



Harley Street
Richard and Rose

LYNNE CONNOLLY

SEINFELD PUBLISHERS

Harley Street [Richard and Rose Book 4]
by Lynne Connolly

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[Blinded—she by nature, he by loyalty.](#)

[To capture love, sometimes you have to grab it by the
horns...](#)

[To survive, she'll have to trust him with all her secrets.](#)

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* * * *

Mystery, murder, and an old menace. It's enough to damage the strongest love.

Richard and Rose, Book 4

Lord and Lady Strang return from their adventure-filled honeymoon, more than ready to settle into married life. After a few weeks living in his parents' Piccadilly mansion, Richard and Rose are restless for their own home, a space where they can work out the pattern of their new life together.

House-hunting will have to wait. A maid in the household of Rose's aunt has been murdered, an act that forces Richard to reveal a dark secret from his past. Despite the desperate passion they share, marriage requires disclosure—something at which Richard has never excelled.

In light of his revelation, Rose must find the strength to delve deep into the bedrock of their relationship while simultaneously facing the height of London society. As they work to unravel the clues that lead to a murderer, an old enemy launches an attack on their already fragile hearts...

This book was previously published.

Warning: This series is addictive. Danger, excitement and hot, hot sex might give you ideas. But you'll have to find your own man.

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Harley Street

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Harley Street [Richard and Rose Book 4]
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Harley Street

Richard and Rose Book Four

Lynne Connolly

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Dedication

For all the readers who stuck with Richard and Rose through
thick and thin. Thank you.

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Chapter One

October, 1753

In October the world floods into the Metropolis, the great Wen of London, its boundaries seeping wider and wider every year as the west of the city expands to accommodate more people. By "the world", I mean the fashionable world, of course. The inhabitants, the people who make London their home have been there all along, sweltering in the summer heat, but the fashionable part of town begins to fill up again, ostensibly to attend the new Parliamentary session, but in reality to gather together after the summer. Knockers reappear on doors and superior footmen in gaudy livery lounge outside them, waiting for the next illustrious guest to appear from a shiny, crested landau. Then they will snap to attention and take the proffered cards inside for inspection by the unseen house owners.

When our carriage drew up outside the façade of Hareton House, the shiny black door opened to reveal the familiar figure of our old butler, Marsh. I took heart when I saw his steady, rotund features, fitting as well here as ever they did in the old manor in Devonshire.

A footman let down the carriage steps for us and I stepped forward to greet my old friend. "Good morning, Marsh, how are you?"

"Well, thank you, my lady." He glanced at my husband, resplendent in his town glory. Richard smiled beatifically at him.

Marsh took us straight upstairs to the drawing room, where the whole family, children included, assembled to greet us. I was stupidly nervous at meeting them again. The last time I'd seen them was on my wedding day in April and now it was October. I'd never been apart from them for so long before and so much had happened, I felt like a stranger.

Richard bowed to the company but they didn't wait for my curtsey.

My sister-in-law, Martha, Lady Hareton, swiftly followed by my sister, Lizzie, surged forward to take me into their arms, one after the other and plant resounding kisses on my cheeks. I was far more accustomed to receiving this kind of welcome than the formal one I'd received the day before at Southwood House, where Richard's parents lived. But I endured both with equal equanimity.

Martha included Richard in her smile. "You must be looking after her well, my lord." Her clothes were of better quality than the ones she used to wear but Martha was just the same. It warmed me to see her round, smiling face, unchanged and homely.

"I try." Richard glanced at me and smiled.

Lizzie took my hands, holding them loosely in her own. "You look positively fashionable, my love. Where did you get that delicious gown? And are you wearing a hoop?"

I laughed and glanced down at the pretty jonquil confection. "I got it in Paris. And no, I'm not wearing a hoop. It's the fashion for informal wear."

"You'll become a leader of fashion, my dear," Lizzie teased. Holding my hand, she drew me into the room and I faced my beloved elder brother, James.

The Earl of Hareton stood before the fire, hands dug in his breeches' pockets but he loosed them and enveloped me in a bear hug. "Happy?" he murmured, his breath warm on my ear.

"Blissful," I assured him. He released me and I went to sit with my husband.

My youngest sister would make her come-out this season, the first of our family to do so in the centre of the fashionable world, the so-called Marriage Market. At seventeen Ruth bade fair to be as beautiful as Lizzie, if not possessed of the same vivacity which had made Lizzie so popular a member of Devonshire society. Ruth had lost her scowl, previously a permanent feature.

What was left was a pretty girl, with a heart-shaped face and blue eyes, hair fairer than Lizzie's glorious gold, who looked at me directly and answered questions without equivocation. I thought she would do well but I was glad I didn't have to go through the ordeal. In Exeter society, Lizzie had overshadowed me; now two of them could dazzle and encourage everyone to overlook me. The difference was that I didn't care anymore.

Martha's children, Walter, Mary and Frederick, were more neatly dressed than I was accustomed to but Walter had a smudge on his cheek that reassured me that he was still a scamp underneath his new finery. They remained politely silent, well trained but fidgety.

"Has Lizzie many admirers yet?" I asked. My sister's followers had been legion in Exeter.

Although Martha was but twelve years older, she smiled in a motherly way. "The house overflows with them." Lizzie had the grace to lower her eyes but she peered up through her long lashes in a most immodest way.

Martha glared at her. "The season hasn't formally begun yet. She'll have to learn how to control her admirers, or we'll be snowed under when it gets under way. We've planned a ball for Ruth's come-out after our presentation." She paused, biting her lip. I thought she was probably nervous about it. "You should find your invitation at Southwood house. She'll be inundated and Lizzie too." She regarded the girls, sitting so demurely on the sofa together, so pretty, then turned back to us. "And you should hear what they're saying about you, Rose."

"What?" I was startled yet again by the thought of anyone being interested in me. "What could they be saying?"

Amusement gleaming in her eyes Martha leaned forward—one perennially overlooked woman speaking to another. "Don't forget, not many people have seen you yet and they *have* seen Lizzie and Ruth. The rumours I've heard say you're the most beauteous, most elegant woman of the three. They're looking for the new Gunnings, you see, and the fact Lord Strang chose you makes them think you are the best."

Richard slanted me a look of considerable amusement. "With apologies to the ladies present, that is evidently my opinion, too." He'd been a leader of fashionable society for years.

I didn't care anymore. "As soon as they see me, they'll pass over to the girls. Besides, I'm safely married."

Richard chuckled. "There's no such thing in this society but that is something I also wish to ensure that everyone understands."

Martha arched one thick eyebrow. "Will you continue living at Southwood House with your mother-in-law?"

"Probably not. We'd prefer to set up our own establishment. Lady Southwood is kind but..."

Richard took over. "I have some addresses. We'll look at them when we have the time."

The door opened but I didn't look around, thinking it was the maid with some tea but when I saw Richard stand and bow, I knew I was mistaken.

He was bowing to Georgiana Skerrit. And there was her brother Tom. Without pausing to think, I shrieked and threw myself at him, forgetting all my society manners in my delight. "Tom, Tom, what are you doing here?"

He disentangled himself, laughing. "I thought you were supposed to be a fashionable lady now?" He held me at arm's length and looked me up and down, his expression changing from delight to something akin to awe. "And I can see you are."

Tom was my oldest friend, the son of the squire of Darkwater. Just as tall and smiling that crooked smile I remembered so well from our childhood scrape. A shadow lay between us, but I did my best to ignore it.

"Rose, you look wonderful."

"I've never been so happy." It was as if there was no one else in the room but us. We used to spend hours together in the woods, sitting side by side on a tree branch, talking about what we would do and where we would go. I could almost smell the scent of rain on the leaves.

We took a seat on the sofa I'd previously occupied with Richard. It said a lot for my relationship with my husband that he would move aside without demur. Because he knew who I loved now. "What are you planning to do in your visit, Tom?"

"I'm going to do the things I've dreamed about. Visit the cockfights at Hyde Park, saunter into the coffee houses, visit the theatre, go for boxing lessons with—"

Laughing, I interrupted him. "Then you won't have time to escort Georgiana."

"Well, she will want to see the shops and the female part of life I can't help her with. I can't be with her all the time."

"Indeed not," Lizzie broke in. "I have plans for Georgiana."

I smiled at my old friend, delighted to see him again. "You look well, Tom. Have you fully recovered?"

A shadow crossed Tom's face and I was sorry I had brought the matter up, but it worried me. His physical injuries had been considerable. "I'm perfectly well." He hesitated before he touched my hand. I hated the hesitation. "And you?"

"Restored to full health and cosseted beyond my wildest dreams," I assured him. Actually, the cossetting could be unnerving. Richard saw to it I was well looked after without curtailing any of the freedoms to which I was entitled. I found my wishes attended to almost before I'd thought of them.

Later, Martha wished to show me the house but she told everyone else to stay where they were, so we went off on our own. The house was magnificent, with a set of reception rooms constituting the pearl in the luxurious oyster. But it didn't suit Martha, somehow.

Although Martha was barely twelve years older than I, she had a motherly nature and she always tried to take special care of me. She saw me as the waif of the family. For many years everyone assumed I would be the spinster left at home to help her in her duties.

I could talk to her honestly. "I'm truly happy. I'm looked after and loved. I've never regretted anything I've done in the last year."

Martha had been concerned that I clutched at straws with Richard, taking the first man who offered for me, when there was no longer any need to do so after James inherited the title. Richard had a fearsome reputation as a libertine, never staying with any woman for long and Martha still thought of him that way. She knew I valued loyalty in all things. "We've visited Southwood House of course, since the Southwoods came up to town. I was wondering if you were content there."

"No." I couldn't tell her about Lady Southwood's managing nature but I could tell her of other pressures. "Lord Southwood wants an heir and although he doesn't say anything, you can almost feel his anxiety."

Martha took my hand and patted it. "It was a year before I got in the family way with Walter. You're not to let it worry you."

I shrugged. It did hurt that I wasn't yet pregnant but I wouldn't let anyone see my hurt. "That's what Richard says. There's a cousin, so the title won't die and it's only been six months since we married. But we'd be happier in our own establishment. He has preferences and ways I'd like to look after myself, not leave to someone else's servants."

Martha smiled. "I must have taught you well, then. Have you anywhere in mind?"

I went over to the harpsichord by the window and lifted the lid, trying a few notes. It was out of tune. "We'd like one of those smaller houses in the West End but we don't know if we'll buy or lease yet. Richard has a house in Oxfordshire and another one nearer to London I haven't seen yet. Richard says we'll consult with his secretary, when he gets one and we'll go through it together."

Martha raised her brows. "I thought he was a man given to making up his own mind, not to allowing anyone else to help him decide anything."

"He wants me content with all the arrangements." I replaced the lid of the instrument. "He's given me a full share in Thompson's, you know."

Her look was disparaging. "That staff agency? Surely that's not your main concern."

"No, but it's an important indication of his intentions. He built Thompson's up himself, you see. It has nothing to do with the family or inherited wealth." In fact, Thompson's Registry Office was wide reaching and much more lucrative than most people knew.

We returned to the drawing room. Despite its size, it looked crowded. I felt a pang, thinking how much I would prefer to be staying here instead of at Southwood House, but those days were gone. I was rather surprised I associated those days of desperation and entrapment with so much contentment. Perhaps it was more the fear of the unknown, of the life to come.

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Chapter Two

Waking the next morning was the same as waking anywhere else with Richard. Blissful. So good when waking up is better than dreaming. I woke early but it was still relatively dark, so I snuggled into my husband's warmth.

Hearing a movement, I assumed it was my maid. I opened my eyes to ask her what time it was and discovered that it wasn't Nichols but a housemaid I had never seen before, presumably come to light the fire. She stood in the middle of the floor and stared at us, her mouth open and eyes wide in complete astonishment.

I stared at her sleepily in the dim light of early morning. We stared at each other. The girl looked young, dressed in clothes evidently meant for someone larger than she. Her mob cap almost completely covered her face.

I forced sleep away. "Is there something wrong?"

Richard stirred in his sleep and turned over, his arms reaching for me. When I evaded him, he murmured, "What is it, sweetheart?" before he, too, opened his eyes and followed my gaze.

Richard broke the impasse. With a smooth movement that didn't even make the sheets rustle, he sat up in bed. "Do I know you?" He made no effort to hide his nakedness, although the sheets covered him below his waist.

The maid blushed fiery red. "N-no, my lord. I was only taken on last month."

Richard disposed his hands gracefully on the sheets before him, as in control as if dressed in full Court rig. "We don't allow anyone in here but our own body servants. You'd better convey the information to the housekeeper as soon as you can. I don't want this episode repeated."

The little maid dipped a quick curtsey. "Y-yes, my lord." She fled, closing the door behind her.

Ignoring my giggle, Richard turned to the nightstand to consult the watch he'd laid there. "Half past seven," he informed me, coming back to my arms. "Do you know what woke me then?"

"The maid?"

"No." He dropped a kiss on my forehead. "When I reached for you, you pushed me away. I can't remember you ever doing that."

"I'll try not to make a habit of it." I smiled up at him, enjoying, as I always did, the sight of his fine-drawn features, the warmth in his blue eyes. I pulled him closer for a proper kiss. "What made her so surprised?"

He frowned. "She's probably not used to finding people in bed together in this house." He touched my cheek. "I'll make enquiries about her. It's not usual for my orders to be disobeyed and I'm sure I told them to leave us alone until we got up."

"I thought you—you knew her."

He frowned, then his face cleared and he laughed. "Good God, no! She can't be very old." He shook his head. "Perhaps once, when I was younger. But not since I met you. You know that don't you?"

I met his frank, anxious gaze with one of my own. "Oh yes. I know that now." Although my wretched feelings of inadequacy chased me every time Richard paid attention to a lovely woman, that was my problem, not his.

"When did you first—you know?"

"When did I lose my virginity? I was fourteen."

"Fourteen?" This surprised me, despite knowing that he'd once tried to work his way through the female population of London.

"A housemaid, older than I was, seduced me. It seems to be the usual way. At least, a lot of my contemporaries went the same way." A frown appeared between his brows. "Does it bother you?"

I considered. "Not at all." I always tried to be truthful with him. "Perhaps it should but I have a feeling you developed your appetites early."

He laughed fondly. "And you, my love, did the right thing and waited, as any good maiden should." He stroked my face again, so gently I hardly felt it. I moved my head to one side and kissed his hand.

"Not for marriage, though." I'd become his mistress before we married but I was his, all his.

His clear blue gaze caressed my face. "Well, you're well and truly married now, my lady, and there are certain duties you're required to endure." He moved his body over mine.

I shifted a little, to make it easier for him. "What time will they expect us to get up?"

"Who cares?" He kissed me, long and slow. "When we're ready. Are you ready?"

I flexed my body under him. "Not to get up." He laughed and moved, making me sigh in contentment. "But I'm ready."

I responded eagerly to his loving. As always he was both considerate and passionate, sensual and exciting, pushing me to my own heights before he sought his and then sank down into my arms. I shut my eyes and felt his closeness.

I rested my hand on the back of his head. He kept his fair hair short but it still sprang into tight waves. I felt the silky softness and enjoyed the peace that comes after making love.

Eventually he lifted his head and took his weight on his elbows. He studied me. "I'll never get used to this."

"What?"

"The love you give me. I don't deserve any of it but I'm so glad you decided to make me your beneficiary." He kissed me lingeringly and then moved his weight and gathered me close.

"Your father is disappointed in me. I should be big with his son's heir by now." I caressed his chest with my palm.

"He's not too downcast. It's only been six months."

"A year, really."

He smiled. "No. The few times we made love before we married were isolated and we would have been unlucky—or lucky. I know we have to do this to satisfy the family but it's you I want, not our progeny. I don't even know how I'll feel about them when they finally arrive—if they ever do." He paused, kissed my shoulder. "And in any case, it may be my fault. I was always careful with everyone but you. I've never heard of any bastards of mine. I won't have you worried about it or pressured and my father knows that."

"What do you mean, careful?"

"I can withdraw, just before I come."

"I didn't know you could do that."

He kissed me. "With you, my sweet life, it's an impossibility. I did try, in Exeter that time, do you remember?"

"No."

He laughed softly. "I'm not surprised. But I did try. I'd never been so out of control before."

I snuggled in. "I wanted to give myself to you but I didn't expect what I received in return." I would have dozed again but the door opened and this time it was Nichols to light the fire. I never knew how she and Carier timed their entrances so well because they had never interrupted us making love, not once. Or maybe we just hadn't noticed.

We let the fire warm the room, getting our warmth from each other instead. I remembered how hot it had been in Rome and how we only covered ourselves with sheets and slept separated because of the heat. Then I compared that time with today, the chills of autumn already upon us, covered snugly with blankets and a thick quilt. I preferred it this way but I thought the beggars in Rome were probably better off in that respect than our own London indigents.

It was pleasant to lie curled up with Richard, chatting quietly, occasionally caressing each other, putting off the moment when we had to face the day. "You should set a timetable, so people know when you're holding your salons and levees," he said.

I swallowed. I had to become a great lady for his sake. He had offered to live quietly with me but that was not good

enough. I knew I had to change and he was right. It started today. "But I have no intention of giving up this time with you in the mornings and our privacy here will be maintained. I'm determined on it. I'll speak to my mother today. When we're in here together, no one but Nichols and Carier are allowed in."

I knew what he wasn't saying. While it was comfortable for us to keep our privacy, we also had to think about retaining some security. We had enemies. Today we had surprised a little maid, but it was frightening to think of who could have come in while we slept.

I moved my leg along his and he glanced at me, laughing. "If we don't get up now, we may never get up at all. I leave the decision to you, my precious. I'm happy to plead exhaustion and stay here all day but I thought you wanted to go and see your aunt."

I sighed, recalled to my duties. Before we had left Hareton House, I had promised to accompany Lizzie on her visit to our aunt, Mrs. Godolphin, today.

"You're right."

I threw back the covers and reached for my robe, the one Richard had bought for me in Venice. I'd never considered it worth my while to waste money on a new one before, since no one would ever see me in it. This one was ivory satin, heavily embroidered with flowers and bees in many colours, a grand affair and someone regularly saw me in it.

He watched me move about the room before he got up. He loved to look at me and while I would have felt shy and awkward under anyone else's gaze, I loved Richard doing so.

I had even teased him a time or two and been dragged back to bed for my pains but that wouldn't be fair today, when I was expected elsewhere. He slipped on his own robe and went through to his dressing room where his valet presumably waited for him.

I chose green today, the colour of spring and with it I put on the pearls Richard had given to me before our wedding. Nichols tamed my hair, smoothing it back and letting a few curls stray over one shoulder, then she pinned on a barely there lacy cap and I went downstairs to breakfast.

Only Richard and Lady Southwood were there. I never called my mother-in-law anything but "Lady Southwood" or "ma'am." Lord Southwood, his wife explained, had been out rather late the night before and was still asleep and Richard's sister, Maria, was still dressing. A far cry from breakfast in the country, where everyone had usually been up for hours. Richard's mother waited until I filled my plate and sat at the table.

"My housekeeper informed me that you gave one of my maids rather a surprise this morning," she said to Richard. Her tone was chilly.

He turned a face of pure innocence to her. "In what way, madam?"

She held his gaze, matching it with her own. "It took Mrs. Gravelines a full half hour to calm the girl down." She scolded him like a child.

"What can have shocked her so deeply?" An edge of annoyance sharpened his tone. Richard glanced at me. I looked down at my plate, deeply embarrassed.

"You should close your bed curtains at night." His mother seemed oblivious to Richard's frostiness. "I cannot have my maids upset in this way."

"I totally agree with you but what on earth did the girl tell you she saw? It was nothing untoward I can assure you. It's hardly as though I asked her to join us." Richard's temper could be vicious. He believed in tackling a problem head on but I found it uncomfortable to witness. "I should like it known, ma'am, when we are in the bedroom only Nichols and Carier are allowed in. I have never liked the bed curtains closed, as you must know and I dislike being stared at by strangers first thing in the morning." They stared at each other, mother and son, without speaking for a full minute. It seemed much longer.

His mother looked away abruptly. "I'll give the order this morning."

I still felt uncomfortable. I wasn't happy with everyone knowing our sleeping arrangements. I wished we could be back in the little apartment in Venice, with only handpicked servants. Richard was right. We'd be better off in our own house.

I was beginning to know my mother-in-law. When I first met her, her diminutive stature and her seeming kindness had affected me most but I soon perceived the will of iron under the frailty and her implacable devotion to Family over family, the dynasty rather than people. Her inability to see her children, especially her sons, as anything but a continuance of the line had done much to drive them away from her.

Later that morning Richard handed me into the carriage. Lizzie was mouth-wateringly arrayed in pink lustring, with Ruth beside her in blue.

He looked us over, smiling. "It's the Gunnings all over again,"

I replied without thought. "Don't be ridiculous. We're not in the least like them." Except that they, too, were two blondes and a brunette. But the vacuity demonstrated by the fairest of the three was not at all reflected in my clever sister, Lizzie.

He laughed in reply and didn't pursue the compliment but stepped back and let the landau take us away.

Lizzie turned to look at him. "I thought he might be coming to Aunt Godolphin's with us."

"He's studying estate business with his father. He says he'll be delighted to accompany us another time." I was glad to see Richard taking an interest in the estate. He'd never taken much interest in his inheritance before we married.

We bowled along fashionable streets, all with the same kind of new, elegant houses, the thoroughfares broad and clean. We crossed the Tottenham Court Road and went into another set of streets, as new and fashionable in appearance as the ones on the other side but a little smaller with less trim and decoration. A subtle difference but a telling one.

We entered Harley Street and drew up outside a house that looked much like the others. We stayed in the carriage while our cards were taken up. These houses were new, prosperous and uniform, each with the shiny black front door and tall windows that were *de rigueur* for London houses of any quality. Soon a footman in livery let down the steps of

the carriage, helped us to alight and led the way up the steps to the front door.

Aunt Godolphin had been an infrequent visitor to Devonshire but she was my godmother as well as my aunt, and wrote to us often, sometimes sending little gifts to us in our rural fastness. The previous year when she had invited Lizzie and me to spend a season in London, we'd been overjoyed. Events had overtaken us but the fact that she had been prepared to take us counted for a great deal. This was the first time I had seen her for five years, because she hadn't been able to come to my wedding.

She received us in a pleasant, warm room on the first floor, which faced the street. She curtsied low, which I was a little abashed to see, so I crossed the room and held out my hands to her, taking hers, drawing her into a friendlier embrace and kissing her on both cheeks. "Aunt Godolphin, I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you."

"And you, my dear, how well you look. Not just that fetching gown but your countenance. Marriage must suit you, I always said it would." She studied me critically while we sat. Her round face beamed its pleasure. "I knew you were made to run your own life, not live others' for them." She crossed the room to a table on which tea things were laid, continuing to chat as she poured. "I must confess, I wasn't sure when I heard who you had accepted but you look well."

"We suit each other." I smiled and accepted my tea. Lizzie laughed. "It's a love match."

Aunt Godolphin stared at me, her eyes wide. "With Lord Strang?" Her tone said it all—a libertine, a man who cared nothing for anyone else. Until last year.

I glared at Lizzie, annoyed that she would break a confidence. "We find a *simpatico*."

Lizzie stared back impishly, not at all subdued. "Soon everyone will know. Neither of you seem capable of hiding it."

"We're getting better." Even to my ears my tones sounded peevish.

My aunt caught the tenor of my annoyance and frowned. "Why should you want to conceal such a thing?"

After another glare at my unrepentant sister, I tried to explain. "We don't want the whole world to know all our business. Lord Strang prefers to keep *some* of his life private."

Aunt Godolphin sighed in a sentimental way. "Your uncle and I have been in love for five-and-twenty years." Then she regarded me again and her tone became more practical. "But then, the world wasn't watching us all the time. I can see it would be more difficult. I'll not tell anyone but even if I did, the chances are they'll set it aside as the maunderings of an old woman." She looked across and smiled. "So that's why you look so well. Nobody looks as beautiful as a woman in love."

I felt the heat rise to my cheeks, so I lifted my tea-dish and sipped while I recovered my composure.

Aunt Godolphin was fairly launched. With the familiarity of an old acquaintance, she continued, "I'm surprised you lighted on Lord Strang though. Until recently his name was in

the papers almost every day and I presume you know why." She watched me, one eyebrow raised in query and I nodded. "Still, I daresay he's sown all his wild oats now." I hoped not, I was hoping for a few to come my way but I didn't tell her that. "I wish you all happiness."

She turned her attention to Lizzie and Ruth, much to my relief, surveying them critically. "And you girls, I swear, you'll take London by storm. We'll be at your ball, of course, nothing would keep us away and I have every confidence that it will be the hit of the season. You mustn't let it go to your heads though. Too often, I've seen girls who should know better putting on airs and repulsing the suitors they're seeking to attract." Now it was their turn to blush and I sipped my tea serenely, knowing she had finished with me for now. "I may not be of the highest *ton* but I married my Jane well and I saw many others with better prospects fall by the wayside because they turned their noses up at everything that came their way until there was nothing left for them." She leaned forward to pick up the teapot. "Still, I know you all for well-brought-up girls and I've no real doubts about your success. I shall enjoy watching it."

One of the reasons I enjoyed my aunt's company was that I could sit back and let her conversation flow over me, not being required to contribute in any way. Aunt Godolphin favoured us with her opinion on our change of fortune while she poured more tea. "When I heard the news, I was so surprised you could have knocked me over with a feather. James, an earl. Of course, it had always been possible but with two healthy young men between him and the title, I'm

sure no one thought twice about it. I was looking forward to having you to stay but of course after that you could afford to look much higher and I can only be delighted for you. After I heard one of you had netted Lord Strang, I assumed it must be Lizzie, then to hear Rose had caught him shocked me."

I sighed, then I switched on a smile for her. "Why should you think it was Lizzie, Aunt Godolphin?"

"Well—"

From the upper regions of the house came a piercing scream.

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Chapter Three

Aunt Godolphin sprang to her feet, her mouth level and her eyes narrowed. Before she reached the door, a maid, her cap askew, her skirts kilted up in one hand, flung open the door and rushed in. "Madam, it's Lucy."

Aunt Godolphin was outraged. "What about Lucy? Please don't come in here like this, I've taught you better than that."

But I saw the real horror etched on the girl's features and didn't wait for any more. Followed by my sisters, I raced upstairs to the servants' quarters, to the source of that scream. There was something seriously wrong here.

The noise of voices raised in alarm grew louder the farther up the house we went, until the source of the babble became apparent.

All was chaos. What would normally be a quiet, well-ordered part of my aunt's house had degenerated into uproar. As I hurried along the narrow corridor on the top floor, servants stared from the open doors of rooms. This was the women's corridor. Inside, clothes hung from pegs on the walls, with neatly made beds, hard chairs and simple washstands the only furniture.

