised his glass to his friend.

"What will you do now, Franklin? Do you still want to go back into the spy business? I can send you back, but I prefer not too. You need a rest."

"You've told me that so many times, you've convinced me. I'm going back long enough to train my replacement. Afterwards, I'm going home."

"To your estate?"

"Yes, I'll check on everything and if all is well I'll be knocking on your door a few months later to go back overseas. However, you were right. There are some ghosts I have to bury first."

"Starting with your step-mother, I hope," Nicholas said.

"Step-mother, what a ridiculous name for that woman. Yes, the changes will need to start with her."

"And you are not going to pursue Lady Mary Ann?"

Franklin stared at his friend. Nicholas noted the anguish and sadness reflected in Franklin's eyes.

"I am not the man for her."

Before Nicholas could reply, Franklin put out his hand. "Goodbye. I'll be in touch."

Nicholas watched Franklin leave. He worried about his friend. Taking a swallow of whiskey, he sat the glass down. His bride should be down soon and tonight they would be together. His face curved into a grin. He couldn't deny it. He was happy.

\* \* \* \*

Mary Ann spotted him from the upstairs window, as they started downstairs. "Go on without me, Helena. I have something I have to do."

Picking up her skirts, Mary Ann ran toward the back stairs and out the side door of the house. Franklin had started to ride away.

"Franklin," she called out, almost breathless from her run.

He looked back and hesitated. At first she thought he would ride on.

She ran up to the horse. "You were leaving without saying goodbye?" Her eyes took in his hard lean body, so handsome today in black pants and coat and silver vest.

"I thought it was best."

"Best for whom?" she asked.

He flung his leg over and slid down the horse, standing almost against her. "Best for you, Mary Ann."

She touched his cheek and saw the flicker of his muscle.

"I don't want you to leave. Couldn't you stay a while longer? The bride and groom are still here."

"I told Nicholas goodbye. He'll tell your sister."

"So there is nothing else here to keep you?"

He looked over her head at the house.

"Nothing," he said.

"Liar."

He wrapped his arms around her and his mouth swooped down, taking hers in a hard demanding kiss.

"This is exactly what I wanted to avoid," he said, seeing her tears. "I'm not the man for you. You know nothing about me and if you did," he took a breath, "you would walk away."

He threw himself up on his horse and without looking back galloped off.

She yelled at him, although she doubted he heard her. “I don't believe you and I won't give up.”

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, snuggled in each other's arms, Helena kissed her husband lightly on the lips. “I have two surprises for you.” She climbed out of bed, opened her armoire, and then pulled out a painting. Turning, she held it in front of her. His expression was all the reward she needed for her work.

"I'm speechless." He came to her and took the picture closer to the candlelight.

"I wanted to surprise you. I'm pleased with the results myself."

"We'll hang it in the main hall. There is not another artist that could do a better painting of me." He kissed her lightly on the lips and set the painting to the side. “You've made me quite happy and now I'm very anxious to find out what your other surprise is."

"It is more a secret that I've waited to tell you. Remember the first time we made love?"

"You think I would forget such a thing?" His hand wandered over her to cup her soft warm breast.

"Well, I'm almost certain that as a result, we are going to have a baby."

Nicholas stared at his new wife. “You did not marry me only because you're pregnant?” He felt a sickening in his stomach.

"Nicholas, what must I do to convince you of my love? I thought you'd be happy about the baby."

"I am more than happy," he said smiling broadly, “but I also need to be assured you love me."

"Well," she pulled his head down and traced her tongue over his lips, “I will try one more time to earn your trust."

He smiled, picked her up and carried her to bed. “It may take many times to convince me, my dear."

"Then I shall keep trying."

He smothered her giggle with his kiss.

THE END

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\* \* \* \*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For as long as I can remember I wanted to write and have, a book of mine published. Sometimes life gets in the way, or we let it.

I grew up in the south and lived with an aunt and uncle from the time I was ten until I graduated from high school. Both my aunt and uncle worked long hours, giving me a lot of time alone. With my love of reading and an active imagination, I was never bored.

I wrote my first story at eleven or twelve years old and read it to my neighborhood friends. They, of course, thought it was wonderful. My story did not have a happy ending. My heroine died a tragic death. I was in my melodramatic phase.

My first published work was a mother's day poem. The local newspaper had a contest between the high schools. I won. The prize was ten dollars and having my poem printed in the Sunday paper on Mother's Day. I won't say what year.

My aunt was a very practical woman and had worked all her life. You did not write for a career, you studied and got a sensible job that kept a roof over your head and food in your stomach.

My first career was nursing. During my mid life crisis, I went back to school and earned my master's degree in social work. These were good choices, but in the back of my mind, those characters kept knocking on the door and reminding me of my dream job, writing.

I did write during those years, everything from poems, short stories, and longer love stories. They filled my desk drawers and the bottom of my closet.

With three grown children, three grandchildren, a very supportive husband and many friends encouragement I finally got serious. I decided in 2004 that it was time to commit to my dream, make some goals and start my new career. They do say the third times the charm.

My first goals: Join a writer's group and a critique group, attend a writer's conference, and oh yes, write a book.

My first big shock: Not everyone thought I was a great writer. Like any other career you had to study, read, take classes, and write, write, write. Who would know following your passion could be so much work? But also so much fun.

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