Outside one door gathered a gaggle of servants in various states of dress. Some had obviously been taking their ease, resting before going back on duty, others were fully dressed for duty with crisp white aprons and mob caps. There were a few men also; menservants come through from their part of the house to see what was the matter.

A footman stood braced in the doorway of one room, trying to stop anyone entering but under the impact of many bodies he was losing the battle.

Such was the noise that no one noticed our approach until I shouted, in a voice I knew could carry across at least two Devonshire fields, "Let me through!"

The volume and the unfamiliar voice made them all look around and then they fell back.

Only the footman stood in my way, grave-faced. "It's not a pleasant sight, my lady." He interposed his bulk between me and the room.

Exasperated, I glared up at him. "Let me through." He moved back.

He was right; it wasn't a pleasant sight. Lizzie gasped. "Stay back, Ruth. This isn't for us." I was glad she had the sense to keep our younger sister away. Ruth invariably fainted at the sight of blood.

And there was blood in this room, congealing around the body, sending a thick, sickly stench into my nostrils. A woman lay on the bed, head on one side, eyes closed, arms outstretched in a parody of welcome, perfectly at ease thanks to the large dagger that protruded sickeningly from her chest. She was beyond anyone's help.

Immediately I turned to the manservant. "Send for my husband at once. And no one is to come in here until he has seen this."

"What about a constable, my lady?"

"Yes, a constable too but Lord Strang first. He should be at home in Piccadilly. You know the direction?"

The estimable footman appeared completely unruffled. "Yes, my lady. I'll send a runner, it'll be quicker than a coach."

I left the room and closed the door firmly, leaning against it for support. The moulding was hard against my back. I watched the footman elbow his way through the goggling crowd and make for end of the corridor. His feet clattered down the uncarpeted stairs.

I took a steadying breath. "No one is to mention this outside this house." I looked around. "Does anyone know anything about this?" A babble of voices rewarded me. Lizzie stood at the other side of the group and she clapped her hands together noisily, not stopping until a near silence fell. Ruth stood to one side, wide-eyed and I knew from the expression on her face that she was fighting nausea.

I waited until everyone had fallen silent, feeling like a schoolteacher with her class. Faces turned towards me. "What's the girl's name?"

"Lucy," came a reply from the back of the suddenly silent crowd. "Lucy Forder. I shared the room with her."

I beckoned the girl to come forward. "What do you know?"

The neat, plump maid with the round face bobbed a curtsey. "She's a widow and she came to London when her husband was killed in an accident. She's fairly new and we've shared that room since she came." She stopped suddenly but I got the feeling she had something else to say.

"When did you see her last?" The faces behind were still, listening as I was.

She hesitated before she replied. "Last night. It was her night off. She said she was going to Vauxhall Gardens with her young man."

Now I knew she was holding something back because she lowered her eyes and wouldn't look at me. "So she wasn't here when you got up this morning?"

The girl shook her head. "No, my lady. But that wasn't unusual. She sometimes came in and went straight to work without sleeping."

I began to understand but I didn't want to push the girl too much at this stage, not while she was still in shock. It had been a jolt for us to see the dead girl; how much worse would it have been if we'd known her, shared her bed?

I turned to the other servants. "Does anyone else know anything?"

The babble rose and fell again. I pointed at a footman. "You."

"She used to go out every night she could and on her days off, too," he ventured. The girl who shared the room looked daggers at him.

"Does anyone know who her young man was?" Lizzie demanded. No one seemed to know.

The upper corridor was crowded, more servants arriving from belowstairs, so I tried to put some order into the scene. "No one is to leave the house until someone has spoken to you; either my husband, myself, or the official from Bow Street. Everyone is to leave this floor until my husband and the constable arrive. I suggest you go down to the kitchens and wait there, we'll call for you when we need you."

Meanwhile, could someone bring more tea to the drawing room?" I was in need of the restorative and it would give the maids something to do.

My sisters looked as worried as I was feeling, faces taut with concern. We waited until everyone had left the floor, then went back down the steep wooden stairs, leaving the footman guarding the room. I wondered what the neighbours would make of so many clattering feet on the bare wood.

We went straight to the drawing room and I crossed to kneel at my aunt's feet. She sat forlornly waiting for news. I was glad she hadn't come upstairs because she was as squeamish as Ruth.

I took one of her hands gently in mine. "I'm afraid one of your housemaids is dead. Lucy Forder?"

Aunt Godolphin's look of shock was as it should be. Trained by Richard and Carier, I now looked for abnormalities in everyone.

"How?" Her voice came in an unaccustomed whisper.

I took a deep breath. "She's been stabbed, though whether by her own hand or someone else's I can't say."

"She never struck me as the kind of girl to do anything like that." My aunt's voice quavered a little but rose in volume as her confidence returned. She stood, clutching her hands convulsively in front of her. "How could such a thing happen?"

Lizzie led her back to her seat, kneeling in the place I'd just vacated. She found Aunt Godolphin's fan and plied it vigorously. The maid came in with a fresh pot of tea. She seemed to be in control of herself, this one. Not a tremor

shook the pot as she put it down on the table and picked up the used one to take away with her.

I stopped her before she left. "Did you see anything?"

"No, my lady. I was about my business in the bedrooms when I heard the scream, then I went to see what the trouble was. Janet had just found her." I nodded and let her go.

Aunt Godolphin sniffed into her handkerchief. "How long has she been—lying there?"

I shook my head. "It's hard to say. She wasn't there this morning when her room-mate got up but more than that we can't tell yet."

The sound of a carriage drawing up outside made me hurry to the window. Richard had arrived, driving himself in his phaeton. After throwing the reins and his gloves to the footman waiting outside, he hastened indoors.

When he came into the room, the first person his gaze landed on was me. But then he took in the rest of the room at a glance and swept a bow, removing his hat as he did so and throwing it onto a vacant chair. I went to him, leaving Lizzie and Ruth to care for Aunt Godolphin. "There's been a tragedy. They've found a maid dead."

I took him upstairs. The corridor was clear now, except for the footman. I opened the door to the little room under the rafters.

Before the advent of its grisly occupant, it must have been as clean and neat as a maid's room should be. Clothes hung from pegs and the small table held only a candlestick and a book.

The serviceable rag rug was serviceable no more. Blood from the girl's wound had saturated the edge, making it impossible to clean, turning rusty now instead of scarlet. On the woman's gown, the blood nearest to the wound, where the knife still stuck upright like a mutant crucifix, was still red.

Richard looked carefully around the room. "It couldn't have been like this when her roommate got up."

I had thought of that. "The other girl got up at five and this one hadn't come home then. Did she die here?"

"Undoubtedly." He didn't examine the body immediately, preferring to study at the furnishings in the room. He opened the small clothes press, closed it again, looked under the rug and, finding nothing there, picked up the book on the side table. He opened it, studied a page, then slipped the small volume into his pocket.

"Richard!" His cavalier treatment of the scene shocked me.

He glanced at me. "It's a journal. I'll look at it in a more salubrious place, then I'll hand it over to the authorities. Believe me, sometimes these people aren't all they should be, as magistrates recruit thieves to catch thieves. This book might contain something that will discredit your aunt. *Have* the authorities been sent for, by the way?"

"Yes. I sent someone for a constable."

He nodded. "Good. They'll have farther to come. The chances are it'll be one of Mr. Fielding's people from Bow Street. He and his brother seem to have a finger in every pie these days. Except mine."

Only then did he look at the corpse. She was dressed for the evening in a pretty cherry-pink striped gown, which had been altered to suit the current fashion. Her hair fell loose over her face in a curled cascade and on the table reposed a cluster of black hairpins, indicating she had probably undone her coiffure herself.

Richard stepped over the congealed blood and bent to examine the wound.

"Did she kill herself, do you think?" I wondered.

He shook his head. "Not with the knife going in at that angle. From in front of her and above. If you tried to kill yourself in this dramatic fashion—cutting your throat is a surer way—you would hold the knife against your rib cage and push, or thrust it at yourself from a distance. You wouldn't do it like this. It's murder, Rose."

Footsteps approached from outside and a man entered the room. He wore a plain but serviceable suit of clothes with a red waistcoat and he looked confident, official. He bowed to us.

Richard inclined his head in acknowledgement and greeting. "Are you the constable?"

The man gave him a sharp look. "From Bow Street, sir. John Smith, at your service. Is this the victim?"

"Who else?" Richard straightened up and moved away. The man threw him a glance of disdain before he strode to the bed, careful to avoid the gory puddle. He studied the wound and grunted, then lifted her legs so that she lay wholly on the bed, not sprawled half on, half off. "Did you touch anything?"

Richard lifted an eyebrow. "I looked in the clothes press and at the body but I didn't touch her."

"I see." Mr. Smith stood and stared down at the corpse. "When was she found?"

That was my territory. "About three-quarters of an hour ago. I sent all the servants down to the kitchen and told them not to leave the house. It seemed the practical thing to do. They were crowding around and getting in the way."

Richard's smile was gentle in this sad place and was for me alone. "Beautifully practical. Is anyone else missing?"

"I never thought to ask." I said, crestfallen at my oversight.

Richard reassured me. "They probably don't know themselves yet."

Mr. Smith stared at the body as if he took inspiration from it. "Just what I was going to ask myself." He leaned forward to smooth the loose hair from the woman's face. When he moved back, her face became visible for the first time.

When he saw the woman, Richard gripped my hand tightly. I heard his sharp intake of breath. "Lucy." His tone was soft but so penetrating that I could have heard it from the drawing room. It had such nuances of meaning in it that I couldn't interpret it all at once. He knew this woman.

I thought immediately of Thompson's. Perhaps she came from there. But he'd used her first name, not her last one. He stared at the body as though he saw something else, his stare unnerving in its intensity.

"Yes. Lucy Forder."

He shook his head slowly, his hand still gripping mine but at my words he released it. I stopped myself shaking it to get some of the feeling back and suffered the pins and needles in silence. "No. Lucy Gartside. How in God's name did she come to be here?"

Richard would have stayed there forever, staring at that body. I took his hand again and urged him to come downstairs but it took some time before I could persuade him and by then the Runner had realised that Richard had recognised her. Ignoring Smith's speculative look, as he must have realized Richard's reaction meant he knew the woman, I took him out of the room and stopped in the empty corridor outside.

I put my hand on the back of his head and drew it down to rest on my shoulder to give him a moment to regain his composure. This incident had obviously shaken him a great deal and while I wondered and surmised, this was not the time or the place to ask him about it.

Recovering, Richard put his arms around me and drew me close. When he released me, he had regained control. "Thank you. I swear I'll tell you all about it later."

I nodded and we went back down to the drawing room. Richard sat in the nearest chair, moving his hat, which still reposed there, an indication of how much turmoil the household was in. I went to the table and poured some tea for us. Lizzie still sat next to Aunt Godolphin and Ruth stood by the fire.

I had to be honest with them. It might be in the papers in the morning and best we tell them than they find it out that

way. "We think it's murder, not a suicide. We've left the official to come to his own conclusions."

Aunt Godolphin sank her face into her hands. "Murder."

"We might be able to help." I glanced at Richard for confirmation.

He nodded. "We try to find out what happened, if you want us to."

Aunt Godolphin looked up, hope in her eyes. "Can we stop it getting out?"

Richard sounded regretful. "No but we can help limit the damage. It may be seen as a small private tragedy, especially if the world thinks it's suicide." Aunt Godolphin nodded, understanding. The curls of her elaborate hairstyle bobbed in agreement.

I hated to see my aunt so vulnerable, as though ten years had been added to her tally. "Has anyone sent for your husband, ma'am?"

"Yes." She bit her lower lip, then burst out, "Oh, I'm so sorry this should happen while you're here. You'll probably never want to see this house again and I wouldn't blame you. I did so want this visit to be a pleasant one."

Lizzie took Aunt Godolphin's hand and patted it. "Of course we'll come again, Aunt. None of this is your fault." Aunt Godolphin smiled tremulously at Lizzie.

Mr. Godolphin and Mr. Smith entered the room one after the other. While I was delighted to see my uncle again, the circumstances were too unhappy to make much of our greeting. We let Mr. Smith explain. The Bow Street man watched Richard as closely as he dared. Richard met his gaze

without expression. After he completed his account, my uncle shook his head mournfully. "How do you think it occurred?"

Smith's face was impassive. "I'm keeping an open mind on the subject, sir. I have been down to the kitchens and there are two persons absent who should rightfully be here."

Richard sat up a little, his interest kindled. "And who would they be?"

"Two servants, my lord. A manservant by the name of Greene and a young female housemaid, Jackson. They're both missing."

"Did they have any connection to the dead woman other than sharing an employer?"

Smith stared at Richard. "Greene was known to be sweet on Forder and she seemed to have taken the other girl under her wing in the time she was here but other than that, there seems to be nothing, my lord."

Richard raised his eyebrows. "That is a great deal. Was it Greene the girl was out with last night?"

"That has yet to be determined, my lord." Smith's eyes narrowed. "She had a rich friend, though. You seemed to recognise her, my lord, or am I mistaken?"

Richard's voice was smooth, unconcerned. "You are mistaken. What do you mean, she had a rich friend?"

The man stared at him steadily but he was not unaware of the other occupants of the room. He cast a sideways glance to where I stood with Ruth.

"We found a quantity of guineas under the bed. The girl who shared her room denied having seen the bag they were contained in before we showed her the contents and I believe

her. If they had belonged to her, it's sure she would have claimed them."

If he wanted a response from my husband, he was disappointed. Richard met his stare with a mild look of displeasure. "She might have saved them."

"From the dates on the coins she wouldn't have had time," said Mr. Smith.

Richard smiled. "You miss little, Mr. Smith."

The Bow Street man shrugged. "It's my job, my lord."

"What else did you notice?"

"That the girl didn't kill herself, my lord. The knife went in at the wrong angle for that."

Richard's control remained absolute but it would have been better if the officer had called it suicide. Less chance of scandal spreading. "I suggest you busy yourself finding the missing two servants. If they didn't kill her, they may know something important about the murder."

The man regarded Richard with new respect and perhaps some suspicion. "I shall set my enquiries in train immediately, my lord." He never took his gaze off Richard, who met his stare and then looked away to where I stood. They made an unusual contrast, the plainly dressed, short, stout man and the taller, elegant peacock but they had the same aims and neither fully trusted the other.

"Are you ready to leave, my lady?"

I crossed the room to join him. "As soon as you wish, my lord."

He stood. "I brought the phaeton for speed, so if you don't object to sitting beside me in a racing vehicle, we can go now. Or I can send your carriage for you."

I hadn't had the opportunity of watching him drive yet "Do you drive well?"

He grinned but only briefly. "Tolerably. I can undertake not to overset us."

"In that case, I'm ready." I turned to address Aunt Godolphin. "I'm sorry we should visit you under such trying circumstances. I hope we can come again soon, though?"

She shook her head. "It's too much to hope for."

Kind-hearted Lizzie reassured her. "Oh, we wouldn't dream of abandoning you at a time like this. When I tell Martha, I'm sure she'll come to see you at once."

Aunt Godolphin smiled wanly but said no more until Richard executed a perfect bow over her hand and then her smile became stronger. She obviously enjoyed that and it served to make up for the sketchy one when he'd arrived.

Richard bowed to Lizzie and Ruth, nodded to Mr. Smith and we left the room.

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Chapter Four

Pausing only to don outdoor clothing, we went out to the phaeton. After he helped me up to the passenger seat and climbed up to his seat, Richard turned to me before he drove off. "I'm sorry to drag you away so precipitately but Smith strikes me as a shrewd man and I don't think he'll give up easily. We can expect another visit from him, that's for sure."

I nodded in agreement but didn't ask any questions. Not here in the street.

The phaeton was in the latest style, high perched and well sprung, making it a fast and responsive vehicle with the right horses, and Richard drove a pair of greys I wished Tom was here to see. Tom always fancied himself a connoisseur of horseflesh and these were beautiful, high-stepping thoroughbreds, groomed to within an inch of their lives. Richard drove confidently and well, though not too fast. Every time he took a corner, we were pitched sideways and I only just stopped myself clutching the sides of my seat. When Richard looked at me, I managed a smile but he wasn't fooled. He laughed. "It can take some time to get used to, my sweet. It is a little high but I promise you it's completely safe."

"I'm sorry to be such a coward."

He kept his attention on the busy street. "After what you've just coped with? Those weren't the actions of a coward, my love. But a phaeton is an entirely different thing." He took a corner, clearing it by what seemed to be a hair's

breadth and flicked a glance at me. "If you like, I can take you out into the country sometime and show you what it can do. Then you can clutch the supports all you like. Or you can never travel in one again. Many ladies choose that course."

"I trust you. I'll try it one more time."

He grinned. "I thought you might. You don't like to be beaten, do you?"

"No."

"You should not be in the same house as my mother for too long then, or you might come to blows. I don't know which of you I'd back but I'd certainly sell tickets."

"Richard!" I wasn't really scandalised at his words, more horrified at the thought of setting myself up against my mother-in-law, who stood above me in age and rank, in everything in fact except height.

"The fight of the season," he pondered. "And a close run thing."

I had to admit there was something in what he said. When I next looked at him, I contented myself telling him to keep his attention on the road. His comment was teasing. "You're lucky I didn't bring the curricule. I can drive that just as fast but it only has two wheels."

"I shall look forward to it." He glanced at me again, more at ease. The challenge of driving such a highly sprung vehicle and the thought I might take on his mother one day seemed to have restored his spirits, at least for now.

He drew up outside the house on Piccadilly with a flourish and threw the reins to a waiting groom before coming around

to lift me down. He held me for a fraction longer than he needed to before we went inside.

Richard called for Carier as soon as we got in. We went to my sitting room and I told the valet what had occurred that day. The valet had brought the Thompson's box with him, guessing it was business.

He thumbed through the cards. "There is nobody from the box in that establishment, ma'am, though we've provided one or two staff in the past."

"We should put somebody there now," Richard said. "I want to know the belowstairs comings and goings."

"I shall attend to it as soon as possible, my lord." There would certainly be a vacancy.

"Do we know this girl, Lucy Forder?" Richard was back in control of himself. No one would have guessed this girl meant anything to him.

"No, my lord, we don't know her. She never applied to us for employment. When I see Mrs. Thompson, I will ask her if she knows the girl."

I wondered at that, why Richard didn't share his knowledge with Carier. There was little the body servant didn't know about his master and the two trusted each other implicitly.

"We'll visit her tomorrow." Richard smiled at me. "It's time you met Alicia."

Little time was left to dress for dinner but here the value of a good body servant showed itself. Nichols could dress my hair with speed and still work miracles. Barely half an hour passed before Richard and I met in the sitting room and

walked over to the main wing. I was to meet yet more of Richard's widespread and influential family tonight and I trembled with anxiety. I hated meeting new people but that was part of my new life, so I was doing my best to cope. Richard knew some of my fear but not all and if I could help it, he'd never know. I'd get over it.

I was delighted to see Richard's twin, Gervase. Another ally. Although identical, the brothers had spent twelve years apart, enough for them to develop their own style and interests in life. When Gervase was considered a bad influence on Richard and sent away, Richard did his best to follow him to perdition, trying every excess he could find, regardless of personal safety. Until I had arrived in his life.

Richard introduced me to my new family but I couldn't get the sight of that grisly room out of my mind. I tried hard to until someone asked Richard about it. It was, of course, his mother. "I hope you don't plan to become too involved in the business. Naturally, all our sympathies must go out to Mrs. Godolphin but I cannot think it is any of our concern."

Richard gave her a tight smile. "It is, however, an intriguing problem. I thought the matter straightforward, the result of a sordid little affair until the Bow Street man mentioned the money found in the room. She had a great deal of it, more than a maidservant should have in her possession. There is more to this affair than at first appears."

"Nevertheless, my son, you must have other concerns, especially now." She stared pointedly at me.

I did my best to assert myself. Just because I was nervous, that didn't mean I would allow anyone to ride

roughshod over me. "I enjoy the challenge of solving a problem. It is true the circumstances are often depressing but the satisfaction of finding a solution is considerable." My heart beat a little faster but I held my ground.

Lady Southwood stared at me, one eyebrow raised, exactly like her son at his haughtiest. But just as he had never defeated me, so she did not. I knew that look too well. "I'm indeed surprised that such a well-brought-up young lady should turn to such sad circumstances for her amusement."

"Not amusement but the duty of bringing a miscreant to justice. I've never heard of a poorly attended hanging." Lady Southwood must know I had the right of it there; many people of *ton* attended such events. She might even have gone to one herself. I wouldn't enjoy such a thing but it was the fashion to attend executions, especially after the execution of Lord Lovatt after the 'forty-five.

My mother-in-law frowned and turned away, displaying her displeasure by the upright posture of her body and the tilt of her head. Richard, seated next to me, breathed, "First skirmish to Lady Strang," but when I turned to frown at him, he was blandly conversing with the lady on his other side.

However, his mother wasn't finished with the subject. "You must not get involved any further, Strang. It is none of your business."

Richard regarded her then with such a freezing stare that even she fell silent. "The victim," he drawled, keeping his voice slow and clear so everyone heard it, "was a maid called Lucy Forder but she used to go by the name of Lucy Gartside."

Lady Southwood was too well trained in the ways of polite society to let her son's pronouncement disconcert her for more than a second but that second seemed to stretch into an hour. An unmistakable flash of recognition and alarm lit her eyes. Her husband's attention lifted from his plate. His eyes widened; he was clearly appalled.

"Do you know the name, sir?" his wife asked him calmly. He met her stare. Time moved forward again then. Conversation started up around the table and people moved.

Lord Southwood took his cue from his wife. "I seem to recall the name." He sounded suitably vague but it obviously meant more to him, too. His attention had sharpened. "We have so many maids. The girl could have passed through our household"

Out of the corner of my eye I caught Gervase's sudden movement as he clenched his fist but when I glanced across the table to Maria, I saw nothing untoward in her. She was chatting with an attractive man standing by her side and hardly stopped to listen to Richard's statement. I watched but I said nothing and since his mother let the matter drop, so did Richard but they didn't speak to each other for the rest of the meal. Richard's attempt to disconcert his mother in public had been uncomfortable to watch, but only those who knew Lucy's name would have recognised her significance to the family. He'd done it deliberately, testing her public face, and all I could remark was that it was even better than his. I imagine he wouldn't have cared had she broken down, might have welcomed it.

After an evening spent listening to the usual gossip I went to my room. Nichols helped me out of the gown and hoop and into a loose one, since we were not planning to go anywhere else that evening. Then she brushed and washed the hated powder out of my hair, leaving it to fall loose down my back, and pinned a tiny lace cap on top.

I sent instructions that we were not at home. After tonight, Richard and I were due to attend various evening functions but tonight was ours. It might be our last free evening this side of Christmas. I went to our sitting room to find a couple of decks of cards and a bottle of wine, determined not to let the shadow of this afternoon spoil this evening, to give him his ease. I would let him tell me about Lucy in his own way, in his own time.

Richard, wearing a loose short coat in place of the formal, stiff one he'd worn at dinner, suggested a game of piquet. Since he'd spent some of his time in Venice learning how to cheat at cards I watched him warily but he seemed to be playing fair. It wasn't until I found myself winning every trick whether I dealt the hand or not that I realised he was letting me win.

I threw the pack at him. He moved aside, laughing and the cards showered over his right shoulder. He caught one of my hands and pulled me to him so I ended up sitting on his lap. He drew me down for a kiss. "You win. But then," he added, his arms comfortably around me, "you always should."

"Why?"

"Because you deserve to. You've made such a difference to me. You deserve some luck of your own."

"And you don't call me lucky?" I slipped my hand around the back of his neck. "You've given me everything and you're still here after six months."

His voice bathed me in warmth. "I plan to be here after six years. And sixty, if we live that long." I laughed. I couldn't imagine myself that age. "I shall start to show you off soon, show the world what a treasure I've won."

I frowned. "Why should you want to do that? I'm not special, except to you. Let me fit in and find my place."

It was his turn to laugh. "They won't let you do that. You're my wife and they're longing to see you. Now don't be disingenuous and pretend not to know why. You knew this had to come."

I sighed. He was all I wanted, not all this fuss. "Yes, I know. All your mistresses will curse me and wonder when they can reclaim you. Will you tell me which ones you've had and which ones you passed by? It might amuse me while they're sizing me up."

"Certainly not." He made himself busy at the front fastenings of my gown. "You may assume there were a great many. I should be ashamed, I know, but I never preyed on the vulnerable, only on the willing. To tell you the truth I can't remember precisely myself. You have driven the memory of them away, my sweet." He found his way through to my stays and slipped his hand around my waist to find the knot at the back.

"I'll wager you remember them all."

He untied the knot and tugged at the laces to loosen them. "With you," he protested, his lips against my skin, "I find it

hard to remember who I am, much less who they are. Shall we go to bed, my love, my wife?"

I took his hand and we went through the private connecting door to my bedroom. I gladly let the gown fall away, closely followed by the stays, quilted petticoat, slippers, stockings and shift while I pulled his clothes from him, better than I used to be at undressing a man. I'd had plenty of practice recently. Then, down to his shirt and little else, he picked me up and laid me on the bed.

Although we had loved each other many times, I found each time as exhilarating as the first, only enhanced by our growing knowledge of each other's bodies and needs. I had thought he would grow bored or satiated with me but to my everlasting joy he showed no signs of it, enthusiastically exploring, helping me to explore, to give him his delight.

Tonight he seemed more needy, taking less time than usual before he entered me. Every time I felt his body slide into mine I had the sensation of coming home. He watched me as he loved me and swung me on top of him. I sat up to gain more control and loved him, looking at him all the time, moving gently at first to prolong our pleasure, moving up and down slowly, laughing at his sighs of pleasure. Then I leaned against his upraised knees, letting him pull me hard on to him as my own ecstasy crested. When I cried out in rapture, he responded, calling me his best, his dearest love, caressing my body with his hands, cupping my breasts, urging the nipples to peak hard. The little shots of extra sensation prolonged my joy, pushing me to the heights. This time my peak coincided

with his and we fell on the bed together, our breathing short and ragged, laughing breathlessly in sheer pleasure.

He caressed me, his hands moving slowly over my body, a time I adored, when I had him vulnerable and all to myself. He had allowed no other woman to see him like this before, or so he told me, and some of the endearments he whispered he'd certainly never used with anyone else. I reciprocated, telling him what he most wanted to hear. "My only love, dearest of all men."

After a while he lifted himself up on one elbow and gazed at my face more solemnly than he usually did in these circumstances. "I have to tell you, don't I? About Lucy." His hand lay lightly around my waist.

"I'd like to know but don't tell me if it causes you pain. I don't want to make you unhappy."

He smiled tenderly but his face soon grew serious again. "You have to know. Especially now." He paused and swallowed. I lifted my hand to touch his cheek.

He moved his face against my hand and his eyes glazed over with memories. "It happened when I was fourteen, at our country house, Eyton. She was the first girl I'd ever had and a dairymaid, only a little older than me." The lines between his nose and mouth deepened. I hated hearing about him with anyone else but that was the least of the poor girl's troubles now and only an instinctive, selfish reaction of mine.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" he asked and I nodded. I had to know. He held me a little tighter. "I foolishly told my parents I wanted to marry her, you see. Instead of letting the affair take its course, my mother sent her away. I

never knew where, though I spent a long time searching for her." He paused. "I've always tried to be fair to the women in my life. Lucy was the only one I wasn't able to take care of. I resented it deeply. My parents didn't trust me enough to let me take control." His voice hardened. "I looked for Lucy but I never found her—until today."

I ached for the anguish he was trying to hide for my sake. It revealed itself in the tension in his body where I rested against him. I didn't know how to comfort him except to hold him and fight back my tears until I was on my own. "She was the last girl I let into my life." He looked at me and smiled but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Until you."

I thought of all those loveless years. "Is that why you don't let your parents close?"

"Partly." He paused and studied my expression carefully for signs of distress. Hiding them from him was one of the most difficult things I'd ever done. "They've always tried to take control of my life, especially my mother. She resents you a little. That's because she didn't choose you herself. You fitted in with her plans for me though, so she didn't choose to object."

"What if she had?"

"Nothing." I moved my hand away from his face, to his shoulder. He still lay over me, his weight taken on his elbows, watching. "I'd have married you if we'd been forced to run away together. Mother wouldn't have spoken to you then, much less let you into her house." He smiled grimly. "It might have been better, at that."

"No. You can't wish to make family disputes public." He would hate that.

He smiled. "Perhaps. But we won't stay in this house too long, or they may well become more public. I can't stay under the same roof as my mother. I used to love her dearly when I was small but I didn't understand then that her care came from a desire to support the family. Family is all, you see. The continuance of the line." He stopped and touched his lips to mine. "It should be possible for us to move just after Christmas. We'll go into the country for the festivities, your family or mine, or in one of our own houses and then move back into a town house when we return to the city. Would that suit you?"

"Yes, very much. I'd like to look after you properly."

His caresses moved slowly up my body, gentle and loving and he bent to kiss my lips. "You can do that anywhere." His confidences were over, for the time being, so I joyfully gave myself up to him.

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Chapter Five

Richard took me to Thompson's after breakfast the next day. We travelled in a nondescript, uncrested carriage because we didn't want to attract too much attention to ourselves.

My blue gown, while pretty, wasn't elaborate but Richard gave no hostages to the City in his dress. He presented his usual flamboyant self, in dark blue with the solitaire diamond winking in the folds of his pristine neckcloth. His white waistcoat was so perfect, it might have been embroidered by the army of mice he seemed to employ; his wig was perfectly curled, his cocked hat brand new, his dress sword gleaming. Although dress swords were paltry things, often abandoned in informal wear, my husband liked his Toledo steel weapon. And in the capacious pockets of his coat, along with a lace handkerchief and the jewelled snuffbox, always rested one or two Italian stilettos, knives he wielded with frightening accuracy. A sense of danger always lurked about Richard, the fine sharp blade under the silk, the possibility of an explosion of violence unnerving but shockingly exciting.

As we passed down Piccadilly, he pointed out several sites of interest—the nobility's great houses, followed by other houses closer to our destination, now lived in by merchants and gentry of substance. We moved past houses that had seen better days, where the paint peeled on the doors and down at heel footmen lurked, a parody of their smarter counterparts in the West End.

Society moved farther west all the time and as we travelled in the opposite direction, the streets narrowed. Street vendors jostled gentlemen travelling to coffee houses and clubs, chairmen trotted briskly with their burdens of fashionable and not so fashionable society. Ladies sauntered along the wide thoroughfares, gazing into the large glazed windows of the shops while urchins and more sensibly dressed merchants' wives pushed past. The busy streets intimidated and excited me. There was no order and I liked London the better for the way everybody moved together about the metropolis.

I could move about with relative anonymity in London, but when I mentioned this to Richard, he smiled. "That won't last long. As soon as your portrait's done and your likeness is circulated, they'll be watching for you."

"Who will?"

"The Watchers, Gervase and I used to call them. Some people spend an inordinate amount of time looking at us, checking us off on their lists, so they can tell their friends all about it." He gazed out the window at the passing throng. "Then there are the professionals, people who are paid to watch us and report on our movements in the press, which can spin a profit out of reporting where we are and what we're doing."

"I don't think I like that. Haven't they anything better to do?"

"It seems not but we can do little about it, so it's best to ignore them."

I stared out of the window at the bustling streets. Our progress was slow because of all the other vehicles on the road, so I had plenty of time to gaze.

The carriage drew up outside a tall building hemmed in by other tall buildings in a narrow lane. A sign swung outside and a shining brass plaque was fixed to the wall by the front door. Emblazoned on both was "Thompson's Registry Office".

We got out of the carriage. Another brass plate was fastened to the wall outside the front door, under the larger plaque. "All varieties of upper servants and abovestairs staff. Providers of staff to the Quality."

There followed a handwritten paper list of servants required at present: ladies' maids, housemaids, footmen butlers and cooks. All were listed under several ranks, as confusing as the ranks in society to the uninitiated. Everyone in our society was ranked, from the complex hierarchy of thieves to the nobility's equally complicated pecking order.

We went inside. A small desk stood at one end of the long room, which in any normal domestic building would be the hall. Two long benches sat on either side. Several people lounged or sat on them, waiting for the attention of the individual seated behind the desk. I saw all forms of dress, from the homespun to the fashionable, indicating people up from the country to experienced servants changing their situations. The better-dressed people were, from their appearance, potential employers, upper servants looking for more domestics. They were more conscious of their surroundings. They sat bolt upright, ignoring the people with whom they were obliged to share a bench. One stout lady

looked as if she had dropped in after doing her shopping. A basket lay at her feet, crammed full of some of the fresh produce that flooded into London every morning.

A multitude of gazes lifted to stare at us, except for the individual behind the desk, engrossed in his work.

We watched his pen fly over the paper for a few lines until he lifted the quill to dip in the inkpot, then he glanced up, as though he could hardly spare the time. He stared back and his jaw dropped open. Richard fixed him with a basilisk stare. "You're new, aren't you?"

The man nodded dumbly and remembered to close his mouth. Richard smiled and if it were possible, it was worse than his stare. "Pray tell Mrs. Thompson her visitors are here."

I felt like one of the lions in the Tower Menagerie, being stared at by the populace. I didn't like it. In return, I studied the stout woman but she met me stare for stare and put up her chin.

The sound of someone running down the stairs at the end of the hall disrupted this tableau. The newcomer recognised Richard, because he bowed low. "Mrs. Thompson saw you arrive, my lord, my lady. Would you please come this way?"

"Thank you, Barraclough, I know the way by now."
Richard's smile was genuine this time. "You're well?"

"Very well, thank you, my lord."

We walked past the individual at the desk to the end of the hall, so silent the only sound was the rustle of my skirts and the tapping of our feet on the bare boards, and followed

Barraclough up the stairs. On the first floor he took us to a door at the end and showed us through.

This room was far from tidy, dominated by a large pedestal desk before the window. It was covered by piles of papers so high that I could barely see the red leather on its top. A cheerful fire blazed in the hearth and several chairs stood around it. None of them matched. A large, nondescript landscape painting hung forlornly over the hearth, so blackened by soot that the green fields and the blue sky merged in colour, both coming out as a sickly green. Several smaller pictures were dotted about the walls, none completely straight and none carefully placed. The effect was of slight inebriation.

Before the fire stood a woman so unlike the picture of Mrs. Thompson in my mind as to be from a different world. I had expected a motherly, older individual, but this Mrs. Thompson was far from that. She was plainly but richly dressed and as tall as me. She must have been in her mid-thirties but her figure was one to envy, full about the breasts and hips and slim in the waist. Her handsome face was relatively unlined. Richard went forward, kissed her cheek, then turned to me. "You see, Alicia, I've brought my bride to you, as I promised."

The elegant woman smiled at us both. I saw nothing but welcome in her eyes, but the shock of seeing this lovely lady overtook my senses.

Surprised to know he'd promised her as well as me, a suspicion formed in my mind, slowly hardening into conviction despite my best efforts to suppress it. Richard and Mrs. Thompson had been lovers.

It was one thing not to be jealous when confronted by someone with whom Richard hardly remembered having an affair, but his obvious affection for this woman indicated a longstanding relationship. I couldn't deny my jealousy and hurt. My first reaction, born from a place deep inside, was to turn to leave. I did it without thinking, the instinctive reaction of a wounded animal to seek shelter.

Richard caught my hands as I turned away, gazing at my face anxiously. He sighed. I tried hard not to show anything in my expression but my hasty movement, not quickly contained enough, must have given me away.

He sat me in one of the chairs by the fire, choosing another for himself. I didn't return his pressure of my hand and he released it.

Mrs. Thompson's face remained stoically calm. Embarrassed for my outburst, I could say nothing, because it must have been obvious to her what I had thought.

Some of the papers on the desk had been pushed hastily aside to make room for a large wooden tray on which reposed a large teapot, sugar, milk and tea-dishes, none of them matching. Mrs. Thompson busied herself pouring tea for us, which I was glad to see was a powerful strengthening brew. I needed it.

I understood why Richard was attracted to her—she seemed clever and resourceful and she must have been so to run such a successful agency. She also seemed possessed of boundless energy. She didn't sit behind her desk for long without standing up or fiddling with something, a pen or paper perhaps, but out of all this chaos she knew where to

find what she needed. If it hadn't been for my sinking heart, I might have liked her. I tried to concentrate.

We turned to our reason for coming today and, ashamed of my display earlier, I was glad to turn to business. We discussed the previous day's tragic events. Richard had written to Mrs. Thompson, informing her of the bare facts but now he told her what Lucy meant to him in a clear voice that didn't falter or hesitate. He'd locked away his emotions to concentrate on the facts, something he found much easier to do than I did.

She stared at him gravely. "I'm so sorry" was all she said but with a sincerity of sentiment.

"We must discover who killed her. I owe her that, at least."

"Of course. I'll set enquiries forward as soon as possible." She made a note.

Richard leaned back in his chair. "I'll talk to my parents and make them tell me what they did with her. I never knew, they made her vanish. I searched for her at the time but there's only so much a fourteen-year-old can do."

"We'll find out." I believed her. The matter seemed closed, the understanding complete. Although I was supposed to be a partner in this enterprise, I felt shut out and lonely. I wasn't a stranger to that particular feeling.

"So what are they saying about us?" Richard asked in a more cheerful tone. "I know our marriage created a stir, especially with the accompanying events—so unnecessarily dramatic—but are they satisfied now?"

Alicia smiled. "At first you, Lady Strang, were called a ravishing blonde. They confused you with your sister and it

might have stopped there but Richard has enemies and they made hay while you were away." She paused and stirred her tea, studied the spoon when she took it out of the tea-dish and let the brown liquid trickle back. She looked up. "You know who I mean?"

"Steven and Julia Drury?" I ventured without a pause.

She nodded, still playing with her spoon. "I was astonished when I heard Julia Cartwright had eloped. I never met her but from what I heard she was a proud woman, not one to give up easily. I relied on Edward Carier to tell me about the affair. Was this man Drury really your curate?"

I confirmed it.

She picked up her tea-dish. "It makes me less inclined to trust the church. I've seen the Drurys. I went to a theatre production they also attended and I made a point of watching them. They make a striking couple and they've made themselves popular in a certain set of people." She sighed. "They've started some ugly rumours about you. I don't really want to repeat them. Do you need to hear them?"

Richard shook his head. "Not unless they matter."

The lady smiled. "Very wise. Venomous and unfounded. There's always gossip, in any case."

"Are they up to anything that might affect us?"

Mrs. Thompson shrugged. "We've heard nothing. What will you do?" She looked directly at Richard.

"Nothing, if they leave us alone." He glanced at me and smiled. "I have too many other things to think about without pursuing useless revenge. Let them find their own way to hell."

Mrs. Thompson cleared her throat. "I'm sure you have. I haven't been able to trace the people who tried to kill you. They seem to have disappeared into the rookeries. If you want me to, I can make extra efforts, but you said you'd incapacitated them."

Richard shook his head. "No need. I'm fairly sure they won't bother us again. It's the Drurys we need to watch."

"Hmm."

Mrs. Thompson straightened a pile of papers on her desk, then reached for another one on the other side.

"Here's a more pleasant matter, that of your secretary," she said, her relief at being able to drop the subject readily apparent by her smile.

Mrs. Thompson sat behind her desk but her fingers skittered on the paper, and I suspected that tapping sound was her foot on the floor. "I've found someone for you. He comes with excellent references and he'll be free in a day or two. If you wish, I can send him to see you."

We agreed to see him and Alicia continued, "His name is Brangwyn. George Brangwyn." She referred to the paper in her hand, then gave it to us. It listed Mr. Brangwyn's history, from his birth as a younger son of a Welsh gentleman to his current unemployment due to the death of his previous employer. Brangwyn had worked for some eminent people. Richard glanced up from his perusal of the paper. "He knows I have no political pretensions?"

Mrs. Thompson consulted her papers. "I've made what he needs to know clear to him. He doesn't know your connection to Thompson's and he's not from the box but he is the best

candidate we know of at the moment. He will, of course, get to know some of it but it shouldn't interfere with his day-to-day activities, should it?"

The box was actually two boxes; we had one and one resided here at Thompson's. Their contents were identical, containing the names and whereabouts of people who had agreed to undertake special duties for us. It might be in a protective *rôle*, or even as a spy, although Richard tried not to ask anyone to reveal anything that went against their conscience. Nichols, my maid was from the box; Carier, Richard's valet, as one of the investors in the company, was not.

Brangwyn would be required to make sure our appointments did not conflict or overlap and would be expected to remind us of the day's business, especially when we were in London. He would also transcribe certain letters for us, especially those of a non-personal nature and open all the other letters. We received several begging letters a week; not nearly as many as Richard's brother Gervase, who was enormously rich and unencumbered by either personal ties or entails, but enough to take up more of our time than we could spare.

We took our leave soon after. We walked past the long benches and out of the building and this time the man behind the desk stood and bowed to us when we passed. He must have been told we were part owners, as mere rank wouldn't have brought a citizen of London to bow so low. The woman with the vegetables was still there but I didn't look at her this

time and all the other occupants of the benches seemed to have moved on, or farther towards the desk.

I wouldn't look at Richard on the way home. I needed some time to myself. I had to learn to accept this woman without comment and for my own peace of mind, I would try.

But when we got back to Southwood House and I had taken my hat and cloak off in the hall, Richard seized my hand and dragged me upstairs. He didn't stop until we reached our own sitting room, when he shut the door firmly and turned to face me. "What's wrong?" His mouth was tight with tension.

"It's all right." I put all my efforts into keeping my voice steady, my breathing regular. "I understand."

"Understand what?" He sounded angry. I hated this.

I couldn't bear to look at him. I walked to the window and gazed out, unseeing at the garden below. I took a breath, then another one. "You're a man of powerful appetites. I knew I might not be enough for you when we married. It's all right." I thought again of the intimate glances that had passed between Richard and his erstwhile—at least I hoped she was erstwhile—mistress, piercing my heart to the core, bypassing my reasoning. It might be hard, if not impossible, for him to give up that easy relationship of many years' standing. I would have given anything to be on my own, to think it through and sob out my grief but it wasn't to be.

The silence was total. I broke it. "I'd rather have you some of the time than none at all. I'm sorry, you must think me a dreadful provincial but I'll learn to live with it, I promise."

It seemed oppressively hot. There was a fire in the grate but the days were becoming chillier. It must be me.

Outside, I saw a gardener neatly pruning shrubs. I watched him clip away, not a care in the world.

Then Richard moved and I braced myself for his touch. He put his hands on my shoulders and turned me around, seeing the tears I was fighting so hard to suppress.

"Learn to live with what, for God's sake?"

"You care for Mrs. Thompson, don't you?"

"Of course I care for her! I care for my sister, too." He bit his lip, studying my face far too perceptively.

"I'm sorry, I know the fault lies with me." Of course it did, but seeing him with her had shown me what I might have to put up with in the future. In the year I'd known him, Richard had been totally devoted to me, but I couldn't expect that.

Very few men in society remained completely faithful through the whole of their lives. Today had just forced me to face it.

"Today brought a realisation, that's all. The past year, especially the last six months have been wonderful, but now, we have to face our real lives. And that might include you taking a mistress, sometime in the future." I couldn't fight back the tears but I refused to sweep them away. "So very few couples are faithful. What chance do we have?"

"And that's it?"

"Just that I know you and Mrs. Thompson have been lovers, and you could slip into it again."

He lifted his hand and swept his thumb across my cheek, pushing the tears away. "We were, but no, we won't do it again. Because I wasn't in love with her, or with any of the

others. Rose, I love you, you know that. I'll never stop loving you. Listen to me." He took me by the shoulders, gripped hard. "How do you feel about sharing your bed with someone else? Picture someone handsome, kind, loving. But not me. How does that make you feel?" I shook my head, but he wouldn't relent. "How about Tom Skerritt?"

I couldn't suppress my shudder. He must have felt it but he said nothing, just waited for me to respond. I spoke slowly, working through my feelings. "I couldn't. I would hate betraying you and it would never be the same again between us. And—you give me everything I want."

"As do you." His voice had gentled. His grip relaxed and he slipped his arms around me to draw me closer. "I don't ever want to ruin what I have with you. I've had women, God knows I have, too many, but in you I've found everything I could ever want. You're an exciting lover, an intelligent friend and a partner I can respect. Do you think for one minute I'd risk all that for a few minutes' gratification? Do you really think I'm so immature, so utterly stupid?"

I swallowed back my tears. I knew the fault was mine, he had never given me cause to doubt him, but the way he coped with my fears awed me. He could have ridiculed me, shouted at me. I would have deserved it, but it wouldn't have served to reassure me, which was what I really needed. "Put like that, no." I lifted my head and he bent his. Our mouths met in a pure, sweet kiss, and afterwards he led me to the sofa and we sat together, sharing the bliss of each other's company.

"You are far more than a bed partner, my love. But I think I know what this is."

So did I, but I didn't say so. He drew a thumb under one eye, collecting a tear I'd let free. "This is our life. Before now, we've been by ourselves, getting to know each other, loving, with all the time in the world. Now, we have to begin to fit into the world and start living together, form our partnership." I began to see what he meant. "For me it's a matter of a slight adjustment. For you, this is entirely new. The only thing you can be sure of is me and that worries you." I bit my lip and nodded. Yes, that was true. "New friends, new relationships, new life. So you need to be absolutely sure of me."

"Yes."

"You have me. Never leave a thought unsaid, never leave yourself questioning. Promise me that whenever you have these fears you'll come to me first."

"I can try. Yes, I promise."

"Even unproven fears can do great damage. So I'll tell you about Alicia. If you want me to." He pressed a kiss to my lips and I would have left it at that, but he drew back. "Honesty, sweetheart. Yes, Alicia and I were lovers for a short period, shortly after Gervase left the country. I needed a friend, and Alicia was more than anything else. She's six years older than me, and was at a low part of her life when we met. Her husband was an army man, a friend of Carier's. When I returned from the Grand Tour my parents insisted on, we found Alicia in the Fleet, jailed for her husband's debts, so I paid them and started the business. I've never regretted it."

But we never resumed our liaison. About five years ago she found a good man, Timothy Dixon, a lawyer in the City. She refuses to marry him, she says she never wants another man in control of her finances, but for all that they are a devoted couple."

Now I felt even more foolish, but he wouldn't allow it. "I have doubts too. About you, the way men look at you, I know they want you." I stared at him, completely amazed. "You think it's any easier for me?"

We came to a new understanding that day and little by little, my fears began to fade.

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Chapter Six

Over the next two days, events began to accelerate, like a cheese rolling down a hill in one of those odd rituals they're so fond of in the country. We received more visitors, I sat with Lady Southwood and received people I had never met before, mostly of their generation, until I met someone I actually recognised.

Rumours were beginning to spread about us. Richard had not, here in London, publicly demonstrated his affection for me but society knew this was more than a dynastic marriage. We attended a music recital I enjoyed greatly, so far forgetting myself in my enjoyment of the occasion to take Richard's hand at one point. He let it lie there, only laughing at me later when I accused him of provoking comment. "They'll talk whatever we do," he said. "Do you think, my love, our sleeping arrangements aren't common knowledge by now?"

The day before my presentation at court I had a final fitting for my Court gown with the mantua-maker, and some time with a dancing master, trying to perfect my movements.

When Richard found me practising my curtsy in front of the mirror that night, he laughed but took my hand and demonstrated a few little tricks that he used to perfect his bow. "Keep the line of your arm straight. Right to the end, then let your fingertips drop. You have long fingers, my love, you should show them off." I listened to him and the little touches he added did seem to make a difference, although I

was still mortally afraid I would trip. "Are your skirts well stiffened? Layers of buckram?"

"Yes." I realised what he meant. If the train and the back of the skirt were stiff enough, then it would be a lot easier to push them out of the way when I walked backwards.

I had to get up early so I would have the time to dress and still arrive promptly. Pall Mall would be crammed with carriages this morning, all headed to make their presentations at court.

I bathed, donned a loose robe and had my hair dressed and thoroughly powdered before I sat at my dressing table. All I had to do was be there, nothing else. Nichols, the mantua-maker and a hairdresser attended me, fussing like chickens around the rooster. Their reputations depended on how I looked today. I felt like an artist's model, one of those forms on which they drape the clothes to paint when you're not there.

I disliked the current craze for enamelling but I allowed them to apply a little paint and a small patch near the corner of my mouth. Nichols's familiarity with the language of patching ensured I didn't commit any *faux pas*. I used patches occasionally but because I had never submitted my skin to the rigours of ceruse I had few blemishes to cover up. Ceruse, white lead, eventually caused terrible damage to the skin. It killed poor Lady Coventry in the end, although she had been one of the beautiful Misses Gunning and had no need of it. But the fashionable look was a deathly pallor enhanced by exaggeratedly red cheeks and women went to

great lengths to achieve it. I tried not to look unusual but that was all. A country girl.

I let them dress me after that. I stood in front of the mirror in the bedroom while they laced, pinned and sewed for what seemed like hours. From a simple short-sleeved shift and a pair of tightly laced stays, my attendants arrayed me in several under-petticoats, a full oval hooped skirt, pockets, stomacher, then outer petticoat and mantua.

The gown was carefully drawn over everything. A fine red colour, thickly embroidered in silver, padded and couched and enormously heavy, but when it was on, it didn't feel too bad. The overskirt was drawn to the back and the train pinned up behind to show the elaborate lining. I was used to the wide hoop by now but I thought it looked awkward next to the smaller, rounder fashions now in vogue. We had an old-fashioned court with an old king, who preferred to see the fashions of his prime.

I had an old necessaire, a battered silver one I'd owned for most of my life which I slipped into my pocket for luck. It had been with me for on many momentous events in my past, so I didn't see why it should be left behind now.

Lord Southwood delivered the diamonds at the door, procured from the safe downstairs. An exquisite parure of necklace, brooches, bracelet and earrings—the Strang diamonds, compulsory on such a day as this. There used to be a hair ornament but that had been destroyed on my wedding day. A new one had been made from the jewels picked up in the carriage. I watched in the mirror as Nichols adorned me, almost as though it was happening to someone

else, the maid standing by with the velvet-lined box. I eased on long white gloves, added rings and was finally ready. When I glanced at my reflection I wondered where Rose Golightly had gone, even the relatively elegant Lady Strang, and who this elegant creature was, haughty and aristocratic and not looking quite real.

The family waited in the drawing room. My mother-in-law hadn't resisted the lure of ceruse. She looked magnificent, a neat ship in full sail, arrayed in diamonds and rubies, the central stone of the necklace a huge red teardrop, glittering as she breathed. When she saw my look of admiration, she smiled graciously. "Another of the family treasures," she informed me.

Richard was a sight to astonish. He had chosen red, to match me but in velvet, not ribbed silk. The waistcoat was so heavily embroidered in silver and foil that the base material could hardly be seen and the edges of the coat, the pocket flaps and the cuffs were embroidered to match. The buttons and buckles on his shoes glittered frostily and he had the solitaire pin at his neck, the one he wore almost every day. To complete the ensemble, he had a richly decorated dress sword and a cocked hat decorated with silver braid at the brim.

We followed the Southwoods out to the carriages waiting for us and set off on the short journey to St. James' Palace.

Carriages choked Piccadilly, all headed in the same direction. We joined the procession, catching glimpses of similarly attired people in the other vehicles. We used two carriages. Richard, Gervase and I were in one and Lord and

Lady Southwood and Maria in the other. Gervase had also chosen red but his suit was embroidered and laced with gold and not as elaborate as Richard's. Gervase preferred a simpler style. He wore his own fair hair long but even he had powdered, it being one of the court rules. His grin when we entered the carriage did much to depress any pretensions to grandeur I might have felt.

I sat bolt upright, not daring to move lest I disturb something, my furred fan lying under my hand on my lap. The twins sat opposite, more at their ease. Gervase even yawned from time to time.

There were far more people than usual outside St. James. This was the first major Drawing Room of the season and I wasn't the only person due to be presented today, so Richard's watchers were out in force. I expected to meet my family here, if we saw them in the press of people around the old, red brick palace.

If this was all we did, if we didn't have the estate and Thompson's to care for, I might as well degenerate into a living statue. Like the aristocracy in France who were kept at Versailles all year round and deprived of any kind of real power. It made me glad I wasn't French, despite the beauty of the art, the clothes and the culture.

The carriages were two deep when we neared the palace but the occupants tried hard not to stare at each other as we drew abreast, not being members of the common sort. I stared at my husband instead, then at his brother. "I wish I'd thought to bring a book," I confessed.

They smiled and Richard touched my hand. "So do I, my love. To see their faces when they noticed you were so unconcerned as to be studying would have been worth a thousand lectures from our mother." Gervase laughed at the idea and the brothers exchanged a glance, perfectly in accord.

We reached the palace gates eventually but this was only the beginning of another tedious wait. A powdered footman in livery helped me down from the carriage and to my astonishment, I found Nichols waiting. "I have been here for some time, my lady. I walked." I wished I had. Wasting no time she arranged my gown, especially the folds at the back and made sure my hair was still firmly skewered into place. My scalp ached already and every time I moved, pins scratched me.

Despite that, I thanked her. None of this was her fault. "I wish you could see me, Nichols. All the work is yours."

"It wouldn't be proper, my lady" was all the reply I received. There was nowhere private to go, so I stood in the courtyard at St. James' Palace and underwent her ministrations. Other ladies were engaged in similar suffering and I exchanged a wry glance with one of them, a lady in silver and blue, swinging her wide hoop gently as her maid arranged her train.

At last Nichols declared herself satisfied, and Richard and I walked into the palace to join the queue inside for the Drawing Room. "Is this why you don't come to Court often?"

"Yes. A dead bore. Of course, some days it doesn't get this bad but it's still a dead bore, for all that." He turned to

address his brother. "Gervase, do you plan to make this one of your regular ports of call?"

Gervase shook his head. "I never enjoyed it much but you have to come occasionally, you know, just to prove that you can."

I laughed at his perspicacity. Court wasn't one of Society's favourite haunts these days. Fresher gossip and more amusing company was found elsewhere. Inside, the palace smelled of polish and dust.

The royal family preferred to stay at Kensington or one of the other palaces outside London but since Whitehall burned down eighty or so years ago, St. James was the official royal residence.

If one delved into the history of this royal family one came across some queer fish indeed. The present king was ageing and had been a widower for some time but had regular mistresses, who had to suffer all the duties of their position with none of the privileges or power their counterparts in Paris enjoyed. His son, Frederick, had been the nearest they had to a cultured, intelligent prince but he'd been dead for two years now and Frederick's son bade fair to be a throwback to his grandfather.

The king and his son had hated each other like poison, which had added some spice to matters for some time, but royal affairs had sunk back into boredom after Prince Frederick died. This was the court of an ageing monarch who scuttled off to his beloved Hanover whenever he got the chance. Parliament all but ignored him, the aristocracy laughed behind their fans but the pretence remained. The

monarch provided a clear enough reason not to change a system that worked well.

Even the Jacobite threat was exhausted. Culloden had ended Stuart hopes of a serious challenge nearly ten years ago. Now the hope of their house, Charles Edward Stuart, was degenerating into a hopeless drunk. It had been rumoured that he frequently visited London in disguise but as long as he didn't cause any trouble, the authorities were happy to keep him under observation and let him take his amusements. After all, the more debauched he became, the less of a threat he was.

Richard and Gervase kept me amused with these tales while we slowly moved up the stairs to the drawing room. People packed the palace, all gossiping, the ladies plying their fans so it seemed the air was filled with exotic butterflies. My mother-in-law stood just in front of us, Maria behind, so I was sandwiched in by family when I saw them at the bottom of the stairs, about six steps below us.

Richard didn't see them at first and I knew enough to let my gaze pass over them lightly, as though I hadn't noticed. Last year I would have stared but I was learning fast. "Richard." He immediately looked at me, hearing my note of tension. "The bottom of the staircase."

His unnerving blue stare travelled around the hall, eventually passed down and came back to me. "I see them. We don't have to acknowledge them."

Steven Drury stared up at us fixedly, not attending to anyone else. He was dressed far more richly than I had ever seen him before but his handsome face was unmistakable.

Taller than Richard, he towered over his little wife, the pretty, pert Julia, who seemingly hadn't seen us yet, or perhaps her social sense was better than his.

Gervase spotted them. "Oh, Lord."

Richard shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We had to bump into them sooner or later and it might as well be sooner. If society thinks there's any gossip to be had, they'll throw us into each other's arms. But if you think it will distress you, my love—" He studied me, catching my glance, trying to steady me.

"I don't think so. Not now. Is she being presented, do you think?"

"Highly likely. She would have been presented as Miss Cartwright but now she will be seen as respectable Mrs. Drury."

Lady Southwood turned to speak to us, then she too saw the Drurys and she halted, her fan at her mouth to hide her words. "What an unfortunate thing. Should we bow?"

"You should, Mother, if they know you've seen them," Richard said. "Or you can cut them if you wish. They gave us reason enough."

We received our instruction from my father-in-law. "Bow." Lady Southwood inclined her head graciously, the first person in the family to acknowledge the Drurys. Richard and I continued to ignore them but we didn't admit we had seen them, so we couldn't be said to have cut them.

The great ruby at Lady Southwood's neck flashed as she sighed. "They'll call on us now."

"Receive them in company," her husband advised. "Not alone. And don't give them any encouragement."

"I suppose I must."

Until now the Drurys had taken all my attention but I deliberately looked away, in the opposite direction. I saw Martha, Lizzie, Ruth and James, not too far in front of us. With them, to my delight, were Georgiana and Tom, looking as fine as fivepence. Georgiana wore a perfectly acceptable Court gown, borrowed from Maria, who had sent her other gown round to see if it would suit. Maria looked nervous and I hoped my nerves weren't showing when we reached the door of the room where the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland waited. I took a few deep breaths to steady myself.

Suddenly I felt calm and looked forward to getting the ritual over with. After all, how bad could it be?

Despite it being October, the crowded room we entered was hot. Fires blazed in the hearths and the press of people added to the heat. I smelled sweat, distinct and unpleasant. Court gowns couldn't be washed and some were probably put away by less fastidious maids without brushing them down with Fuller's Earth first. The next time they were brought out, they were perfumed to disguise the odour but unfortunately, heat brings out the stink of sweat and camphor, as well as perfume.

I lifted my fan to my face to mask some of the smells, glad it was perfumed, and heard the thin strains of a musical quartet hard at work. Nobody listened to them. We slowly moved forward into the room and my brother's party moved ahead of us.

The spectators took a special interest when Lizzie went forward, especially the men. She appeared indifferent to

everything but the two glittering figures waiting to receive her and sank into a graceful curtsy. When she stood, the duke and duchess had a few words for her, then she had to back away, down the length of the room. Ruth began her gliding walk forward and Lizzie nearly stumbled. She faltered, smiled, showing the slight dimples on either side of her mouth and stopped, then put her hand behind her gown to rearrange the folds that had become entangled. The duchess bowed her head and smiled at her. Lizzie didn't look around, then smiled back, bowed her head and finished the backwards glide. I heard someone behind us hiss, "See? *That's* what you do if your heel gets stuck."

Ruth managed the manoeuvre but without much grace. I guessed her nervousness matched mine. After a few more girls making their debut came my turn. Lizzie's stumble had made the whole room buzz and her mischievous smile when she stopped had probably bewitched more than a few but they stopped to watch me.

With a kiss on the tips of my fingers, Richard relinquished me to his mother and with only a glance in my direction, Lady Southwood glided forward. I went with her, my trembling invisible. The brocaded mantua felt heavy on my shoulders and hips but the weight of the material helped me to keep my balance. My heart pounded and I concentrated hard on keeping control of every part of my body. I managed a creditable curtsy, watched by every soul in that room. They wanted to see what sort of woman Lord Strang had married and why he hadn't chosen their daughters instead.

Stubborn determination filled me and I vowed to do my husband and myself proper justice. The curtsy was good but remembering the little tricks Richard had taught me, the rising up was better. I heard his voice in my head: "Take your time, don't let anything rush you." That had nearly been Lizzie's downfall, so I paused when I stood, drew my hands in gently and in time with the rest of my body.

I heard an accented voice. "Lord Strang's bride." I met a pale blue, pop-eyed gaze, so typical of the Hanovers. The Duke of Cumberland and his wife took the Drawing Room for today while the King was in Hanover *again*. His status as a widower meant he could not take these occasions in any case. Intelligence lay in the duke's pale eyes, though and kindness, surprising in a man of his cruel reputation. I smiled and bowed my head. "I have that honour, your highness." As a royal duke, Cumberland was above mere princes.

"I might have known he'd choose a supremely elegant woman."

I wished he hadn't said that. I still had to walk back.
"Thank you, sir."

"Have you the brains to keep him?" He studied me closely. It would have been impolite to look away. "I think you do," he said, after what seemed like an hour. "We will see you again, Lady Strang, we look forward to it." He turned to my mother-in-law. "Lady Southwood? You must be proud of your son's choice of bride."

Her voice was colourless but I expected nothing more.
"Indeed, your highness."

The duchess smiled at me and gave me her hand to kiss. It was my dismissal. Carefully I slid my foot back, feeling the heavy folds give way and my secret weapon held. I walked backward at my own pace and made it look elegant by using the timing Richard had taught me and the unseen clip Nichols had provided. It was made out of light, split bamboo and it fitted onto the bottom of the gown, holding the first few inches of the skirt rigidly back. I hadn't told anyone about it and I didn't intend to but I felt more than grateful to my resourceful maid. It gave me the confidence to smile easily and bow lightly again when I walked to where Lord Southwood and Richard waited.

The duke bowed to Richard, who bowed low in acknowledgement, then it was someone else's turn. Richard regarded me warmly. "Well done. You were exquisite."

I smiled back and for a brief moment let him see my triumph before I took his arm and stepped back with him. The hoop shook a little but I controlled it. We watched several others take their turn. "It must be boring for the duke," I whispered to Richard behind my fan.

"It isn't his favourite pastime." We saw Mr. and Mrs. Steven Drury approach the royal presence.

"Do we acknowledge them?" We watched Julia curtsy low.

Richard's voice was low. "A bow if we have to. If we cut them here, it will only create gossip but we don't have to speak to them. It should be easy enough to avoid them in this press without too much comment. Besides, all you have to do is swing round and you'll bowl them over like skittles."

That made me smile but I managed not to laugh. To do so as the Drurys were carefully retreating would have been to invite the comments we were anxious to avoid. I suspected Richard of trying to overset me on purpose but when I glanced at him, all I saw was bland boredom.

Lizzie and Ruth both joined us, buzzing with their triumph and equally anxious to avoid the Drurys. Ruth had never seen Steven's wife before and she wasn't impressed. "Cold, isn't she?"

"You should have seen her with Richard." I remembered how they looked together, the frostiness they exuded. "They would have frozen fire at twenty paces." Richard glanced at me and smiled as Ruth studied him doubtfully but he didn't mind in the least. He had not cared for Julia when they had been betrothed and now he loathed her.

Similarly, Steven held no attraction for me any more. He'd courted me in Devonshire and Yorkshire and I had for a short time taken him seriously but his naked ambition became more apparent as time passed. Then I had fallen in love with Richard and recognised my feelings for Steven for what they were—infatuation born of desperation. Steven Drury had resented it and probably still did, despite bagging an heiress. He could now afford all the things he had wanted through me.

He looked handsome these days, dressed in the finest clothes, at the height of fashion but to my prejudiced eyes, Richard made by far the better figure. Richard had finer taste and his natural elegance enhanced it. The ease he demonstrated in this setting gave him the air of belonging that Steven didn't have. Richard also possessed a quality that

made people look, a personal allure I have observed in some, which I believe is bestowed at birth. Gervase had it too but Richard had taken what he was born with and developed it. I had none of it but people took notice of me now because of him.

The Drurys glanced at us but walked off in the opposite direction, towards the valiant quartet, still playing its heart out, with as little result. We didn't need to acknowledge them after all. A great relief to me but a source of indifference to my husband.

We stayed for a while now my dreaded presentation was over, talking and being introduced to a great many people. Lady Southwood introduced me to those of her friends and acquaintances who were there and I wondered how I would remember them all. I tried hard to commit their faces to memory. Some stared at me curiously, some welcomed me in a generous way and all the time Richard remained by my side, as he had promised.

One or two asked about the Drurys but we said nothing of note about them. As far as society was concerned, Julia was the girl who had insulted Richard by running off with a penniless curate while she was contracted to marry him, the fault all on her side. They weren't aware of the suddenness with which we had fallen in love, nor of my previous involvement with Steven.

We had been on our feet for a long time and I wore new shoes that pinched my toes. The heat and the tightness of my stays added to my discomfort but I pinned a smile on my face and continued to exchange small talk.

We walked into the other rooms but I was concentrating on staying upright and didn't notice anything but the heat. As we went through to another chamber, I swayed and would have fallen if Richard hadn't caught me under my elbow and found a nearby chair. He seated me quickly, before anyone noticed my distress, then took my fan and spread it with a practised crack. I smiled at him with gratitude as he fanned me.

"I think," he said, after one look at my face, "I shall take you home. When you're ready to go out to the carriage, let me know." He beckoned a footman over and asked for our carriage to be brought. I watched the man scuttle away, still feeling dreamy. "How do you feel now?" A note of anxiety shaded his voice but he still wore his expression of polite boredom so no one would have noticed anything amiss.

"A little dizzy. It's just the heat—" I stopped, struck by a sudden realisation. No, it couldn't be that.

His polite smile turned into one of tenderness when he gazed down at me. "I wondered when you'd realise." His voice was a low, intimate murmur, out of place in this desperately public arena. I'd missed a month's courses, but I often did so, except—except that since my marriage I had not. Regular intimacy had seemed to make me more regular in other ways, too. I had merely assumed I was reverting to my old pattern, never daring to hope that I had taken.

With great presence of mind, I kept my smile and let my stays hold me upright, leaving me to concentrate on breathing steadily. Gervase approached us and said I was looking pale. "Rose isn't feeling too well," Richard told him. "I

hope you don't mind us taking the carriage home. Would you like us to send it back for you?"

Gervase shook his head, still regarding at me with concern. He had his back to the room, so he let his natural feeling show but when he turned away, his face was smooth and untroubled, like his brother's. A life spent living scandals in the public eye had given the brothers superb control over their facial expressions. "After this heat, I'd prefer to walk back to my lodgings for the fresh air. I'm not surprised Rose isn't well. Two ladies have fainted dead away in the queue and attendants had to revive them with strong spirits."

Richard chuckled. "Are you sure it wasn't the spirits they were after all along?"

The footman came back and told us the carriage waited outside. Leaving Gervase to explain the situation to Lord and Lady Southwood, Richard helped me out and into the vehicle, supporting me much more firmly than he appeared to be doing.

I had done it. I was a fully fledged member of polite society. But that wasn't the thought uppermost in my mind now.

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Chapter Seven

When we got home, Richard immediately sent for Nichols. She helped me, undress me much more quickly than I'd been dressed earlier. She didn't seem concerned and spoke little, for which I was grateful because I still felt dizzy, though the fresh air had helped to revive me on the way home. She washed and brushed the powder out of my hair and helped me into a nightrail. I went to bed. Our evening was full of engagements and I hoped to be well enough by then to attend.

I slept for two hours and when I awoke I saw Richard sitting in a chair by the fire. We exchanged a smile and he came to sit on the side of the bed. He took my hand in his and we stared at each other in silence for a while.

"This is the first time I've seen you in a nightrail for nearly two months," he said. "And it isn't for the usual reason."

I took my lower lip between my teeth. "I thought—with all the anxiety and excitement, perhaps—"

He shook his head, still smiling. "Since we married you have worn your nightrail for the same week every month. You haven't missed once. We've travelled through Europe, been shot at, lost a wheel off the coach and nothing caused you to change your habit." He took a breath. "I think we can safely assume you're in the family way, my precious love." He bent to kiss me, so gently he made me *feel* precious.

I sat up and put my arms around him, felt the warmth of him through his shirtsleeves and rested my head on his shoulder. "When did you suspect?"

"When I counted up, the day before yesterday." He put his hand on my back and slid it up into my hair, holding me safe.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I could have been wrong." He drew back. My eyes were wet and he drew his thumb under one, wiping away the tear, then slipped his arm back around my waist. "But after today, I think we can be sure, don't you?"

I nodded, still too full to speak. When I'd regained control of my wayward emotions, I asked him if he was pleased. "Mostly. I know we have to but I'm concerned for you. You must take care now and not do too much."

"I'll manage. I'm sure it was the heat today and the fact that I didn't have much to eat before we came. I'm not ill, my love, just *enceinte*."

He kissed me again. "It changes our plans a little, doesn't it?"

"Why? You don't want to spirit me away to the country, do you?" Concern filled me that he might be one of those men who won't let their wives turn a hair for nine months. That would drive me crazy.

"Far from it. The best care is available here in London. Should you object to a man-midwife, as well as the usual attendants? They have an excellent reputation but we should bespeak one soon if we decide on it."

The thought of a man seeing me in the state I'd seen Martha in a couple of times made me pause but Richard was

right; this new kind of birth attendant would bring the best care. They were trying to take the birthing chamber out of the Middle Ages, to apply some much needed science and most people who could afford it were coming to prefer the man-midwife.

I made up my mind. "If I like him. But don't you mind? Wouldn't you object to a man seeing me like that?"

"No more than I mind Carier attending you when you're ill." He lifted his hand from my waist and brushed my cheek with his finger. "I love you so much. I couldn't bear it if you were in any danger through this. Through me."

I smiled, feeling much happier than he did at this, now I was getting used to the idea. "I've seen more births than you have, I'll wager. It seems to be hard work but I've never been afraid of that. I love you, too and it makes me so happy I can do this for you." I kissed him. "I'll take care, I promise."

He smiled tenderly. "We'll stay in the house in Hampstead. Or our own, here in town. And one more thing—"

"Anything."

"I don't think we should tell anyone yet."

I was shocked. "Certainly not." We could easily be mistaken, after all but I knew inside that he was right. I would spend the next eight months in company.

"I don't want my mother to know yet." His arms settled around me, mine around him. "If she finds out before we've found somewhere else to live in London she's bound to insist we stay here. She has lots of good arguments on her side but I want to see you established and happy somewhere else, not under her jurisdiction."

I saw his point immediately. It would suit Lady Southwood if the child was born in Southwood House. Once we had charge of the new heir, we wouldn't be allowed to escape so easily. However if we moved earlier, or at least put matters in train before we told her, she couldn't object quite so easily.

"Shall I pray for a boy?" Something else occurred to me. "Or two?"

He stared, dumbstruck. The possibility of twins couldn't have occurred to him yet. Richard and Gervase were not the first twins in the family, so the chances were strong. I didn't tell him my mother had been a twin. Her sibling had died at birth. He gazed at my face, fear in his eyes. "Dear God, I hope not. Not the first time, not twins."

I remembered his mother's constant reminders that Richard and Gervase were the main cause of her constant ill health and I felt sick. Not because I believed her but because of what it might do to Richard's confidence, to find out I was to go through the same ordeal.

I kept my arms around him, looking at him determinedly. "I'm bigger than your mother, taller and probably stronger. And worry is bad for me, so I won't." I stopped, remembering some of my own history. This wasn't the time to remind him my own mother had died giving birth to my brother Ian—currently notable by his absence. He'd retreated to his studies in Oxford, something he frequently did to avoid situations he disliked. "Richard, if I promise to take the greatest care, will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Don't be a stranger to this bed. I know we've talked about it before but I need you now and neither of us can manage for nine days much less nine months without—" Blushing, I broke off.

His expression lightened and he smiled down at me. "I don't intend to give anything up unless I'm ordered to do so by the midwives. I don't think that's likely." He laughed a little when he saw my alarm. "When a man has married expressly to beget an heir, then he may quit his wife's bed in relief but we didn't marry for that. I've no intention of going anywhere else."

I remembered our conversation of the other day and I held him a little closer. "Not even when I'm as big as a house?"

"Not even then." He kissed me more deeply.

I responded to his kiss, felt a glow inside. There was some time before we had to dress for dinner. "Prove it." I began to undo the buttons on his waistcoat. "We should celebrate."

He laughed. "So we should." I pulled the nightgown over my head and threw back the covers for him to join me. Richard undressed quickly, looking at me all the while. When he came to bed, he ran his hand gently over my stomach but said nothing more. He didn't need to. I put my hand over his and he slipped his other arm around my shoulders and drew me close. His kiss held such passion it took my breath away, delving into my mouth to explore and caress.

I needn't have worried. Richard's ardour wasn't tinged by any concern. His loving was as all-consuming as ever. He forgot everything else when we made love and so did I, joining him in our own private world where nothing else

existed. He caressed me into joy, kissed my mouth, my throat and my breasts, loved me with his voice and his body. Sometimes I would control our lovemaking but not today. I shuddered when his lips touched my stomach, opened my legs wider for him when he pushed his shoulders between them and gave me the most intimate kiss of all. He didn't relent, using his talented tongue and fingers to drive me up, high and fast, not stopping when I cried out as I came, but he drank from me and still seemed thirsty for more, lapping me up until I grew so sensitive I couldn't bear it any longer. I squirmed away from him, urging him back up to enter me.

He paused above me, supported by his elbows, his shaft so close to my opening one breath would unite us. His eyes, burning with passion, but with more, with love, met mine. "I love you, I'll always love you and to do this for me means all the world."

"For us," I whispered as he slid his body into mine.

We were everything to each other, husband and wife, lovers, friends, and united in passion, even closer. He drove hard inside me and I knew this to be a new act for us, no longer any pressure to procreate, but a celebration and a pure act of love. I arched up to him and heard his soft groan as he thrust even deeper, but at that point I didn't care. Tingles suffused me and I felt my peak tantalising me, close but not there until, at last, the world exploded in a shower of light, and I clutched Richard as I rode out the waves.

Gasping my name, he reached his ultimate pinnacle of joy just after mine, and lay over me for a scant few seconds before rolling away, only to take me in his arms and hold me

tight as the clouds drifted away and we came back to ourselves once more. We lay together, happy in the familiarity and closeness of our bodies, absorbing our news and setting it in its rightful place in our minds.

Richard chuckled. "In some ways, I want to tell everyone, to show how clever you are. It must be the little boy in me saying 'look what we did'."

It made me laugh, to think of him as a little boy. "I'm so happy. I can do something for you at last, something you really need. For us." I leaned up on one elbow, kissed him, then stayed to look at him, caught by his expression. He gazed at me tenderly, smiled sweetly, an expression few people were ever privileged enough to witness.

"I want you to myself, Rose. I'll get things under way quickly. We'll have our own establishment ready for next season. It will mean a lot of shopping but I've never noticed an aversion to that in you." His smile turned to a chuckle; I'd spent more money than I dreamed of in recent months.

"I'll enjoy that."

"I know."

"What about Gervase? Won't he realise something's different?"

Richard frowned. "Not necessarily. We tend to feel each other's close proximity and hurts, not pleasures, except for the occasional extreme emotion. But there's no reason why we shouldn't tell him, if you agree."

"I think we should. If he suspects something, he'll ask and if he knows, then he'll also understand we want to keep it to ourselves for a while."

"He's coming to dinner tonight. We'll tell him then."

* * * *

We asked for Gervase to be sent up to our sitting room before he went to the main drawing room and we told him there. He embraced me warmly and shook Richard's hand, delighted by the news, and readily agreed to keep it to himself for the time being. "We're fairly sure," I told him, "but not entirely."

"And we want to find our own house," Richard added.

Gervase's eyes gleamed in amusement. "Planning your escape, eh?"

Richard answered with a grin of his own. "Wouldn't you? You spent twelve years skulking in India. I always thought the fact you made a fortune there was only incidental." A trifle unfair but he made his point.

During the next week, we viewed several houses. They were all much smaller than Southwood House and much more to my taste. We chose one to our liking in fashionable Brook Street. My parents-in-law disapproved but didn't object too strenuously, so we continued with the acquisition of the lease. When we viewed the houses, it reminded me forcibly of another time when we had viewed an empty house before we were married and I knew he thought of it, too, although neither of us said anything. We didn't need to.

I began to doubt I was pregnant. I felt no different than normal. I'd heard women got sick in the first few months but I didn't, nor did I look any different. I don't know what I'd expected but it wasn't this.

The only other person I let into the secret was Nichols. She had guessed, as she, too, could count but she also agreed to say nothing for the time being. The first few months of pregnancy were the most risky and I didn't want anyone to know until I was sure. As far as we could tell, the baby was due in June, when the season would be over. I felt confident I could carry a child but the birthing process with all its attendant pains and indignities was something I dreaded. I'd helped Martha with two of her three births and although she assured me they had been easy, I saw nothing easy about them. It was something I didn't tell people, as an unmarried woman in the birthing chamber wasn't approved of but the opportunity to help had been irresistible. Now it was my turn.

A few days after we'd told Gervase, I was sitting over an early breakfast, prior to going shopping with Lizzie, when a footman brought a note was to me. It had been delivered by hand. I didn't recognise the writing. I slit it open and began to read.

Dear Lady Strang,

It is a long time since we met last, is it not? So many things have happened since then. I have been married to my dear wife for nearly a year now but seeing you at Court reminded me what we once meant to each other. Allow me to say how lovely you looked, so different from the shy girl of our Exeter days.

My wife and I have no reason to feel animosity towards you now, in fact, the opposite, as we were brought together by you. We would like to be comfortable in your presence and now that we are members of the same exalted society, we

are bound to run into each other from time to time. I would like to be assured that you mean no insult to my wife when we meet and that you will acknowledge us with gentility, if not cordiality, is my dearest hope. Therefore, I would request a private meeting between us, to clear the air. I hope you can accede to this request, in the name of past friendship.

Yours etc.

Steven Drury.

His signature had acquired a new flourish and someone else must have addressed the missive for him, otherwise, on recognising his handwriting I might well have consigned the note to the fire and not read it at all. I had cause to know his writing. Once open, I read it. At first I felt indignant and almost burned the note and thought no more about it but then I decided to find Richard.

He was dressing, sitting in shirtsleeves and breeches at his dressing table with only Carier in attendance. He read the note, his face grim. He made to crumple it but then looked up at my face and sat back. "I know that look. What are you thinking?"

Carier found a chair for me and I thanked him with a smile. "All society knows animosity lies between us and the Drurys. We could make a spectacle of ourselves—or they could." He nodded. "This would give us an opportunity to put it behind us. And we could watch them better, if their guard is down."

"So you don't take the note at face value?" He tapped the paper with one beautifully manicured hand. The paper quivered, then stilled.

I shook my head. "Not for one minute." He made a small sound that sounded suspiciously like laughter but he didn't interrupt me. "They're both capable of bearing a grudge. What if we don't let them see how it is between us? Let them think the dynastic, formal element has taken over?"

He put one finger to his lips, then took it away again. "Wouldn't that encourage them to make a move?"

"But we would know what sort of move, wouldn't we? With luck, they'd concentrate on that instead of anything more dangerous."

That caught his attention and a smile quirked his lips. "You do know your strategic thinkers, don't you? Did you read Doria while we were in Italy?"

"I may have done but I'm more familiar with Machiavelli."

He let out a short laugh. "Yes, it shows." He paused, then read the note through again while he thought about my proposal. "It would be safer and anything which puts you out of danger, my love, especially at this time—" He paused and looked guiltily at me when I glanced at Carier, coming back into the room with a gleaming waistcoat. "He knows," confessed my husband.

Carier bowed. "I offer my felicitations. I can assure you, my lady, it will go no further."

"I know." I smiled at him. "Thank you, Carier." I brought my attention back to Richard.

"So shall we ask them to call?"

"Not until after Lizzie's coming-out ball. They won't be there and I'd like to concentrate on that and ... other things for now. I'll write to them, shall I?"

He took my hand and kissed it. "If you don't mind. No, on second thought"—his eyes gleamed—"ask Brangwyn to write." I saw his point and agreed with him.

George Brangwyn was fitting in well, coordinating our appointments and informing us where we should be and when. It was much easier to let him schedule everything and all we had to do was inform him which functions interested us and which did not.

Lady Southwood continued to complain about our bedroom rule. "It puts out the whole routine of the house," she said to Richard one afternoon over tea, between guests. "The servants have to wait to service your room until you have left it. It destroys their routine and I like them to work to a routine that I set. They are talking. The details of your personal habits will be all around London by now."

That was shrewd. Richard hated having his private life discussed in public. But he showed her none of this, raising a languid eyebrow and leaning back in his chair. "Dismiss them. The rumours and the servants. I'm afraid the rule is immutable, madam."

"I can overrule you, at least in this house. I may send a maid in anyway." She met his gaze fearlessly but he was past her jurisdiction now.

"If you do, I will personally chase them out, so it depends how many hysterical maids you think you can cope with. You know I prefer not to wear nightshirts." His words were lightly drawled but the light in his eyes showed he meant it.

"Besides, you won't have to put up with us for much longer."

She drew herself up. "You are welcome in this house for as long as you choose to stay in it." The stiffness of her tone belied her words.

"I appreciate your kind offer, but I think the sooner we have a separate establishment, the more comfortable we will all be."

I had to agree with my husband. I was growing to hate this house.

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Chapter Eight

Richard came to see me in the morning room when I had just finished reading the letter Brangwyn had written to the Drurys. I was surprised to see him. "Why, I thought you'd be in the coffee house."

"I decided to come home and see you instead." He gave me a fond smile. "Perhaps I'll go out again in a little while." He held his hand out for the letter and Brangwyn gave it to him.

While Richard scanned the letter, I asked, "You're a Welshman, Brangwyn. Whereabouts do you come from?"

"In the south, my lady, near Swansea." He had the faintest lilt in his voice. "But I've spent more time away from home."

"Working?"

"Indeed, my lady. First as a tutor on the Grand Tour, now a secretary."

Richard gave him a wry grin. "I didn't take the least bit of notice of my tutor on the Tour. Poor man, I led him a crazy dance."

"I got to see things that I couldn't have otherwise seen, sir." Brangwyn's dark eyes gazed into the distance and he smiled, then looked back at me. "I am content."

"Well, I have no parliamentary aims," Richard reminded him. "So the minute you get a better offer, you must come and tell me."

"Yes, my lord."

Richard gave Brangwyn the letter and he bowed. Noiselessly he left the room to seal and send it. Richard perched on the edge of the large desk. "He'll do well."

"Indeed." It had been nearly three weeks since we discovered Lucy Forder's corpse and I had heard little of the matter. I didn't like to bring the subject up, but now was as good a time as any. "Is there any news about poor Lucy?"

He lifted a brow. "She's still dead." He sighed. "I'm sorry. No, there is no news. Enquiries take time, especially when I have to put queries over Europe." He nodded when he saw my surprise. "It seems they travelled. I've put enquiries in train and so far, nothing, although that is news in itself. We know where she didn't spend any time."

"So we wait." I picked up another note. I wanted to change the subject as quickly as I could, dispel that melancholy I had brought to his face. "Martha wrote to me. She says she's snowed under with preparations for the coming-out ball. She wants me to help."

"I'd rather you didn't. Not now. This is your first pregnancy and we have no idea how it will affect you. You came close to fainting away at St. James' and I won't have it happen again if I can prevent it."

I agreed with him. So far the faintness and a tenderness in my body were my only symptoms but he was right. A first pregnancy was venturing into the unknown. Besides, Martha had become too used to having me around to help her in the past. I would not become her adjunct in the future.

The autumn sun streamed through the window, hit the great ruby on my finger and set it winking. "I was expected to

be the spinster aunt. Martha would have liked me to stay at home and help her. Especially now."

He reached for my hand. "Five-and-twenty was no age to fall into flat despair." He looked at me, holding me with his gaze. "I was lucky to get you."

I laughed, still not used to thinking of myself as a society "beauty" the gossip-rags insisted I was. "Exeter society had me for years and they didn't think so."

He made a sound of derision. "Pearls before swine." His smile showed me the sincerity of his words.

* * * *

The gown I chose for the coming-out ball was much more to my taste than the magnificent presentation gown. This was a French sacque, tight in the bodice and full in the skirt, in apple green brocade, embroidered, flounced and pinked, with a matching petticoat similarly embellished. The lace at my elbows and on my bodice was from Brussels, the fan an exquisitely delicate French creation. Nichols dressed and powdered my hair, then laced me into the gown and I looked in the mirror and saw the great lady I was only just beginning to be familiar with.

Richard entered on his knock, bearing a long box. "I knew you were wearing green. I asked Nichols. So I got these for you, if you should like them."

He'd promised me emeralds in Venice. Now here they were in abundance, fashioned into a beautiful parure, the pieces so light and delicate they looked ethereal. The brilliant-cut small diamonds that embellished the green stones flashed when I

moved the box. The design was of intertwining ribbons and bows, fluid and fragile.

I lifted the necklace and he helped me put it on. I watched the transformation in the mirror. Nichols pinned the large brooch on my stomacher and the aigrette in my hair while I hooked in the earrings.

The maid who assisted Nichols when I dressed *en grande toilette* left. Richard came up behind me as I stood before the large mirror. "You know why I'm giving you these?" He took the edge of my earlobe gently between his teeth before releasing it.

"Yes." I met his clear gaze in the mirror.

"Because I love you." He slipped his hands about my waist. "And because you're so brave and so clever." He kissed my neck.

It had taken some time before I could accustom myself to such intimacies in front of Nichols. "It took both of us. Perhaps I should give you something."

"You already have." When I turned to face him, Nichols slipped quietly out of the room, and I could kiss him properly without holding back. If it had been any other ball, we would have stayed at home.

We went down to the carriage together. I knew that I looked at my best. His attention had given me a glow not even the emeralds could better. Even Lord Southwood noticed it. "I'm not a ladies' man, my dear, but damn me if I was, you'd be the sort I'd choose." I took it as a compliment. I knew I could make my best effort because nothing would eclipse Lizzie on this night, her night.

Although this wasn't the season proper, the ball at Hareton House was successful enough to be voted a sad crush. Enough of a stir had been created about the Golightly girls for some people to make a special visit to the Metropolis for the occasion.

Most of our particular friends were there; the Flemings, Louisa Crich, Freddy Thwaite sat or stood together, so we joined them. Freddy, a marvellous dark, earthy foil to Richard's ethereal sensuousness, was Richard's particular friend. His compliments were outrageous but I didn't care. I knew he told everybody the same things.

Martha had cleared the furniture from her largest saloon to use as a ballroom and had opened all the large rooms on the first floor for the use of her guests. The house dazzled with more candles than she would use in six months in the old Manor House, glinting off the gilded plasterwork above the large paintings, turning the guests into glittering icons.

Richard, standing behind the sofa with Freddy and amusing himself by making acid comments about some of the guests, stopped and his hand gripped my shoulder.

The warning came just in time. Coming toward us, smiling sweetly, was Eustacia Terry. Richard and Freddy made short bows and she curtsied to us. "So charming of dear Lady Hareton to invite us." Eustacia's smile was beatific. "We didn't know if we could come but we're out of mourning now, so Mama said 'why not?'."

"Why not indeed?" Richard's tones were urbane, the edge in his voice inaudible to those who didn't know him well. "You

travelled all the way from Devonshire for this?" One wave of his elegant hand indicated the room and its inhabitants.

Miss Terry beamed. "Indeed, sir. I would have gone a lot farther for it, too."

"Your first *ton* party?" Freddy enquired.

"Oh, Lord Thwaite, how pleasant to see you again. Yes, our first party in London, the first of many, we hope."

"That will depend on many things." Richard's voice held no particular interest but I knew he was speculating whether to give them their cong   or not. To be cut by Viscount Strang here, in the heart of the *ton*, would be death to their social hopes but it was doubtful if Miss Terry realised it. He'd denigrated himself in her eyes by marrying me, a despised neighbour. She compounded her mistake by saying, "I must say, Rose, you're looking as fine as fivepence." I nodded coldly.

"A great deal more than fivepence." Richard moved, as did Freddy, so I wouldn't have to turn my head to look at them. Eustacia's pale eyes fixed on my jewellery. With an effort, she tore her avid gaze away and saw Richard watching her with some amusement. "Would you care to dance, Miss Terry?" He gave her his most enchanting smile. "Or are you completely bespoken for this evening?"

She flushed, and dropped her eyelids, gazing up at him through her lashes. "I'm honoured, sir."

"Oh, the honour is mine entirely." He held out his hand, palm down, for her to lay her own on the back of it.

Richard was an exquisite dancer, born to it with a natural elegance he'd worked hard to enhance over the years. They

were in time for the last of the minuets. People watched this country girl who had taken Richard's fancy as he guided her through the steps, her naïve efforts at flirtation in response to his graceful approaches and I saw the speculation. Ladies gossiped behind their fans, surreptitious glances cast to where I sat serenely next to Caroline. I had nothing to fear here. Eustacia was fair haired, with pale blue, protuberant eyes and a small chin. She hadn't the vivacity of my sister Lizzie, nor the intelligence Richard looked for in a woman. I wondered why he'd chosen to be kind to her. Perhaps it was because of the injustice we had done to her in the past, or maybe he felt sorry for her.

He brought her back to where her mother stood with us and relinquished her to the care of Freddy, who promptly drew her onto the floor for the next dance.

After that, she didn't want for partners. Once Richard and Freddy, both leaders of fashion, had shown their approval, other men came forward and claimed her hand until she beamed with attention and pride. When we went in to supper, she positively glowed. Lizzie joined us, accepting Gervase's support. "You're a success."

Eustacia, holding Freddy's arm in a strong clasp, was joyful. "I didn't think it would be so easy. Although Mama always said I could do it."

Richard had done it by starting the ball rolling, though I still couldn't work out why. He'd never liked Eustacia, only deterred from cutting her publicly when I pleaded with him. She had not been kind to me in the past, singling me out for ridicule, enough to make Richard determined to punish her.

Now, it seemed, he was reconciled to her. I didn't know whether to be happy or sad.

He joined me, put his hand on my elbow and steered me to a seat. As he handed me a glass, he murmured, "Better now?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I thought you were going to faint. You went pale."

I took a sip from my glass. "I can't stand too long at present. Walking, dancing I'm fine, but standing seems to be a problem."

He found a chair, a little removed from most people and we had our first opportunity for a private word. I made the most of it. "Will you let Miss Terry become fashionable?"

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Within limits." He glanced at me. "Didn't you guess? I paid her just enough attention to draw people to her. But it will be remembered that it was my approval which started it all." I watched Eustacia, surrounded by a group of young men, trying her skills at flirting.

I understood then. By paying her that attention, he could bring it to a close as quickly as he'd started it. If she put a foot wrong, he would cut her, make it clear she no longer amused him. I caught my breath. "Machiavelli."

"Thank you, my sweet."

I sipped the ice-cold wine. "She'll enjoy it."

"It's of supreme indifference to me whether she enjoys it or not. But she had better behave herself."

I glanced around the supper room and saw Lizzie and Ruth. "My sisters don't want for admirers."

"Neither do you. I'll have to give you up to yours pretty soon."

"Foolish."

"Not at all, my sweet. You are as much a success as they are." He glanced down, his polite smile turning to fondness.

"A hit."

"Your sister's ball was a great success," said Lady Southwood, a few mornings later at breakfast.

My reply was cautious. "It seems to have been judged so."

"And your sisters made a sensation."

"I'm happy for them."

Richard joined us at the table with a laden plate. "But it seems that they like their beauties in threes. Rose hasn't escaped notice."

Lord Southwood smiled. "I should think she would not." I glanced up and caught Maria's sympathetic gaze. I thought she might have a streak of shyness herself.

"I was lucky to get her," he continued. Lady Southwood dropped her close regard of me. She disliked any declaration of affection and this came perilously close.

Richard glanced at his mother. "You expressed some concern about the Drurys, ma'am. I agree with you, we don't want to become the subject of gossip. So we've arranged to see them here, to clear the air."

Her ladyship frowned, then, remembering it would leave lines in her immaculate maquillage, deliberately raised her eyebrows to smooth her brow once more. "It might be best if we weren't seen to be at odds. Whatever they did, or tried to do to you, we don't want the rest of the world knowing."

"We asked them to call at midday. I thought we would use the red parlour."

"Of course. I'll see that tea is served and you're not disturbed."

They arrived at mid-day, precisely on time. We waited for them in the red parlour, a dauntingly formal room, full of stiff-backed chairs and elaborate woodcarving, a relic of the previous generation. We didn't use it much.

I found it a shock to see Steven close, even after all this time. Darkly handsome in deep red velvet, he bowed deeply. He chose to meet my gaze as he rose. I didn't look away, meeting it with a cool look of my own. He glanced at Richard and made his bow. Richard watched, waiting to see me seated. Julia was as cool and frosty as her husband was darkly brooding.

I poured tea and we exchanged civilities like any other people who are mere acquaintances until Julia Drury asked if our bride trip had been pleasant.

Then Richard did pay attention to her. "Mostly." He leaned back in his chair, seemingly at ease, a feat in these rigid seats. "However one incident disturbed us and caused considerable inconvenience to my brother." He waited.

Julia stared at Steven meaningfully. He drew a deep breath. "We regret the occurrence of the incident intensely. It was arranged while we were on our bride trip. We had not had time to consider the foolishness of such an action and by the time we realised the consequences, we could not find the man to reverse the proposal." He didn't look at us while he made his speech. I wondered how she'd compelled him to do

it. So he described employing a paid assassin to kill us on our honeymoon. We had only escaped by using resources of our own, and Gervase had suffered a bullet in the shoulder because of their machinations. I would not forgive that easily, if at all.

"I see." Richard sat at his ease but perfectly still. When I handed Steven his tea-dish, his hand brushed mine, I was sure on purpose. I glanced at him, startled, but I said nothing and moved back to my seat.

"So you say you did it in the heat of the moment?" Richard continued smoothly. Unlike Steven, whose red velvet clashed with the different red of the parlour, he wore darkest green, in dull ribbed silk which reflected nothing but looked marvellous against the upholstery of his chair. A great emerald flashed on his finger as he shifted his hand.

A shadow crossed Steven's handsome face. "We regret it now. It was a foolish thing to do. The man exceeded his authority and he has been admonished for it."

"I thought we admonished him enough." Richard's cool answer gave me pause. A shiver passed through me when I remembered what we'd done to Jeffries.

"You rendered him useless." Julia's cut-glass voice chilled the air around her.

"Do you usually have an assassin in your pay?" Richard's tone was so casual it sounded as though he was asking about her hairdresser.

Julia frowned. "Not at all. This was an exceptional circumstance."

Richard said nothing for a time, just studied her consideringly. "I could have married you." His voice carried no emotion, no challenge.

She made a sound of exasperation. "You *should* have married me. What you did was foolish."

Richard seemed to agree with her. "Foolish and sheer madness." He paused. "I haven't regretted it for a minute."

Steven and I might have left the room, so little notice was taken of us. I sat quietly and sipped my tea, watching Steven covertly while Richard addressed his erstwhile betrothed.

"We could have made things extremely difficult for you." Julia's fine gown rustled as she turned to put down her half-empty tea-dish.

"You were the ones who eloped," Richard reminded her.

Julia stared at her husband with a curl to her thin mouth that looked like contempt. "If we had kept our heads, you would have been the ones to elope."

Richard confirmed it. "I'd never have proposed to you had I been thinking properly. We would not have suited and once I got to know you better, I realised it."

Julia regarded Steven in a warmer way, if she could ever be said to look warmly. "I, too, have never regretted it." She reached to take his hand, then dropped it again when Steven smiled at her. The whole gesture seemed like an afterthought, uncomfortably insincere.

Steven's voice sounded warm in comparison. "We wish to assure you such a thing will not happen again."

Richard smiled at him. "That's a rash promise. What if a highwayman should take it into his head to shoot at me? Would you be responsible for that?"

Steven sounded exasperated. "No, of course not."

Richard put a finger to his lips and frowned. "You're assuring us that you won't make such an attempt again?"

Julia was quick to respond. "We can't say we made such an attempt. We did something foolish in the heat of the moment, then found ourselves unable to correct it, that's all."

"Of course." It didn't matter what form the words took, so long as the meaning was clear. "But you wouldn't dream of doing it again." He smiled, without humour or friendliness.

"No," said Julia.

"Thank you." Richard stood and crossed the room to the window but he kept our guests under observation, and they were forced to move their heads as he strolled. "We progress. We asked you here today because we have no wish to become a spectacle for the idle and if we cut each other in public, this will necessarily happen. Do you agree?"

Julia watched him eyes as cold as a snake's. "We have no reason to continue. After all, you brought Steven and me together."

Richard didn't comment. I knew he found it anathema to show his private emotions in front of two people he had every reason to hold in dislike. He appeared perfectly at ease, the image of the aristocrat at leisure, no hint of any emotion about him. He gazed at his former betrothed. She met his gaze coolly. There was one woman I need never feel jealousy about and she sat in this room.

"You want a quiet life?" Steven's voice verged on the sneering.

Richard turned his gaze to him. "I don't think unnecessary antagonism should be promoted. We all have more important matters to deal with. But if you wish, we can continue. I'm perfectly indifferent to it. I'm doing this for my family, not myself."

Steven shrugged with every appearance of unconcern but turned away from my husband to look at me with an expression I couldn't fathom and which I chose to disregard. Pity? Love? Did he still imagine some feelings for me then, or was it as much of a sham as it had always been? "You're looking well, Rose."

I hadn't looked for such a remark and I didn't care for his opinion but I thanked him for the compliment and ventured nothing of my own.

The exchange had not escaped Richard. "So we will not cut each other in public and we will not engage in private vendettas?" He moved from his place by the window and went back to his chair.

Steven stood, then helped Julia to her feet. Standing, her hand placed lightly on his red coat sleeve, she looked like one of the marble statues from Hareton Abbey, except, of course, she was clothed. "Indeed I would prefer a warmer connection but I fear that would be too much to ask," Steven said smoothly. Julia shot her husband a poisonous look but he met it with a bland smile.

They bowed and left. Richard made sure there was a footman outside to escort them to the door, then came back. When he sat down again, his pose was far less studied.

He gave me a quizzical smile. "Do you believe them?"

"Not for a minute. He's up to some game of his own and I wouldn't trust her as far as I could see her."

"What do you think he was up to?"

I sipped my tea. "I'm not sure. Perhaps he wonders how we are now. He saw us before we married but he doesn't know how marriage is suiting us, how we're getting on together. Perhaps he thinks he can spite you by starting up with me again."

Richard frowned. "How do you feel about that?"

I was shocked. "There's only you, you know that."

He smiled at my vehemence. "I never tire of hearing it, my love. But *he* doesn't know it. Can you tolerate that kind of attention for a while? If you should be at all apprehensive, don't give it another thought but I rather thought Julia was putting out feelers to me."

"I didn't see anything but cold disregard in her."

"She didn't want you to." He shook his head. "No, it won't do. I don't want him anywhere near you. I nearly killed him because of what he tried to do to you before. I can't risk you like that again."

"But he didn't and by the time you reached him, he couldn't. I kicked blindly but I managed to reach the target pretty well, didn't I?" I gave him a mischievous grin.

"My sweet love, I can only pray I never displease you like that. Believe me, you would have caused him some extreme agony for some time. He doesn't distress you any more?"

"No. I feel nothing, not even dislike. They should deal well together."

"Not as well as we do."

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Chapter Nine

I grew increasingly busy, shopping and interviewing servants for the new house. October gave way to November and I became eager to see us in our own house.

One afternoon in the great drawing room, waiting for dinner guests, my mother-in-law began again with her persuasions for us to stay in Piccadilly. "I lived with my husband's family all the time. We felt they needed us nearby."

"They were old," Richard pointed out. "They started their family late. I prefer to retain my independence, if at all possible."

Lord Southwood studied his son, taking his measure. "Strang has a point, but I hope he has longer to wait than I did for the title."

His wife's head turned sharply to stare at him, eyes wide with alarm. "I should hope so. Really, my lord, there is no need to be so morbid. I merely wished to see my son and his wife well established, that is all."

"We won't be far away," Richard assured her, keeping his tone of reasonableness. "A short chair ride."

"And in the summer?"

Our plans for the summer were necessarily flexible now but Richard answered her without a blink. "They will include Eyton, naturally." His voice as frosty as his blue coat, he didn't say more to her than he needed to about our future plans.

"I'm glad to hear it." The blue gown Lady Southwood wore was royally hued, not reflecting the cold blue of her son's coat.

Richard bowed his acknowledgement.

"It might be for the best." Lord Southwood was a frank man and when he had anything to say would say it, occasionally giving way to bouts of temper which no one but Richard could stand up to, but in general he was more easygoing and less controlling than his wife. "Strang has become accustomed to having his own establishment in recent years and perhaps he would prefer it. It is usual, after all."

Grudgingly, Lady Southwood had to admit it was true but said she was only thinking of his welfare. It would have ended then had she not added, "I hope he has sense to keep clear of this Lucy Forder affair. I don't want to hear of you involved in that, Strang."

Richard faced her coolly. "Then I fear you are doomed to disappointment, ma'am. She was found in the house of Rose's aunt and I can't refuse my help in these circumstances. Please rest assured I'll try and keep our name out of it but no one is aware of the past connection except you, Gervase and Rose."

Lady Southwood cast a startled look to where I sat, as serene as I could manage. "You told your *wife*?"

I nodded. "I needed to know, considering the circumstances. If anything should come out about Richard's past involvement with her, I had to be prepared in case we have to scotch any rumours."

"Is there any reason why anyone should know?" Lady Southwood's eyes narrowed. Her husband gave her an apprehensive glance and I knew at once more secrets hid here. My heart beat a little faster and I drew a few deep breaths to control it.

"Not that we are aware of." Richard's attention was fixed on his mother now; he had seen something, too. "What is there for anyone to find out? Sixteen or more years ago you discovered me *in flagrante* with a maid and you sent her away. Hardly unusual, or something that would embarrass us if the story got out. Where did you send her, Mother, what did you do with her? Surely there's no harm in telling me now?" His eyes took on a sharper expression.

Lady Southwood assumed an air of hauteur. "What does it matter now? As you say, it happened a long time ago."

She couldn't deter Richard from discovering what he had yearned to find out half a lifetime ago. "I have asked you repeatedly since we discovered her body. I waited until Rose's presentation was over with, as you asked me, but now I insist on an answer. My affair with Lucy is long over and she used a different name by the time we found her. There is no reason to connect us. Enquiries about her recent behaviour have come up blank, so I need to trace her movements from the last time I saw her." I could see he was keeping his demeanour as frostily haughty as he could. His mother would not respond to emotional requests, but she might respond to reason. "You can tell me now, Mother. After all, she's dead," he added bitterly.

"Is this a proper topic of conversation for your wife?" Lady Southwood asked.

Immediately Richard turned to me. "Would you rather withdraw, Rose?"

Yes, *oh* yes. I shook my head. "Not at all. Only if you wish me to." He needed my support.

He smiled and walked to where I was sitting on a wide sofa and joined me, putting his hand lightly over mine but he addressed his mother. "What did you do with her?"

All through this his father was silent but now he came forward and stood between us, looking first at his wife and then at his son. "You said you wanted to marry her."

Richard didn't move. His hand on mine remained steady. "I would have listened to reason."

Lord Southwood regarded his son steadily. "People have done such things before and you were running wild at that time so we couldn't be sure you wouldn't do something rash. She came to us when she knew she was pregnant and we helped her."

Richard hand tightened on mine but I didn't move. He hadn't known, they hadn't told him; he'd told me once he didn't think he had any offspring from his many mistresses, might not be capable of fathering a child for all he knew. I felt apprehensively sick. "She was pregnant?" I repeated, since Richard didn't speak.

He and his mother stared at each other, white-faced, neither of them moving.

Lord Southwood stared at his wife then, his thick brows raised in surprise. "I told you to tell him at the time. I

assumed you had." That said volumes about the way husband and wife communicated.

She met her husband's anger with calmness. "I saw no point." She gazed at her son, expressionless. "When she left, you behaved like a—a servant. You forgot your position, forgot who you were. Any more news would have made it worse. You wouldn't have stopped until you'd found her."

"No, I wouldn't," Richard said then, every emotion leeching from his voice, nothing there to betray what he must be feeling. His hand still gripped mine.

"We sent her to France," his mother continued smoothly. "You had forgotten I have relatives there?" She was taunting him with her cleverness at a time when she had been a mature woman and he but a boy of fourteen. I began to understand why Richard had cut himself off from her so completely. "She was delivered safely and continued happily enough for a while, then she met a gamekeeper, Forder. There's a vogue for English gamekeepers in France. We provided her with a dowry and she married him. He took the children for his own."

Richard's voice tore the air. "*Children!*" It was as though everything he had held back flooded out in that one word.

His mother frowned, but not so much that it disturbed her perfect maquillage. "Twins," she explained briefly, carelessly.

"Dear God!" The diamond pin at his neck glittered as he forced himself to breathe.

I was probably the calmest person present, the whole affair seeming distant. "Where are they now?"

Lady Southwood shook her head. "We left them in married bliss. For all we knew, they were still there."

"Did you not remember the children were your own flesh and blood?" Richard asked, more quietly. His hand still gripped mine.

Lady Southwood looked disdainfully at him. "Mere sentiment. There must be any number of Kerre by-blows peopling the world by now. Don't you think you added to them yourself?"

"I was sure I hadn't." Even after a shock like this, his years of practice in self-control didn't desert him. "At least until now. Madam, I have always honoured my obligations. This affair sickens me."

I was surprised his father didn't rebuke him but he, too, was shocked. He couldn't have known until this moment that Richard hadn't been aware of the existence of the children. It was not the habit of the upper echelons of society to take a personal hand in their children's upbringing and I knew Richard and Gervase were not unusual in this. Lord Southwood remained silent, his lips tightly pressed together, his steady gaze on his wife.

"Richard, you were fourteen," his mother protested. It was the first time I had ever heard her use his given name. I felt him flinch, as though she'd struck him.

He spoke slowly. "I was old enough to get her pregnant. I prefer to take responsibility for my actions."

"You know now."

He stared to where his hand held mine, then released it with a polite smile of apology. I wanted to shake my hand to

restore the circulation but I let it lie, suffering the resulting pins and needles in silence. He returned his attention to his mother. "Yes, I know now. Where are the children these days?"

"How should I know?" She waved her hand irritably. "We gave the woman a good dowry on her marriage and that was the end of it as far as we were concerned. Was there no sign of them when she was found?"

"None," Richard replied. "But this time, madam, rest assured I will find them."

He stood, bowed to his parents and offered me his arm. I could do nothing but stand and take it. "You will, I hope, excuse us." He led me out of the room and to our own quarters, his manner stately and haughty.

The doorbell clanged. The dinner guests had arrived. No doubt our absence would be calmly excused.

We went into our private sitting room and Richard closed the door with great care before he finally gave way. Holding me tightly, he shook for a full minute, his head pressed to the side of mine. I couldn't see his face. I had only known him like this once before and I prayed I would never have to see him so again. Now his mother had brought this on him.

I didn't know what I could do for him other than this, sharing his loss, but I was shamefully glad he had not known. Whatever he'd said before, he might have married her if he'd known of her condition. Then I couldn't have had him. I despised myself for feeling so but I couldn't deny it.

Eventually he drew back and took both my hands in his with a gentleness that brought tears to my eyes. "My poor love, I'm so sorry."

"What for? You have nothing to be sorry for, Richard, it wasn't your doing."

He smiled at my slip. "It was all my doing." The smile left him. "You know I have to find them, don't you?"

"Of course but what will you do then?"

"Make sure they are well and provided for. What else?"

They would be fifteen or sixteen by now, coming into adulthood, maybe leading independent lives of their own. "I'm sorry you had to hear all that, Rose. If I'd had any inkling of what was to come I would have asked you to go."

"Why? Wouldn't you have wanted me to know?" I was indignant.

He smiled and shook his head. "I would have told you but more gently, not like that. You may have forgotten, my love, but you're carrying something I have every intention of taking the greatest care of."

I felt deeply touched by his concern. "I've not forgotten. I never forget that. But you come first, you always will and I'm glad I was with you. I wouldn't have liked you to learn all that on your own."

He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. "This makes no difference to my feelings about *our* child." He met my eyes with a searching look of concern. "Except perhaps intensifies it, makes me want to cherish you and the baby more."

I took him to a sofa so we could sit together. "When I heard, I thought—thank God," I confessed. "Because you might have married her. I'm sorry, my love, to be so selfish."

He put an arm around my shoulders. "I can't say what I would have done but looked at in that light—perhaps some good did come of it, for us at least."

"What was she like?"

"Who? Lucy?" I nodded. He pursed his lips. "Sixteen, older than me. Pretty, sweet, not bright. She believed me when I promised her the world, which made it all the harder when she was spirited away." He frowned, remembering back. "I sent enquiries into France via Mrs. Thompson but we were obviously not looking in the right place. I sent couriers everywhere. I would have gone, had I known, would have fetched her back and started the series of scandals Gervase and I have been famous for ever since."

"Did Gervase know?" I slipped away and went to the decanters on the sideboard. "Yes." He leaned back, watching as I picked up the brandy, pouring a small amount for me, a larger one for him. "At least, he knew about Lucy, though I don't think he knew about the pregnancy." He took the glass with a small smile and waited until I sat next to him again. "No, he didn't know, or he would have told me. At fourteen we were inseparable. I would have known for sure if he'd known."

He put down his glass and took my hand, tracing lines on the back of it with his finger. I gave him time to think, a quiet time to assimilate what we'd heard.

"Shall we bring Thompson's into it?" I asked eventually.

His voice was steady, reasoning. "It's my only hope. We have a network that stretches across the country and, in some cases, into the continent. Only Alicia and Carier need know the truth. To everyone else, finding these children will be just an extra task for them, for which they'll receive the usual bonus." The silence grew heavy.

The brandy must have done something to him. In a low, trembling voice, unlike his usual measured tones he cried, "My God! Twins!" His control shattered.

I drew him close, held him while he shook, felt his hot tears on my neck. All I could do was hold him, let him take his release and wait for him to come back to me. I was shocked to see this man of such courage and self-control break but I knew he needed this. His mother had betrayed him and his sense of duty. Her act represented years of sorrow, firmly locked away in the name of family, of convention, of expectation. And I was angry, so angry, that his mother had behaved in such a heartless way. Did the well-being of her son mean nothing to her? I already knew the answer. Family came first.

I held him, soothed him and while I tried to comfort him, I realised something else. When he had called me his *only* love, he meant it. I was all there was for him, his only emotional outlet, the only person he trusted enough to show this much of himself. The love of a child for his parents had long gone. It probably began to decay on the day they informed him of Lucy's fate instead of discussing it with him. And after many years spent apart, the rapport between Richard and Gervase was only tentatively re-establishing himself.

If I were gone, there would be no one for him. He would draw into himself more and more, until he left nothing outside. That must have been his intention when he proposed to Julia, to withdraw from hurt or anything else. His self-will was so great, he might have succeeded.

It worried me terribly but there was nothing I could do except take the responsibility he had given me and put him first in everything.

This grief must take its course. I could only hope that it would leave him washed clean, ready to cope. He held me with a grip that threatened to cut off my breath, his only sounds inarticulate cries of sorrow and anger.

When he had more control, he drew several deep, steadying breaths. After a time he leaned back, eyes closed and stayed still for a while, restoring himself, carefully putting everything back in its place. It took some time but then he opened his eyes to look at me, his lips curving into something that was both a smile and an apology.

I held up my hand briefly. "Don't even *think* it. You needed that and I can only be thankful that I was here to hold you safe until you came back to me."

His eyes were bright and red-rimmed, his face pale but he looked fresher, better and I no longer feared for him. "I feel as weak as a kitten." His voice was both drained and tired.

I got to my feet and offered him my hand. "You should rest."

Trusting as a child, he stood and took my hand, letting me lead him into the bedroom. I helped him off with his coat, waistcoat and shoes, then I found a cloth in my dressing

room, dampened it and cleaned his face. He could smile properly by then but he looked tired. He reached out a hand and touched me. "We've probably missed our dinner. Will you try to eat something here, for me? You mustn't miss a meal in your condition."

I was so touched by his concern, I nearly cried but it would have done no good, so I kissed him gently and promised him I would eat. "And if you don't mind, I'll tell Carier and leave him to pursue enquiries at Thompson's." I didn't think he would be able to bear going through it all again so soon.

He smiled and nodded his agreement, so I went away and left him to sleep.

I sent for some food on a tray, pleading a headache, leaving the Southwoods to make whatever excuses they wanted. When I had finished, I sent for Carier and told him as what we had discovered. His face, usually grim in repose, became grimmer and I knew I had an ally in whatever we had to do.

"He wants to find them, to make sure they're well and happy," I concluded. "Not necessarily to tell them the truth, because it might be doing them no favours."

He nodded in agreement. I'd asked him to sit down. "We don't want this generally known," I told him. "Only you and Mrs. Thompson need know."

"We'll be extremely discreet," the redoubtable valet promised.

"You should know this has greatly upset my lord. He's sleeping at present and I don't know if we'll attend the recital

tonight. I'll go in to him and wait but I don't want him disturbed until he wakes."

Carier stood and bowed low. "Yes, my lady." He made to go.

"One more thing,"

"My lady?"

I didn't want to remain here with his mother now, any more than he did. "We'll bring our removal to Brook Street forward as far as we can. Let's try to move in a week or two at the most. I can get all the essential shopping done in that time and Mrs. Thompson has informed me that she can obtain the necessary servants whenever I'm ready for them, so I'll visit her tomorrow. I'll tell her about the twins then and we'll go from there."

"My lady." Carier bowed and left and I went back to the bedroom. The valet came in briefly to light the fire and a branch or two of candles, glancing only once at the bed where Richard slept like a child, then left me in peace. It felt more like peace, somehow. Richard had come back to me, I could only hope whole.

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Chapter Ten

Before we got up the next day, I told Richard of my decision to expedite the move to Brook Street. "I didn't think you'd want to continue here much longer."

"If you're sure it won't tire you too much, I would like it above all things."

"We'd both be happier and that's worth working for."

He kissed my forehead. "May I come and help?"

"Yes, please. It is to be your home after all."

"And yours." He looked closely at me then, lifting my chin so I looked up into his face. "I know you won't let me apologise but will you let me thank you? No one has ever seen me like that before—no one. I've never allowed it."

"You needed it. And it's not as though you haven't helped me like that in the past, is it?"

He smiled and drew me to him for a kiss, deeper and longer than before. "Do you think, my sweet, my precious love," he said, his lips against mine, his hands caressing me, "I could thank you properly? I need to love you, to know you still want me."

"Oh yes."

I arrived at Thompson's later that day, ostensibly to enquire after new servants.

Nichols and I went in, and this time I was recognised and taken straight upstairs to the untidy office. I left Nichols to wait outside, so she sat dourly on one of the long benches in the hall, looking to neither side but graciously accepting a

dish of tea. This place seemed to run on tea. Mrs. Thompson wouldn't let me begin until we were both settled with a dish.

She looked much the same as she had last time, dressed practically but richly, her hair out of place, as mine would be if I hadn't such a good maid. The expression on her face had nothing to do with artifice and everything to do with her own good sense.

"We decided to bring our move to Brook Street forward, so I'd like to see maids and footmen as soon as possible, please."

She raised an eyebrow. "Of course." She made a note. I proceeded to tell her why we were moving so soon.

She watched me while I told her, in as few words as possible, what we had learned yesterday, gasping in distress when I told her Richard had been informed of the fate of the maid Lucy, seeing, as I did, how brutal such treatment would be to a sensitive boy in the throes of his first love affair.

She tapped her pen against her teeth. "I'm sorry to speak ill of those to whom you're related but I cannot think such behaviour is productive of anything but callousness."

"I agree with you. Did you know anything of this before?"

She shook her head. "The affair was long over when I met him. He'd already run through many more women by then."

"What was he like at nineteen?"

Alicia put down the pen she'd been toying with and stared into the distance, a faraway look entering her eyes. "At nineteen Lord Strang was an angel. Oh, not his morals." She laughed. "Far from it. But in manners and dress, he was breathtaking. He'd only just decided to hold his head up and

defy the world, intoxicated by the power that brought him and the freedom from his parents. He'd decided to make the break then, although he was still legally under their jurisdiction but he threatened them with disclosure about his brother's sexuality if they crossed him in any way. The debutantes swooned at his feet that season but he made a beeline for the married women and the women of looser morals. He had no intention of locking on more shackles."

She studied me consideringly. "He was of that mind until he went to Yorkshire last year. I don't know what happened there but there was no inkling of it. You know he proposed to Miss Cartwright in the way he might propose a business decision?" I nodded. "Then we heard she had run off. I wasn't surprised he let her go. But you—you were a shock to everyone who knew him. That is," she hastened to explain, "not you precisely but the way he blithely became engaged to a lady completely unknown to society before."

I smiled. "I know. It was a surprise to me as well but sudden, startling and final."

She nodded again. "I thought love might catch him like that one day. I knew he couldn't go on as he was without someone. At nineteen he wasn't as polished as he was at thirty, so I'd seen some of the kindness and concern in him that cried out for a home."

"Thompson's? Where did that fit in?"

"An intellectual exercise. The problems we brought him from time to time gave him something on which to use his considerable brain." She stopped and we shared a smile. "And Thompson's gave him his own power base, something he

could control. You know the government has come to us from time to time?"

"No." Shocking, to be so close to such power.

"We find things out that no one else can. People always underestimate the power of servants, what they know and what they can do, so we've helped all manner of people at one time or another."

That reminded me of the other matter, the one I'd really come here for. "Is there any news about my poor Aunt Godolphin's business?"

Alicia sighed. "Nothing yet. The pocketbook Richard took from the scene wasn't her journal, just a list of dates and numbers, which have to be money. The amounts seem to be fairly consistent. And letters, some kind of private code."

"No mention of Lucy's twins?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. There seems to be no clue to their existence, not even a keepsake in the room. Perhaps she kept such things somewhere else. She spent a lot of time elsewhere, the other maid said. I'll make enquiries."

She turned over a paper on her desk. "We have one lead, just one." Her voice changed as she read. "Forgive me, with the shocking news you brought, I almost forgot. You know the maid that disappeared when Lucy was killed?"

"Yes."

"Julia Drury has her. She's kept her present lady's maid but this one seems to be an assistant. We know she came from your Aunt Godolphin's house, so that is where she ended up."

I thought about this news. I knew I could trust it; Mrs. Thompson would have verified something so important herself. "Do you think Mrs. Drury knows anything?"

"There's no reason she should know about Richard's connection to Lucy but she must know that the girl came from that house and what happened there."

"We need to talk to her," I said.

"We do indeed. Shall we approach her directly?"

I shook my head. "No. Mrs. Drury knows there's a financial connection between Thompson's and Richard, because it was in her marriage contract, but she isn't aware that it goes deeper than that. I don't think she or Steven should find out. She knows Richard is involved in investigating this murder, so perhaps the approach should come through us."

"How did she discover Richard's involvement?"

I gave her a wry shrug. "The scandal sheets got hold of it. As a result everyone in London knows Mrs. Godolphin is my aunt and I was there when the body was discovered. With their special knowledge of our activities, the rest isn't hard to deduce."

"That sounds reasonable," she said.

"There's a truce between us at present, one neither Richard nor I trust but it could be useful in this case. Leave it with me, if you would, just make sure they're watched."

Alicia shuffled through a few more papers. "We only have a footman in the house at present. From the special box, that is. I'll see if I can put someone else there. They've dismissed a lot of servants recently, so I may be able to put a few their way." She made a note.

"That would be useful." I stood and held out my hand. "Thank you for being so frank with me." We shook hands, like good friends. "I'll keep you informed and if you have any news on the twins, could you make sure you tell both of us, please?" She nodded. "I don't want him trying to tackle that particular problem on his own."

I'd arranged to meet Lizzie in the Royal Exchange. I was determined to fit out the Brook Street house myself, as far as I could, so I set my mind to some serious shopping. Entering the Royal Exchange was like stepping into another world. Only a short distance from the Thompson's office lay this empire of shopping. It was busy at this time of day, about one o'clock, so there were many people to greet before I finally found Lizzie.

Louisa Crich was with my sister, her mother thankfully taking the opportunity to go home and rest. "I really must find a husband soon," Louisa said, "or she will collapse with exhaustion." The poor footman was loaded with packages and with my business concluded, I could join them and enjoy myself.

A year ago Lizzie had dreamt of this. She had a comfortable amount of pin money and the fashionable world at her feet. Her enjoyment was evident, contrasting well with Louisa Crich's more practised ennui. I'd met Louisa in Exeter just before my marriage and now counted her one of my friends. The two were gathering a crowd. People stared curiously at them when they passed and whispers circulated. I stood back and watched them for a while, the pretty gestures, the practised flirting and knew Lizzie had come to

her natural habitat. I prayed that when she found her husband he would know how to look after her and nurture her generous spirit.

"We were about to send for the carriage for the purchases," Lizzie told me. "Now you're here, we'd better do so without delay."

"That might be a good idea." I watched the poor footman leave. Perhaps my connection with Thompson's had given me a closer empathy to the servant's lot but I reflected now that he would have to walk all the way back to St. James' Square with the parcels before he could return with the carriage.

"Why don't you have the parcels delivered? I usually do."

Lizzie waved a careless hand, narrowly missing the hat of a passing stranger. "I like to get home and open them all at once. I always have." So she had; Exeter had been no different.

I bowed to a few people I knew before I saw Julia and the girl.

Julia Drury was on the walkway below us and she hadn't yet seen us. She had her maid with her and a young girl, a pretty blonde creature, her head bowed submissively as Julia gave her an instruction. This must be the one, the maid who had run away from Aunt Godolphin's. She must know something, or why would she have run? And how did Julia and Steven find her?

I couldn't see her properly, only her gleaming hair and slight figure but when they moved away a little, I was able to see her face clearer, although from above. She owned small, even features and when she lifted her head, I saw a pair of

clear grey eyes. Her expression was grave, as befitted a maid. I wondered if she was really in training, or if Julia was keeping her close for some reason. I would have to pay a visit.

* * * *

I talked it over with Richard later. The girl must have been under their care when they came to see us but they hadn't mentioned her. Why not, if they knew about the murder at Aunt Godolphin's? If they wanted to reconcile themselves to us, it would have been a gesture of good faith on their part to let us know they had her. "The only thing I can think of is that Julia Drury wants to lure you back."

Richard raised his brows. "Why?"

I smiled. "Why did all those other women want you? To tempt you back."

He kissed me and assured me that I was his only temptation but he understood what I meant. It did seem the only option. Julia wanted to lure him back and if she did, it gave us a slight advantage. The Drurys didn't know how it was between us.

* * * *

Richard accompanied me on a shopping expedition for items for the new house the following day. When we returned, the butler told us a visitor was waiting for us in the small bookroom on the ground floor. Richard looked surprised. "Why the bookroom?"

"The woman may not be the sort you wish to interview in your private apartments." Patterson was intensely on his dignity, his nose as high in the air as his neck would allow. With his portly person, it made him resemble a penguin, a creature I had never seen in real life but from the pictures, he would have fitted in nicely.

Thus, we went into the bookroom, Patterson watching our progress all the way.

It took me a minute or two to place the woman seated nervously on the edge of a hard chair but then it dawned on me who she was. Probably about forty but well preserved, simply dressed, not in the first style of fashion, her person a little too flamboyant for a servant. Her defiant expression was belied by the way she twisted her hands restlessly in her lap but she looked up as we came in and met our stare boldly.

"Venice." The last time I had seen her, she was being carried out of our sitting room in Venice, laid flat by a blow from the butt of my pistol. She was the assistant of Abel Jeffries, the man who tried to kill us, on the orders of the Drurys.

"Yes, my lady. Venice." Remembering her manners, she curtsied to us. We returned the courtesy. Richard watched her quizzically, never taking his eyes from her face. Many people found his blue stare unnerving and she was not immune to it. She blushed and dropped her head when she took the seat Richard indicated. "You wished to speak to us?" Richard prompted her.

She lifted her head, her cheeks still flushed. "Yes, my lord, my lady." She stared at us, pain in her eyes. "You sent us

home after Venice. You'd hurt Abel but not me, so we could still make some sort of living and you gave us the address of your agency but neither of us thought we could get proper employment, not after what we'd done." She seemed reconciled to being a paid assassin, not at all abashed or ashamed. "We went back to our employers—"

"We know who they are," Richard put in. "The Drurys."

She tilted her head to one side, considering, then nodded. "As you say, my lord. We owe them no favours, God knows." She sighed deeply. "We showed them what you had had done to Abel but they weren't interested. They didn't even pay us what they promised to pay whether we did the job or not. They threw us out. What could we do?" She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "So we went back and said that we would tell you everything. They didn't know you'd guessed who'd sent us, you see."

Richard nodded.

"They said they would stop us and so we decided to come and see you, to ask you for help."

I laughed shortly. They'd tried to kill us and now they wanted our help? But I said nothing. The woman glared at me reproachfully and continued her narrative. "It was a job, my lady, for which we were to be paid well. We were the best and even on my own, I can do pretty well."

"You've worked since?" Richard asked sharply.

"Yes, my lord. I've no other way of earning a living." She paused before rushing into her next sentence. "Anyway, they killed Abel. The Drurys."

That statement, so flatly spoken, could easily have passed by, except for the sudden crumpling of her features. We watched in shocked silence as she found her handkerchief and buried her face in it. Despite the warm fire, I felt cold. "Twenty years we were together," she sobbed. "Twenty years. And they killed him rather than pay him the money they could have gambled away in a night."

We let her recover her equilibrium. The lady was evidently truly attached to her murderous companion and she sobbed for fully five minutes before sniffing decisively, mopping her eyes and putting her handkerchief away.

I was shocked at the callousness of the action but surprised they had left her to tell the tale. "Why didn't they kill you?"

"They couldn't catch me," she answered. "God curse the day we ever took a job from them. And curse them, too. I've been in hiding at St. Katherine's for the last month or two. This is the first time I've come out and I've been careful."

"What jobs have you done recently?" Richard asked then.

"No killing. Mostly strong arm stuff in Covent Garden." She referred to the area most notorious for brothels and bagnios. "And not for no toffs. I ain't working for nobody like that again."

"There's nobody like a toff for sheer cruelty and cold bloodedness," Richard agreed.

She nodded vehemently. "Nobody knocks the girls around like the Quality. They seem to think money is the answer to everything but sometimes it doesn't fix it." She stopped, aware of whom she was talking to.

Richard was more amused than angry. "Exactly so. But please don't tar us all with the same brush. So you haven't seen or heard of the Drurys again?"

"Not been near them but I know they're looking for me."

"Whom have they employed?" asked my husband.

She gave him a sour look. "To do their dirty work? Nobody I know, though I'd know him again if I saw him. Well dressed, young, medium height, knows thieves' cant well enough to pass but not well enough to belong."

"Could be useful." Richard's next question surprised her. "Can you do any domestic work?"

She had to think for a while. "I was a housemaid when I was little."

"That might do." He pondered, finger to lower lip. "You have certain talents I could use but I insist on complete loyalty from my employees. And discretion. If you're considered suitable, you'll be placed in a household where you'll earn the normal wages but if I wish to use you for special work, you'll be paid a considerable bonus." He was suggesting Thompson's. It seemed like a good idea, if the woman could be trusted. "Sometimes it will only involve watching and reporting back to us and sometimes a little more will be required. You're not in the first flush of youth, Mrs. Jeffries, and this will provide you with the security you've never had before. Does it sound useful to you?"

Eventually, reluctantly, she said, "It's the best offer I've had so far."

"One thing you should know," Richard added. "I do not tolerate indiscretion or disloyalty. If you betray me, it will go hard for you. Can you accept that?"

"I'm good at keeping myself to myself. We stayed loyal to the Drurys until they hurt us, didn't we?"

Richard nodded. He drew his writing tablet and a pencil from his pocket. "Can you read?"

"Yes."

"Then take this note." He scrawled hastily. "Take it to the address on the back. You may have to wait but you'll get to see Mrs. Thompson and we'll go from there. If we need you, we'll contact you."

She got up, took the note and curtseyed. "I may be a fool working for Quality again but I've got little choice at the moment." With another curtsey, she left us.

Richard saw my doubtful expression. "Better she's in than out. I'll have her watched for a while and then we'll see how she does. And she has useful information that could hang the Drurys or at least cause them considerable trouble. She won't be allowed anything sensitive until she's handled jobs that are more mundane. Do you think that will do?"

I nodded. "I should say, 'you know best, my lord,' shouldn't I?"

"You should *certainly* defer to me." He took my hand and pulled me to my feet. "But I'm glad it's not unquestioning. I need a partner, someone I can trust and it seems this is you." We shared a long look and I was glad to see him still loving, still caring. He kissed my hand and we left the room.

It had shocked me that the Drurys had killed Jeffries, when they could just as easily have paid him off. He was no good to them any more, not after what we did to him. But I thought it was foolish as well as callous. If Steven were discovered to be implicated in it, then he would be liable for prosecution. It wasn't likely but possible.

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Chapter Eleven

The nights were growing colder in the evenings, so Richard decided to take me to Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens before they closed for the winter. This was a mild autumn and the proprietors had decided to delay the closing to catch the gentry coming to London for parliamentary duties and other frivolities. A recital was scheduled for a date not long before our move to Brook Street and he would take me then.

Speculation about Lizzie's suitors was becoming rife but she favoured no one above anyone else and she confided that she had enjoyed this season so much, she would like to give it another year before she settled on someone. "You shouldn't have rushed into marriage," she told me after dinner at their house one evening.

"I couldn't help it. I don't know what happened. It was so surprising, I still can't think about it without shivering."

"Shivering?" I had told her once that I had become Richard's mistress shortly after we met. She'd been incredulous at what she called my folly.

"Don't you remember the lectures you read me when you thought I was giving Richard too much attention? What if you'd been right and he was an unreformed rake? What then?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Now you think about it. Well, you were extremely lucky but if he had loved you and left you as the saying is, the best turn-out would have been your

private heartbreak. You would have met him and Julia everywhere, since we were coming to London anyway."

I swallowed; that would have killed me. "Do you think Julia feels like that?"

Lizzie snorted in derision. "No, not at all. She has no feelings, that one. Her pride was hurt but no one but us knows about that. She seems happy enough with Steven Drury."

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Eustacia was still lavishing attention on Richard and privately he told me he would be happier when she went home. "Don't you think she'll find a match?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "She's regarded as an incorrigible flirt. That's all well in a girl of eighteen but one looks for more in a woman of twenty-three. Or someone of fortune, who can afford to behave anyway they please."

I was in my room, having my hair dressed by Nichols for the evening at Ranelagh and he'd come to see me, as he, by some miracle, was ready first. He found a straight-backed chair and sat, leaning back, watching Nichols make me ready. "You can never tell, though. Someone might fall for her. And she's looking too high. Most of the men she's set her cap at will eventually marry the woman their parents approve of, not one of their choice."

I picked up the nail buffer. "Her portion isn't great."

He shrugged. "It's adequate for a man who loves her. After all, I would have taken you with nothing."

I looked up, to see him gazing at me in the mirror. It was true, and that knowledge astonished me every day.

I smiled. "But no one has shown that sort of partiality for her."

"I wish they would." He sounded exasperated. "She seems to be everywhere we are these days and once she sees me, she makes a beeline for me and I can't shake her off. I swear I'll give her the set-down she deserves before too long. I meant to put her in fashion so that she relied on me but I didn't know how much it would try my patience." New tensions had added to the pressures on him. New lines bracketed his mouth and his expression was more pensive than I was used to.

"You've been patient with her. I suppose I still feel guilty about her."

He frowned. "I've told you before, there's nothing for you to feel guilty about. Besides, I wouldn't do anything too terrible."

"What would you do?" I stood for Nichols to help me into my gown.

As I stood in petticoat, stays and stomacher Richard studied me critically. "You're tight-laced. You're not overdoing it?"

"No, my lord," Nichols replied. "I am taking extra care at the moment. Her ladyship is wearing her stays a little looser."

"Good." As Nichols held up the pink gown I had chosen to wear over the cream petticoat, he returned to the previous subject. "What would I do? I would start a book in one of the

coffee houses on the date she loses her virginity. With money at stake, they'd be queuing up."

"Richard!"

His slow smile showed his delight at my naiveté. "You think it would be the only entry on that particular topic? *Je suis désolée* to disappoint you, my sweet innocent. I could also cut her in public and let it be known she bores me. My opinion counts for something, you know." He bit his lower lip. "If I promise not to do the last two, may I do the first?" Although he must have known my answer, he looked hopeful.

"Certainly not."

"She'd love the extra attention and there's no harm in it. Nobody would force her."

"No, Richard." I glared at him directly while Nichols adjusted the pleats at the back of my gown.

His smile had a wicked glint and I knew he was teasing me.

"You have no intention of starting a betting book, have you?"

His smile broadened. "There's one already but I swear to you that I had nothing to do with starting it."

"Have you entered anything in it? Truthfully?"

He didn't look in the least shame-faced when he confessed, "Yes, I have but only on the date. I'm in it, you know."

I was astonished. "They think you'll seduce her?"

"Well, I have been seen in her company rather a lot recently, even if it isn't by choice. And I might have done it

before I met you, although virgins weren't my—sphere of interest."

"So we heard." I smiled at him. "It was the only reason Lizzie and Martha trusted you at all."

"Perhaps they shouldn't have done." The smile remained, but subtly changed, a remembrance of what had happened between us. Nichols pursed her lips in disapproval, though she said nothing. Despite her past life as maid in some of the best brothels in London, Nichols had a puritanical streak about her. Perhaps she had seen too much.

She opened the box containing the jewellery I had decided to wear, pearls and diamonds tonight, a simple string with pendant earrings to match. I always loved fine jewels, although before my marriage I'd thought them beyond me but now, as well as the family jewels that had come my way, I had several fine pieces of my own. I touched the necklace as Nichols clasped it around my neck and I saw Richard's smile when he saw my pleasure. I was ready, so Nichols helped me into a warm cloak before we left the house.

Ranelagh had opened ten years before and was currently the most fashionable pleasure garden in London. In the middle of vistas and promenades, set out with bowers and flowers stood a large rotunda, where, in the season, regular recitals took place.

We travelled to Ranelagh down river. The usual November freezing chill had not yet set in but I was wearing furs for extra warmth, and yet despite the weather I was reminded of the trips we had taken up and down the Grand Canal earlier in the year. But this was the Thames, wider, colder, greyer

and we travelled in a rowed barge, not a poled gondola. The most important things were the same, though.

We'd engaged one of the booths for supper, together with Gervase, Lizzie, Ruth, Tom, Georgiana and Freddy Thwaite but we travelled down alone, arranging to meet them there.

The great Rotunda impressed me with its magnificence, built entirely for pleasure. Gervase and Freddy found us and entertained me hugely, pointing out the ladies of the town who were inevitably present in this public place. The proprietors tried to keep them out but it was difficult, as they were respectably, in some cases magnificently, dressed and didn't make their ambitions embarrassingly obvious.

Since the recital had not yet begun, Richard escorted me around the Rotunda, joining the other members of the great and good showing themselves off here, showing me the more scandalous ladies and reciting some scurrilous stories about them. He wouldn't tell me which of them had shared his attentions in the past, though one or two stared at him askance when we passed. His stories became increasingly scandalous, until he told me something I couldn't believe and I called a halt to it. "You're trying to put me to the blush," I accused him. "No one can do that."

"She can. It's even been written about."

"Shall I try?"

"No." Although I didn't look at him, I knew from his tone of voice that he was amused. "I confess I've never seen it, although I've read about it and heard it from people who have seen it."

"Then I don't believe it. And you can take me back now." I heard his delighted laugh but I refused to look at him.

On our way back we saw the Drurys, sitting with Eustacia Terry and another gentleman. I didn't like to see it, even though it was perfectly within the bounds of propriety with Julia to chaperone Eustacia. We bowed to each other. "Look," I murmured to Richard, "you see that girl standing behind her? That's the new maid I told you about." The one sharing the room with Lucy at my aunt's house. She must know something. We had to talk to her but the Drurys kept her close.

Standing behind the group as though in waiting upon them was the girl I'd seen with Julia Drury at the Exchange. She was a slight creature and although dressed plainly, pretty, but her serious expression didn't help her looks. Richard glanced at her, then we turned back and went to our box.

I settled down to enjoy the recital. Although this was a pleasure garden, I couldn't fault the quality of the music and as usual in the presence of fine music, I lost myself. The others chatted quietly but I didn't notice much, although I tried to keep up with what was being said. Richard laid his hand on mine and if my response were required, he would gently press it. He understood my love of music, he felt it himself and I was grateful to him for his thoughtfulness.

After the recital there was a short interval before supper. Richard leaned forward, as though to talk to Freddy and glanced across at the Drurys' box. "They're leaving the box," he said in a conversational tone. "Shall we take a turn about the gardens, too?"

"That would be pleasant."

Lizzie took Freddy's arm while Tom escorted Ruth. Georgiana and Gervase followed behind. Richard led us in the direction he'd seen the Drurys take and soon we came upon them, as though by accident.

Richard immediately left my side and went to Julia. I watched him bow over her hand. She glanced at me, triumph in her gaze but Steven approached me. He met my eyes when he straightened up. I remembered a time—brief but intense—when he'd been able to keep me transfixed with that soft brown gaze. "I'm pleased to see you looking so well."

"Thank you, sir. You seem to be prospering."

"You could say that." He glanced to where Richard was discussing something with Julia. "They make a fine couple, don't they?"

I smiled. "No. They're too unlike."

He stared at them, surprised. "I thought they were exactly alike. Both so cold, always looking for new sensations."

"My husband hasn't caused many scandals recently."

"He's still living down the ones he created before. There's gossip in the coffee houses about Eustacia Terry and him but it's low-key compared with what I understand went on before."

"People change."

"No they don't," he snapped. He drew me aside from the others. Lizzie watched suspiciously while she chatted to Gervase. Steven lowered his voice and spoke in a warm, intimate tone. I braced myself for his confidences. "Rose, I

still have feelings for you and I'm sure Julia has for your husband. That new maid of hers is also enamoured of him."

"What makes you think your wife has feelings for anyone?" I couldn't help my waspishness. I disliked them so much and I wasn't as good as Richard at hiding my feelings. "He's doing this to stop the gossips."

Steven gazed at me, self-pity in his dark eyes. I knew that expression well. "We meant so much to each other once. Don't you feel anything for me any more?"

"I was angry with you in Venice but no—not now." It wasn't entirely true. "My feelings for you were entirely mistaken."

"And for your husband?" He smiled, his mouth quirking up at one side. It made him look like a fascinating satyr.

"We get on." Why should I tell him how much I loved Richard, how much he depended on me? "What about your wife?"

He sighed and cast a glance in Julia's direction. "She's beautiful, desirable, rich—everything a man could want." He didn't say he loved her or even that he was fond of her.

"But you ran away with her."

"I took advantage of her confusion." He met my gaze. "You were Lord Strang's mistress by then, weren't you? Don't forget, I saw you. You certainly took advantage of the situation in that benighted house." He smiled in a way I found most unpleasant.

"I was mad to do it," I snapped.

His voice took on a sneering tone. The flickering lights of the walkway emphasised his cynical expression, the shadows

about his dark eyes and the corners of his mouth. "So you've not found him the life companion you hoped for? Surely you have your compensations." With a little gesture of one hand, he indicated my appearance. I stayed silent. "In fact, we both have. We're two of a kind, you and I. We saw what we wanted and we went for it. There are few compensations for people such as you and I and we have to make the most of our luck." He lowered his voice again. "Rose, if ever you should need a shoulder to cry on, a friend, I hope you know you can always come to me."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Steven Drury would be the last person I would trust with anything but I smiled and inclined my head as though in thanks. "I'm perfectly content," I said as Richard came back to us.

My husband offered his arm. "I'm delighted to hear it. Shall we?" We bowed and moved on. I was grateful for Richard's support now; that foolish faintness was coming over me again. I found it more of an inconvenience than anything else but I was afraid I might one day soon faint at an inappropriate moment, then all would be known.

Richard murmured to me. "Are you well? Did he upset you in any way?"

"Yes, I'm much better now we're moving again. No, he didn't upset me, it was more like surprise. He offered his friendship. Maybe more."

"What?" I was glad to hear the startled tone in his voice, as it wasn't often I could surprise him like that.

"He has no idea how it is between us. I made sure of it."

"But he's seen more than most," Richard commented.

"He put that down to simple lust. He seems to think I'm as restless as he is."

Richard gazed at me, a faraway look in his eyes, indicating he was thinking hard. "And she thinks he's at her feet. Interesting. Anything we can use, my love, we will, if we have to protect our own."

We reached our box again and it was time for supper, so we could say no more.

Richard told me what Julia had said to him when we lay in bed later. It was the only place where we knew we could converse totally in private these days, so I was doubly glad we had kept to our rules about allowing access here.

"He ran away with Julia because he could," I told him. "She was terribly upset when you threw her over. I don't think she believed you would ever go through with it and he took her then, in her pride."

Richard grimaced. "She wasn't upset. She was angry. When I told her I wanted to break our contract, she seemed to think I was as afraid of my father in one of his tempers as everybody else is. I'd long decided they had done enough to me. I wouldn't take any more interference and when I met you—" He turned his head, looking at me as I lay in the shelter of his arms and he smiled tenderly before he went on. "When I met you, I was so sure of my feelings I would have done anything to win you."

"You didn't have to do much," I reminded him.

He pushed a stray curl from my face and kissed me, making it tender and lingering. I returned it, caressing his tongue with mine before he drew back. "I would have created

all the scandal required, if I'd needed to. I only wanted to spare you all that." His hand moved over my stomach.

"You said Julia thought she had Steven at her feet. What else did she say? About the girl?"

He sighed. "Before I tell you that, there's something else I need to tell you. When I saw the girl, I recognised her."

This brought me up short. I leaned up on one elbow so I could look at his face. "You didn't mention that."

"I wanted to be sure. Do you remember a girl in here when we were in bed?"

"The little maid? Was that her?" He nodded. I closed my eyes, picturing the face. Yes, he was right. "How did she get in here?"

"That, my sweet, is another mystery. I haven't the faintest idea. I'll ask my mother tomorrow but she doesn't supervise the hiring of all the servants. She considers that Mrs. Patterson's job."

"Shall I talk to her?"

"No. Mrs. Patterson and I are old friends, I'll ask her myself." He tucked one hand behind his head. "Julia thinks the whole of the world is at her feet. She thinks I am, though how she can believe that after what happened between us, I'm not sure. But that pride, that overweening vanity, could help us. It gives her an arrogance that might make her careless in time. I'm sure she's up to something, I just don't know what it is. She feigned complete surprise when I told her I was involved with investigating Lucy's murder, although she must have known I would be interested, even if Lucy had been just another maid."

I lifted my hand to his cheek in sympathy. He kissed the palm before I took it away again. When he moved his head, his eyes glinted from the light of the branch of candles still burning next to the bed. "She says the girl had been earning extra money at her house, sewing and so she came to her in fear when Lucy died. Julia says the girl didn't see anything that would help us—she was merely terrified out of her wits when she saw the scene and ran from there in panic. Furthermore, Julia said that if she had known I was interested in the matter, she would have sent the girl straight to me."

"Lies." The barefaced impudence of it all appalled me. "Julia knows we're interested. Do you think she knows what Lucy was to you?"

He sighed. "I don't know. We have servants in place in the house now, and I hope they can discover something for us."

"Do you think she wants you back? Do you think she's enticing you with the girl?"

"Yes," he replied. "But there's more to it than that, I'm sure of it. The girl is called Susan. Susan Jackson."

"I'll send word to Mrs. Thompson," I promised him.

He took his hand from behind his head and ran his hand from my armpit to my hip and across my stomach. "You feel no different."

I shivered at his touch. "It will."

"This, on the other hand," he said, reaching his hand up to cup my breast, "Feels fuller, I'm sure of it."

"I thought so too. Nichols says it's often so. A woman will feel her pregnancy in her breasts before her belly shows any signs of change."

Richard pulled me down and kissed me. I sighed and closed my eyes in pleasure. Taking this as encouragement, he urged me on to my back and continued down, kissing and caressing, his mouth and hands concentrating on my pleasure. I could do nothing but sigh and murmur his name, as he took the secret pearl of flesh between his thumb and forefinger, kissing all around and finally taking it into his mouth. His expertise was only improving as we grew more accustomed to each others' bodies. Like a sculptor, his art became more refined and practiced. I gripped his broad shoulders, my fingernails digging in before I released him, worried that I might mark him. He growled and lifted his head. "Do what you like, my lady. You can do nothing wrong. Don't let consideration of what's right or wrong into this bed. There is only us here, only our pleasure." He returned to his self-appointed task until I was racked with that ecstasy he had first brought me earlier in the year and which now seemed so necessary to my comfort.

"So that hasn't changed either," he murmured as he came back up the bed to kiss my lips and join his body with mine.

"I'll never change." I was beyond rational thought now. "Never, never, never."

He chuckled against my lips before he kissed me again, then found that place on my throat I loved him to kiss. "You'll change, my lady," he said, his lips against my neck, "but never be any the less desirable." With one hard thrust he entered me and I pushed against him, rolling with him until I lay on top. I planted my knees either side of his thighs,

watching him as I worked him, feeling him deep inside me, touching that sensitive part with every stroke. I loved this.

"Close your eyes, sweetheart. Concentrate on your pleasure." His low murmurs served to add to my excitement. I did as he bid me and let myself feel the sensation of his body in mine, so hard where mine was soft and giving, but he encouraged my control of this act. When I concentrated, I could feel the differences. Where the bulbous head of his shaft caressed me deep inside, I felt a spot of extra sensitivity and there seemed to be another, lower down, or maybe they were one. I worked to get him to slide past them with every touch and he felt me, holding himself rigid for my explorations but by the gasps he gave I knew I was driving him wild as well as myself.

We came together, his seed and my wetness bathing us in our pleasure, and I let him take me then, giving me the extra strokes that sent me up to a higher peak before oblivion took me.

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Chapter Twelve

Our days became a whirl of levees, visits, shopping and, in Richard's case, visits to the coffee houses and clubs. We went to balls, ridottos, routs and Venetian breakfasts and everywhere I was treated with the greatest kindness and respect. We came across the Hareton party frequently and the Drurys a little less frequently but we received no news from Thompson's, except that reports were still coming in. The manservant could have escaped the country or taken the King's shilling. We continued to treat the Drurys with politeness, acknowledging the *faux* truce. We needed the information the servant they had in their employ might be able to give us and until we got her, we wouldn't disturb the status quo. Neither Richard nor I believed she knew nothing. Julia wouldn't keep her so close for kindness' sake.

I was surprised when we received an invitation from Bow Street to take dinner with the Fieldings but Richard wasn't. "I have some acquaintance with them and Smith will have told them that we know something of Lucy. We should accept, because they won't give up. We might as well get it over with." Since we had no other dinner engagements for the evening in question except another fraught family one, we accepted.

We agreed to let them know that Lucy used to work for the family and that Richard had recognised her from that time but no more. The rest was our concern.

I dressed simply for the dinner but Richard was his usual magnificent self, resplendent in crimson cut velvet. We took the carriage to Bow Street and during the short journey Richard explained in succinct terms, what the Fieldings saw as principal interests in life—the pursuance of law and the development of a reliable non-military device for upholding it. Perhaps we could distract them from their purpose by discussing cases they had found of particular interest in the past. And, of course, Mr. Henry Fielding's popular books. Richard warned me that Mr. Henry Fielding's health was not good these days and he'd been forced to give up his magistracy, so we might be required to excuse him at some point. He was a widower and his brother was single, so a Miss Fielding was acting as their hostess but whether she was a daughter, sister, or aunt, we did not know.

When the introductions were made, I would have favoured sister, though I wasn't sure. Miss Fielding was a colourless female of indeterminate age and in her I recognised myself. As a single female, a spinster, I would have lived in a grander house but I may not have been much different to the lady before me.

The Fieldings looked alike, although in fact they were only half-brothers. They were both on the short side, portly with a brisk, businesslike manner and John Fielding, the blind one, wore dark spectacles to remind onlookers of his state. In court, he wore a broad black ribbon over his eyes, fostering the popular conception of the "blind beak".

Poor Henry Fielding did indeed look unwell: pale and occasionally; when he thought no one was looking, he would

close his eyes. I was sorry to see it. I had loved the book Henry Fielding wrote and had hoped for many more. *Tom Jones* was considered racy but I read it as soon as I could get hold of a copy and enjoyed it hugely.

When we sat at table, I began by complimenting him on it, although he must have heard it many times before.

Indeed I felt most comfortable in this dining room, modest but comfortably furnished, more like the surroundings I had grown up with than anything I'd known lately.

Mr. Fielding smiled and accepted my compliment. "I'm sure you've read better, my lady."

"I don't think I'm competent to judge, sir but I found it one of the most enjoyable books I've ever read."

"You're very kind. You didn't, then, prefer Richardson's epic?" He was referring to *Pamela*, the book that had made Richardson a prosperous publisher and extremely rich. It was the story of a servant girl who married her employer through a great display of virtue. "I enjoyed it when I read it," I admitted, "but there are some aspects of it I found disquieting when I thought about it later."

"What would those be?" His tone was kindly but it didn't fool me. It was well known that Mr. Fielding disliked the book; he had even written a parody of it, *Shamela*, in which he had voiced some of my uncertainties.

"The housekeepers, mainly. They should surely be of better moral probity than Mrs. Jewkes and Mrs. Jervis. I would hate to think any housekeeper of mine was busying herself about the intimate concerns of the housemaids, unless

there was evidence of moral turpitude in the maid." I meant that they acted like brothel madams.

"A proper concern for a lady running a decent house, your ladyship." There was a twinkle of intelligence in his grey eyes. Although I'd carefully prepared my opinions for this dinner, they were sincerely felt. *Pamela* had been amusing but not, despite the much vaunted good morals of the heroine, uplifting.

"It cannot be seen as a good example to domestic staff." I accepted some fricasseed rabbit and picked up my knife. "They'll run away with the idea that if they allow certain liberties to the master and then refuse him at the final hurdle with a great deal of screaming and fuss, the master will become enamoured of them and marry them. The chances are, if he is inclined to affairs with servants, he will turn his attentions elsewhere or rape the poor girl."

With great deliberation, Mr. Fielding turned to my husband. "Lord Strang, I never thought you would marry a woman of such good sense."

Richard accepted the compliment on my behalf. "She has good qualities in abundance, sir. I count myself extremely fortunate in many ways." His eyes narrowed. "What sort of woman did you think I would marry?" It was typical of him but Mr. Fielding wasn't in the least abashed.

"Why, sir, it's not my position to wonder about your private concerns but if I had, I would have guessed at a beautiful woman with few brains, polished but empty."

Richard laughed. He seemed far more himself here than at the more formal dinners we attended. "It was my intention, but who could refuse a treasure like my lady here?"

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. The appreciative gleam in Richard's guileless blue eyes was matched by a similar expression in Henry Fielding's. Neither showed any inclination to back down and I feared compliments would rain down on my head thick and fast before they were done. "I can only be thankful I wasn't born to domestic service. Else I might have been accused of ensnaring my lord with pretty refusals." It did the trick.

John Fielding, silent until now, joined in the conversation. "My brother has written more than one book."

"Indeed, sir. I confess I haven't read *Amelia* yet. I've had a busy time of late. And we take the *Covent Garden Journal* at Southwood House."

"Amongst others," Richard put in. "I try to read it whenever I can. We've discussed our differences before, but essentially, we're on the same side." I knew he read every copy.

"Naturally we are, my lord." John Fielding gave a sweet smile. "Lady Strang." He turned his sightless eyes towards me. "Your husband has professed to believe that if we tried to alleviate the symptoms of poverty, we would have less crime. I say whatever the situation, wrong is wrong and must be punished. How do you stand on this?"

I was surprised to be asked and flattered that they would want to listen to my opinion. I thought about my answer carefully. "Both opinions have their merits. It is true,

wrongdoing must be punished but many people are driven to crime by their situations, like the mother who steals a loaf to feed her starving children."

John Fielding frowned. "Institutions exist to help with such people. They shouldn't steal, it is wrong. The courts have the powers to deal with such problems and in practice, the woman wouldn't be unduly punished, since then her children would be left on the parish. She would probably be allowed benefit of clergy and released." This was where, on a first offence, if the accused could read a proscribed passage of scripture, he or she would be released with a warning. "The appearance in court would give her pause and show her the error of her ways."

"What else could she do if she couldn't get work?"

"If she had no husband to look out for her? There is the new workhouse at Hyde Park and there is always work for an able bodied, healthy female," the magistrate answered firmly.

"But of what kind?" Richard lifted his glass to his lips. He wasn't laughing now.

"You're referring to an unfortunate condition of woman," John Fielding said, "for which I believe the current state of morals has its explanation. These women are of a certain type, their good morals destroyed, often by exposure to the evils of the Metropolis. They come up fresh from the country and instead of heading for establishments such as your registry office, they are corrupted by people—often of their own sex, who lay in wait for them."

Richard put down his glass. "Sadly we don't usually take girls fresh from the country on our books. Our agency tends

to specialise in the superior servant. But I understand your meaning. Some people who wait for the coaches from the country especially to deter these girls from entering a life of vice. I fear, however, if I were to take an interest in that side of the business, I might be regarded as somewhat hypocritical." His eyes gleamed with suppressed humour.

There was a short pause but Mr. Henry Fielding, glancing at me, burst out laughing. "Why, brother, you must admit the truth in that. Hypocrisy, above all things, is what we most hate in the world, the vice that condones all other vices."

The laughter lifted the mood and as long as we kept the conversation to lighter matters, we enjoyed a good, convivial meal with a high level of intelligent discourse. The Fieldings disliked the racier element of the theatre, feeling it fed the baser nature of the poor, especially *The Beggar's Opera*, a story of highwaymen and their women. I'd read and enjoyed it and hoped to see it now that I was in London, where it was still frequently staged.

We discussed other, more improving works, and music was a safe topic. The only controversy there raged between Italian opera and English music, something that was less about morality, more about nationality and a sense of mischief amongst certain people. My love of music encompassed most types, depending on my mood and the quality of it. In my opinion, Bach outshone them all but I was more circumspect in venturing an opinion, not wanting to draw any more attention to myself than I had to.

A friendly competition continued between Richard and John Fielding, a verbal duel both seemed to relish, leading them to

the brink, then one would step back, acknowledging a hit. The mention of prostitutes in the presence of ladies and Richard's oblique reference to his previous way of life was a typical example. Once or twice, he brought John Fielding to the brink of admitting something ridiculous, then the magistrate would step back, only to come back at my husband from another angle. They seemed evenly matched and both enjoyed the exchange. The rest of us could watch and join in as we pleased, which seemed to suit Mr. John Fielding.

John Fielding asked my husband a question that had puzzled me once or twice. "You say politics bores you and yet here you are conversing knowledgeably on matters which must be considered political. You have no parliamentary ambitions?"

Richard twirled the small amount of liquid left in his glass. He had refused a refill. "I suppose I say such things to deter certain parties." He paused. "I will not enter the public sphere as anyone's 'man'. I am myself and while many of my opinions may chime with one person's or another's, I won't be used or have my name used. And I won't have Thompson's used, either. It was the best thing to come out of the years before I reached thirty." He looked up at John Fielding and smiled. "You, I know, sir, are one of the few people who know what Thompson's really is. Believe me when I say I will not have it used by anyone else, for any purpose. Mr. Fielding"—turning to Henry—"you were in charge of just such an agency once. You understand the power of it, properly organised. So if I enter Parliament, it will be as my own man." He was creating his own power base, wider and more far-reaching

than the usual, already broad, sphere of influence an aristocrat could expect to control.

When Miss Fielding and I retired after the meal, it wasn't long before the gentlemen joined us in the comfortable drawing room. It was wonderful to see how easily John Fielding found his way around the house, despite his affliction. The furniture must be carefully placed and he must have spent some time learning its disposition to be so easy here. We sat and talked over tea and wine in a most pleasant way. The evening was drawing on and we knew we must leave soon and the subject I dreaded still had not been broached. It had to come.

John Fielding began it. "You are involved in an unfortunate matter that occurred in Harley Street last month?"

Richard readily admitted we were. "The murder occurred in the house of my wife's aunt. In fact, my wife was there when the body was discovered."

John Fielding was quick on the uptake. "You were not, my lord?"

"Sadly, no. I arrived to collect Lady Strang and she informed me of the sad circumstance. Your representative arrived shortly afterwards."

"So you helped to order the scene?" Henry Fielding asked.

"I must defer to my wife in that." Richard smiled at me over the rim of his glass, then took a sip. "She sent all the servants to sit in the kitchen and wouldn't let anyone touch anything until Smith arrived."

"Very perspicacious." John Fielding nodded in my direction. "My lady, if you weren't nobly born and female, I would consider you a doughty recruit to my service."

"I wasn't nobly born," I protested, "my brother only came lately into his title. Ladies would help you greatly in your work. You say many of the offenders you see are female, so to have some females on your side would even things up a little, would it not?"

Other men would have dismissed that out of hand but to do the man justice, he considered it, his head on one side while he thought, a restorative glass of wine in his hand. He took a draught of it before he replied. "It's certainly an interesting suggestion. Perhaps a woman could gain access where a man may not. But even if I were to search for suitable applicants, I fear women with your presence of mind are few and far between."

He offended commonsense with that remark. "Nonsense. Great households are held together by women, women have been the reason many men have achieved so much, either by inspiration or support. Give us a chance, sir and we'll rule the world." I could have added that Thompson's employed more women than men.

"Fighting talk," said Mr. Fielding as Richard laughed out loud.

"I wouldn't back many men against you, my lady, if it should come to it." I smiled back at Richard, already ashamed of my outburst but it seemed to divert the brothers, until John Fielding returned to his subject like a terrier at a bone.

"So you helped materially at Harley Street, your ladyship," he continued affably. "But one thing puzzled Smith. He is a reliable man, my lord, not given to fancies, you understand but he was sure he heard you refer to the wench by a different name. Could it be you recognised her?"

Richard's face turned grave but he showed none of the turmoil he must have been feeling. "I knew her as Lucy Gartside. She worked at my father's house—Eyton, in Derbyshire—when I was a boy. I hadn't seen her since. I was surprised by the coincidence, that she should turn up at the house of my wife's aunt, that's all."

"It's a long time to remember a servant," said the magistrate. "And this woman was dead, covered in blood as I understand the matter."

"No." Richard glanced at John Fielding's still, listening expression. He continued without a tremor. "Her face wasn't marked and I recognised her as soon as Smith moved her hair away from her features. I was brought up at Eyton, I rarely visited London and Lucy worked there from girlhood." He'd nearly let his closer relationship with her slip but I don't think the brothers noticed. At any rate, they didn't comment.

"I cannot see this has any bearing on the case," John Fielding remarked. "I must thank you for being so frank with us, my lord. Did the woman have any family in Derbyshire?"

"She was a farmer's daughter, I believe. My mother preferred to employ local people for ordinary domestic staff." We knew very well, but Lucy's family hadn't heard of her since she left for France. And she had left no forwarding address.

We left soon after that, as much for consideration to Henry Fielding, who looked distinctly pale and fatigued as from any desire to get away. "Do you think they'll be satisfied with that?" I asked Richard when we were in the carriage together.

Richard stretched his legs before him. "I hope so. It seemed to satisfy him but John Fielding doesn't let things lie. He'll want an answer to this one, I'm afraid, so it can't be a Thompson's solution. We have to work with him and, at the same time, stop him from finding out too much. We must just pray that this murder had nothing to do with any past history."

I took his hand. We were due to go on to a ball, after stopping at Southwood house so that I could change into something more appropriate. "Would you like to stay in tonight?"

"More than anything," he breathed in the intimate darkness of the carriage, "but I fear our absence might be missed and either John Fielding would get to hear of it and come to his own conclusions, or people will begin to realise why you need to sit down so often." I heard the tone of his voice lighten at the last comment and I was glad something brought him pleasure in this dark time.

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Chapter Thirteen

A few days after the dinner at the Fieldings', we officially moved house. To all intents, we were setting up our own establishment and nothing was mentioned about the recent revelations under the roof of Southwood House hastening our departure.

Our butler, Jervis, met me in the hall and bowed low.
"Your ladyship will find all in order, I hope."

I looked around the hall. It was mine, this house. A glow suffused me because I had always dreamed of having this.
"I'm sure I will. Have you informed the staff of our particular rules?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Have the two cooks arrived?"

"The chef and the pastry chef, my lady. Everything is as it should be."

"Then if you could have tea served in the morning room, I'll put my feet up for an hour."

Another bow. "Yes, my lady."

Sitting at my ease in the morning room, a pot of tea on the table at my elbow, I felt smugly content. The straw-coloured brocade on the excellent mahogany furniture was all new, with no history. The portrait over the mantelpiece was of the family home, Eyton, a place I'd visited only once. Lady Southwood had given the painting to us and it seemed to go well in this room, a warm, sunny vista with a substantial house in the background.

This was my first house, the first house where I was indubitably the mistress and had the running of it. In Venice we'd had to employ servants from Thompson's special box, as much bodyguards as they were servants. Richard had seen to that. But here most of the servants, although procured through Thompson's were just servants.

However, my maid and a footman were specially recruited. We weren't past all danger. Carier, as a part owner of the agency, and Bennett, Richard's groom, remained constants, quietly in the background. Bennett had been with Richard since his childhood; he had always been there and would be until he retired.

I must have fallen asleep because when he returned, Richard didn't disturb me but went to work with Brangwyn.

The clanging of the doorbell woke me and I barely had time to put one hand to my head to tuck away the curls that had come loose when Jervis knocked.

"There's a lady to see you, my lady. A Miss Eustacia Terry. She arrived about ten minutes ago and said she would wait, so I showed her to the drawing room." Since he was new, I had given him a list of people we were never at home to but I hadn't put Eustacia on it. A solitary visit was surprising but after tidying myself a little, I went up to the drawing room and greeted her. She looked fetching in pale green. The cold light of the overcast day fell on the banded table under the window, the new chairs set by the fire.

We kissed in greeting, just like old friends. "Does Lord Strang know you're here?" I went to pour some tea, brought up by a maid just before I arrived.

Eustacia took a dish of tea with a smile of thanks. "No, I asked that he not be disturbed."

I sat and settled my skirts. She looked superior, her eyes sparkling, her chin uptilted and a slight smile quirking her lips. I had seen that look before, when she scored a point over me at some social gathering in Exeter and persuaded her special friends to laugh at me again. "Was there anything in particular you wished to see me about, or is this a social call?"

Eustacia looked down, then up, meeting my gaze. "It's about your husband." She paused, then said in a rush, "How much do you trust him?"

"Totally."

"I thought I ought to come and see you, although Julia said I should not."

"Julia Drury?" Why should that lady object to Eustacia visiting me? And since when were they on first name terms?

"Yes. She has been kind to me lately." She looked down at her hands, clasped tightly together in her lap, over her fan. "She says I shouldn't bother you with such trivialities as this."

"So what does Julia Drury consider to be a triviality?" I was curious what she was going to say, though not alarmed.

She stared at me for a long moment but I met her gaze and waited.

"Richard asked me to become his mistress," she blurted. Her fair skin flushed scarlet. "I consented."

I took a deep breath, which she must have seen. I let her think what she liked. "And have you?" I kept my voice steady.

"Yes." She stared at me. Her pale eyes seemed to hold no guile but I knew better than that. "When I told Julia, she said it wasn't important to you anymore, that the passion I'd seen in you before had dissipated into a more proper regard. But we were friends long before you came into all this. I thought it only right to tell you."

'Friends' wasn't my description of our relationship, now or at any other time. "Crowing over your triumph?" I put my cup down. "Who else have you told? I take it you haven't told your mother?"

Eustacia shook her head with vigour. "No, I couldn't tell her." She didn't seem in the least disturbed and I knew she was watching me closely for any signs of distress. "I haven't told anyone, apart from Julia Drury. She told me not to tell." I'll wager she did. She'd want to keep that snippet for a time when she could exert maximum pressure.

"So it will be all around town by the end of the week." I hadn't thought her particularly stupid before, but I did now. "You fool, Eustacia. You've played right into Julia's hands." My voice did show something then—anger, although she might have mistaken the tremor for distress. Her eyes widened and her thin mouth crooked up at one corner.

"You're wrong, they truly care about you." She looked sincere; perhaps they really had taken her in.

"Oh, I know that."

"Then why won't you accept them as your friends?"

"Let's give it time, shall we?" I decided to draw her out a little more. "Why do you think they want to be friends?"

Exasperatedly she waved one hand in emphasis. "Julia was truly distressed to hear about Richard's betrayal of you and she begged me to keep it to myself." She seemed sincere. Perhaps Julia was deceiving her too well.

"When did you become his mistress?" I sat still, my tea totally abandoned on the little table by my side.

"Almost as soon as we arrived in London." The note of triumph was there, that tone I'd heard so often in Exeter in the past.

"And how does he behave to you?" Short of testing her knowledge of bedroom secrets, this was the nearest I could get.

She sighed and clasped her hands together, staring into space instead of at me. "He's the perfect gentleman. So courteous, so kind. He never forgets the considerations due to a lady and he is never so overcome by his passion he forgets the proprieties." So she'd been dreaming of him, had she?

I let a tremor into my voice. "Did he say why he wanted you?"

Her expression turned grave. "He says he needs more than you can give him. He says he loves me and he cannot help himself."

I'd heard enough. I picked up the little bell at my side and when Jervis answered its summons, I asked him to pass on my apologies to my husband and ask him to step in.

Eustacia obviously didn't expect this. She stood and in a whirl of amber silk made for the door. "Sit down, Eustacia. If he has something to answer for, he'll answer for it now." She stopped, glanced at me, then took her seat again in silence. I

wondered how she would cope with this, as she had evidently not given this turn of events any thought at all.

When Richard entered, immaculate in cool blue, he looked straight at me, a brow arched in query, then made his bow to Eustacia. He stood between us where we sat on the sofas set either side of the fireplace.

I began without preamble. "It seems Eustacia Terry here has become your mistress, has been so since we reached London."

He glanced at me, startled but turned his gaze to Eustacia. "Have you told anyone else?" He didn't bother to deny it. He didn't need to.

She met his gaze for the first time. "No, only Julia Drury."

He made a sound of exasperation. "Ach! So it will be all over town by next week."

"Just what I thought." I cast him a sly glance. "Apparently, you don't ever get so passionate that you forget the proprieties."

He grinned. "Have *you* ever known me to forget the—er—proprieties?" He walked across to stand behind my sofa and held his hand out.

"I don't know what they are."

"What *are* the proprieties of the bedchamber?" I heard his note of mischief and guessed what was coming. I wasn't wrong. "Before you strip your lover naked, do you ask permission? When you fondle her breasts, do you ensure she is comfortably seated? How about two women? How do you manage to observe the correct procedure? Eldest first, perhaps?"

"Richard, you will embarrass the poor girl." I reached my hand up. He smiled at me fondly. "That was the idea, my love. I hope you know how mild that was." I thought of what we did in the bedchamber—and out of it—and bit my lip, forced to agree.

He released my hand and lifted his head to address Eustacia. His hands rested lightly on the back of my couch. "I hope to God you're still a virgin. Your husband, whoever the unfortunate man turns out to be, will expect it. Perhaps Julia will teach you how to pretend."

The silence was deafening. "How can I be?" Eustacia countered. She put her chin up.

Richard shrugged. "How should I know?"

She looked appalled. Perhaps she had persuaded herself the lie was true. "My lord, you can't be denying our love." Game to the last.

He sighed. "When do we make love?" At least he succeeded in making her blush.

She answered readily enough. She must have been well coached. "When Rose has retired for the night. I came to you. In your bedroom at Southwood House." She stared at him, daring him to deny it.

"And what does my bedroom look like?"

She went on to give an accurate description of his room at Southwood House.

Richard took a turn around the room, finally stopping in front of where she sat. He stared down at her, then glanced at me, checking I wasn't distressed, before he continued. "Miss Terry, I don't know what this is about but both my wife

and I know you have never been and would never be my choice of mistress, even if I wanted one." He ignored her sound of protest, bent down to rest his hands on the arms of her chair and stared at her. She couldn't escape him. Her open mouth never got to say anything. "My wife and I never used my room at Southwood House. The only time I ever slept in that bed was before my marriage." He paused and sighed again. "I spend every night with my wife, an eccentricity I thought was well known by now." He stood upright and gazed down at her. "I must ask you to leave. I cannot have you bringing such distress to Rose."

Eustacia opened her mouth again but once more Richard interrupted her. "I advise you to spread your story no further. Even if it was believed, it would only bring you harm. No man would come near you with a respectable proposition after hearing that." He went on coldly, in a voice which could crack ice. "If you persist in spreading your story, I shall blacken your reputation so thoroughly that when you go home to Devonshire, the doors will be closed to you. One entry in a coffee house betting book and the deed is done. It's your choice but remember who you hurt most when you spread it."

"My lord—I—" It was her turn to be tremulous.

I hadn't doubted him. If I knew him any less, if our marriage had been only one of lust or arrangement, it would have been easy to believe but the flaw for Eustacia was that I knew him too well.

He held out his hand to help her to her feet. She placed her own small hand in it but he released her as soon as she was standing. "A foolish attempt. You should have known

Rose better than that." The deliberate, intimate use of my first name was to tell her something.

He didn't give her a chance to say anything further, courteously showing her out into the care of her maid. I heard his voice in the hall, asking that the carriage be brought round to take her home.

He came back upstairs and gazed at me. His mouth was set in a straight line, his eyes grave. "I knew it. They had a spy at Southwood House, almost certainly the little blonde maid."

"Oh, Richard!"

"Someone let that girl in, the one in our room that morning. When my mother checked with her housekeeper, they'd never heard of a Susan Jackson, much less employed her. The Drurys have been turning up at functions we've attended a little too much of late. We go from ball to rout and they're there. I've left instructions with Carier to make discreet enquiries. And I won't have Eustacia admitted again." He brought a chair and sat next to me, taking my hand again. "Don't let it worry you, my love. We're here and we left all my mother's servants behind. I have you safe now and unobserved, I'm sure of it."

"I don't like it, Richard, I don't like the idea of it."

"So you didn't mind the idea of Miss Terry becoming my mistress but you don't like to be spied on?"

I knew he was teasing me to lighten my mood. "You know I didn't believe that."

"I don't deserve your trust." He dropped a kiss on my forehead. "Didn't you doubt me at all?"

"If she had been anyone else, I might have paused for thought, even though you should know I would never doubt you. But not her, not after Exeter."

A frown crossed his face at that reminder but it didn't stay there long. "She must be very stupid. What made her think she could persuade you she was telling the truth?"

"She's always had a fancy for you, you know. Her father tried to dirty me in your eyes and make you turn to her. And we've been careful not to show our affection in front of the Drurys, so they may have informed her that our ardour has cooled. I don't think she expected me to call you in. If Julia had been correct in her assumptions, I'd have accused you of it later and you'd have denied it but the seed of doubt would have been planted."

"Would it?"

"Of course not."

He frowned. "You're far too good for me. I couldn't break your trust, even if I were ever tempted to do so, which as you must know is extremely unlikely in any case. You know I'm no saint, and you know I appreciate beauty, but I'm no longer tempted to sample it for myself."

I gazed into those celestial eyes. "This may cause some mischief. Julia may allow this to become known. It will start the gossips all over again."

He shrugged.

"Poor Eustacia."

"She doesn't deserve your compassion, my love. She's a stupid girl, as well as a vindictive one. If anything ruins her reputation, this will."

He stood and drew me to my feet. "Now will you please me and lie down for an hour? You look tired and I don't like to see it."

"I was going upstairs when Jervis told me that Eustacia was here. I'll go and rest gladly."

He escorted me into the hall, his arm still around my waist. He kissed me before I desired Nichols to be sent up and I went to the room we were to share together.

I was going to like it here.

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Chapter Fourteen

One evening not long after our move, Richard was engaged with some friends at one of those clubs held at a coffee house, strictly male, devoted to literature and fine wine. I confidently expected him home in the small hours, disgracefully drunk, so I decided to retire early with a good book of my own. This was a great luxury, as all our days seemed to be filled from morning until the small hours. I changed into a light undress, removing stays and hoops and settled down in the small parlour with a pot of tea and a warm fire.

The vigorously clanging doorbell interrupted my enjoyment and Tom was announced. I greeted him but it was clear he was in a great state of agitation and he thrust a note into my hands, bidding me read.

Dear Tom,

I hope you don't find this but if you do, it's just to tell you not to worry. I've been invited to join a party for a masquerade at Vauxhall. You know how I wanted to go but no one would let me. I'll be back soon, see you in the morning.

Georgiana.

I looked up at Tom, the note in my hand. "She says she'll come to no harm. Don't you trust her, Tom?"

"It's not that." He didn't sit, as I had bid him, but strode about the room, his long legs making nothing of the carpet. "She's so innocent, I'm afraid someone will take advantage of her. I don't know who she went with or when she made her

plans. I'm afraid for her, Rose. These masquerades have a fearsome reputation."

Indeed, he was right. Private masquerades were at the more *risqué* side of fashionable society but the public ones were an excuse for the better dressed ladies of the town to mingle with society, soliciting clients, and for illicit meetings between lovers and other types of dubious activity. The thrill must have encouraged Georgiana, together with the invitation of which Tom assured me he had not been aware.

"Why didn't you go and fetch her home?"

He hung his head. "I hoped to find your husband home. I didn't want it generally known she'd gone, I wanted to fetch her back without too much fuss and I thought Lord Strang was probably the best person to ask for help."

"I'm afraid he's gone in pursuit of literary excellence but with a few bottles of wine to go with it. He won't be back for a long time." I sighed and stood. "I'll come with you and send word around to Gervase's lodgings, though I fear he'll be out too. Have you any idea who she might have gone with?"

"None at all. James and Martha have gone to a rout with Lizzie and Ruth, and the Terrys have gone to a ball with the Drurys, so I can't think who would have taken her." He shook his head. "I can't ask you, Rose, you can't come."

"As long as you don't desert me for some lady of the night, we'll be fine," I assured him. "I'll take Nichols, too, you know she's a little more than a lady's maid. Not to mention a footman or two."

Tom frowned. I, who knew him so well, saw how worried he was. "You know I wouldn't ask but I'm at my wit's end. If

it became known she attended something like that, it could ruin her." He looked helplessly at me.

I thought the women were fools, but I wouldn't hesitate to help my old friend. I stood to leave the room. "I'll be as quick as I can but I can't go out in undress." I went upstairs, calling for Nichols, who came at once. She disapproved of the errand but I explained to her the necessity of discretion and she agreed Georgiana must be fetched home. I dressed quickly as I could, added a domino, bought in case of the occasion of a private masque and Nichols produced a mask, a plain black one. She also found a man's domino for Tom, with a mask attached to the hood. I wrote a note for Richard, explaining where I was and when I passed through the hall, I encountered Brangwyn, so I entrusted it to him. Two of our burliest footmen waited for us.

I didn't dare use my carriage or chair, because they were embossed with Richard's family crest, and he'd taken the uncrested one, so we ordered a hackney to take us to Vauxhall. Nichols, Tom and I crammed inside, the footmen following behind. These hackneys were only built for two. The night was chilly, so I was glad of my warm, enveloping domino and gloves, covering my tell-tale ruby betrothal ring and the wedding ring I had never taken off since our first true wedding night in Venice. Tom sat silently next to me, brooding on the fate of his sister. I put my hand over his and he smiled wanly. I tried to reassure him. "Georgiana has a lot of sense. I'm sure she'll be all right. Many respectable people go to these masquerades."

"Would you go?" Tom demanded.

"I've never considered it an amusing prospect and Richard never offered to take me. We're busy enough."

"You were at home tonight," he pointed out.

I couldn't keep the wistfulness out of my voice. "My last free night for a long time."

Vauxhall was usually approached by water but we were in a hurry, in no mood for amusements. When we reached Lambeth, we left the hackney and hurried around to the entrance, Tom fumbling in his pocket for the price of admission. The footmen followed behind us. I knew they wouldn't interfere unless I asked them to. They were there for my safety. I'd already donned my mask and as we passed through the gates, Tom lifted his hood over his head. It was nine o'clock and supper was about to be served, so we hurried towards the supper rooms in the hope of finding Georgiana and her party there. The brightly lit avenues were thronged with people in a variety of disguises, some of them none too decorous. My heart sank when I saw the acres of flesh on display. Not a respectable night, then. Not even verging on it.

We soon discovered how difficult it was to find a company of people, all masked, in a company of their peers. I kept my arm firmly on Tom's, and Nichols, also cloaked and masked, followed us closely. The footmen hovered.

We toured the supper rooms several times and short of removing my own mask and waiting for Georgiana to come to us, I couldn't think what else to do. We decided to move on, to where the dancing was well underway.

Vauxhall masquerades were popular and the avenues were even more crowded than before. I passed a couple who were busily engaged in something that should never be attempted in public and averted my eyes hurriedly. I had to ignore Tom's despairing curse. "What if that were her? She wouldn't know how to escape. Oh, Georgiana!"

The dance floor was similarly packed but lit with a thousand candles and lamps, making it much easier for us to see. The dances weren't at all the decorous, graceful efforts of West End ballrooms but seemed to be a mixture of country dances and a general romp, where the man seized a lady and capered about the floor.

We were looking on, when suddenly a strong pair of arms seized me. I looked wildly behind and was glad to see Tom, thinking on his feet, had grabbed Nichols and was pursuing me closely. Although I wasn't used to being handled in this way, after the first shock, it did give me an opportunity to look about as I whirled briskly about the floor with my unknown admirer. I saw no one I knew, so I let my gallant whirl me around twice more until I felt giddy and one of the footmen, his face grim, approached to extricate me. I glanced at him, trying to assure him I was fine and to stay back. I didn't want to advertise the fact that I had bodyguards.

I studied him, the eyes glittering behind the mask, a loose, inebriated smile on his face. "Shall we find somewhere a little more private?" He'd been talking as we danced but I'd taken no notice, too intent on searching for Georgiana.

"What for?" I asked stupidly, my mind not on the conversation.

He leaned forward. I smelled the sour wine on his breath. "I've taken a fancy to you, my dear. Don't worry, I'll see you right." He leaned farther forward.

"I think not."

"Oh yes." He breathed gusts of foul, sour air and came closer still.

So I took the stiletto out of my pocket and let him see it. "No."

Tom and Nichols had caught up by then and Nichols stood back, her own hand in her pocket, watching the man. She exchanged a glance with the footman. My gallant escort glanced back and saw them, then shrugged and moved away. "Sorry, my dear. Didn't know you were spoken for." I replaced the knife. Tom stared, a strange expression on what I could see of his face.

I was exasperated. "Did you expect me to come defenceless? If I know Nichols, she has more than a handkerchief in her pocket." Nichols nodded in confirmation. Tom said nothing, just shook his head. He was used to me as a quiet country girl. I knew I had to change, and I had every intention of doing so.

Once I'd recovered my breath, we moved on, sure Georgiana wasn't in the ballroom. Vauxhall had many walks, most dimly lit to facilitate clandestine meetings and we interrupted a few but none of them were of interest to us. Eventually I suggested we should return to the supper room, then go home. We had done our best. Nichols's shoulders sank in relief and we turned to retrace our steps.

The walkway was dimly lit and nearly deserted but as we moved back toward the blazing lights of the ballroom, I heard a noise coming from a small bower to our left. I would have walked past but the lady seated in it didn't entirely seem to welcome the attention of the man who had his arm around her shoulders. As we paused, we saw he was trying to insert his free hand down the bodice of her gown, having pushed aside her domino and the fichu she wore for modesty. There wasn't a lot left to the imagination.

Despite my determination to leave the revellers to their sport, the tears coursing down the poor girl's face moved me and I went over to them.

I tried to keep my tone reasonable. "Pray leave the girl alone, sir, there must be plenty more available this evening who would be more willing."

The man looked up. I saw his eyes glittering behind the black mask. Then he said the last thing I wanted to hear in the voice I least wanted to hear. "Rose?"

I put my head back and gulped some fresh air. When I looked back, the man had indeed desisted and the girl was fumbling at her neck, straightening her costume. Then Tom pushed past. "Georgiana?"

"Oh, Tom!" She threw herself into his arms. "Take me home, Tom, I never was so deceived in all my life." She burst into tears. Tom comforted his sister and I watched her tormentor as he stood and removed his mask.

We stared at each other. Now he was on his feet, he was more easy to recognise, the handsome features marred by anger, the clothes disarrayed.

"What were you thinking of?" I asked him coldly.

"She seemed willing enough." Steven's voice was roughened by frustration and anger. "Until just now, when I kissed her, she was all smiles. Believe me, Rose, I wouldn't have forced her."

I didn't believe it but I didn't say so. "I'm glad to hear it." I didn't like him making so free with my first name, either.

"And your wife? What does she think about all this?"

Steven put his hand to his forehead and dropped it again, gazing at me helplessly. "She has matters of her own to pursue."

Georgiana's tears were abating, settling into gentle sobs now that she was safe with her brother. While I spoke to Steven, Nichols kept her attention on me, my footmen at her back but she helped Georgiana to rearrange her neckwear and make herself decent again.

"What were you thinking of?" I asked him again. "You know Georgiana, you know she's a respectable girl, what made you think she would consent to this?" I waved my hand, indicating the dark bower, the lack of attendants.

He shrugged. "She seemed game. She was laughing and joking over supper, she even kissed Miss Terry on the cheek and she drank as much as the rest of us. She said she felt dizzy and I took that as my cue."

Georgiana was flushed and sniffing. "She might have just felt dizzy," I commented.

Tom took a hand in the conversation. "You filthy degenerate, I could kill you for this."

I feared that Tom might call Steven out and, for Georgiana's sake, that was the last thing we needed. Any scandal would send her back to Devonshire in disgrace.

I smiled, one of Richard's cool smiles with no humour in it. "I wouldn't call him a degenerate, Tom. Steven just mistook the situation, that's all."

"Still—" Tom stepped forward, releasing his sister but I stepped between them before he could insult Steven further. "Go back to Georgiana, Tom. You don't want to cause any scandal, do you?" He understood then and casting Steven another black look, went back to his sister. Nichols stared calmly at Steven, her hand in her pocket.

I studied Steven, the handsome, tall figure, the dark hair shining in the moonlight, looking almost rakish. "You look like a highwayman, standing there with that mask in your hand."

"And you look as magnificent as you always did," he said quietly. "But you're only just realising it for yourself, aren't you?" I thought then, perhaps he had some feelings for me. "Your marriage has given you an arrogance that I find totally compelling."

There was no doubt about it. He was making advances. "I'm sure that brings you solace in the sleepless nights. How could you have thought Georgiana would be willing to let you take such liberties with her?"

Giving me one last, glowing look, he turned and bowed low to poor Georgiana, sweeping off his hat and making a graceful gesture of deference with it. "I can only beg your pardon, ma'am. I totally mistook the situation." He stood straight again. "And yours too, for putting you to any trouble."

I understood the lady had permission from her brother and since she was accompanied by her fellow guests from Hareton House, I assumed there was no problem with her attendance at our little *soirée* tonight."

"Well, there was," said Tom. "Her note didn't tell me who she was with."

"I think we should go before we attract too much attention." I turned to walk out of the alley, towards the light. Steven offered the support of his arm and after a moment's hesitation, I took it. I was beginning to feel a familiar faintness and I didn't want anyone to know, so I had little choice.

Only I heard what Steven murmured to me. "I meant what I said. I should like to be your friend again."

"Really?" I was cool but not impolite. "After trying to kill me?"

He frowned. "That was foolish but I was so angry. When I thought our betrothal was a settled thing, to find that the woman I'd seen with the arrogant popinjay I had taken such a dislike to was you, I could only think of revenge."

I let his reference to my husband pass. "So you don't think of revenge now?"

"How can I?" He raised my hand to his lips. I gave him no response and let my hand rest on his sleeve again, although the touch of his lips wasn't pleasant. It reminded me of things I would rather forget. "You've blossomed, come into your own. I knew there was something more inside that dowdy exterior, that given a chance you would grow. I'm sorry it

should have been with him, that's all. Does he treat you well?"

"Do you treat your wife well?" I countered, not willing to give him any idea of how well Richard did treat me.

He looked down to meet my eyes. "As well as she expects.... I've heard the rumours."

"What rumours?" My tone was sharper than I wanted it to be.

"Your husband and Eustacia Terry. They're true, aren't they?"

"How should I know?" The irritability worked in my favour here.

He smiled. "It's flying around the ballrooms that Strang's finally succumbed. The clubs are looking for proof but there seems little doubt." My heart sank. I assumed Steven and his wife were not remiss in passing on that particular rumour but I didn't want them to know how close we really were. That would be a weapon they wouldn't hesitate to use.

I looked up into his eyes, making my own round and disingenuous. "Aren't you surprised that it should be Eustacia?"

"No, she's always been an accredited beauty." He paused. "I'm thinking of making a play for her myself. Do you mind?"

"No, why should I?"

"Rose, from our previous acquaintance I wouldn't have credited you with such good sense. Perhaps marriage was what was needed to knock the romantic notions out of you."

Perhaps he remembered the hours I spent with him, gazing adoringly into his eyes while he told me extravagant

untruths about myself. I was beginning to feel most uncomfortable. I was glad when we reached the ballroom, where he said he had left the rest of his party and took his leave.

"Pestilence," Tom muttered at his back.

I stared after Steven. "I've always considered Julia Drury to be a greater threat."

A wave of sick dizziness overcame me. I put my hand up to my forehead and nearly fainted. The heat and the time that I'd spent on my feet nearly defeated me.

Nichols, behind, caught and supported me, putting her arm firmly about my shoulders. The footmen moved closer. I tried to smile at Tom and Georgiana, who were staring at me in alarm. We made our way to the exit. I didn't speak when she and Tom helped me into the hackney carriage but leaned back against the greasy cushions with my eyes closed.

When I opened them, it was to the clear grey regard of Tom and his sister.

I quavered a smile. "It's all right, I'll be well enough when we get home. You'd better stay with us tonight, rather than rouse Hareton House. I'll have a message sent around when we get home. Can you see to that, Nichols?"

"After I've seen to you, my lady," said my doughty maid.

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Chapter Fifteen

We were home soon and although I was feeling much better, Nichols helped me through the front door. The footman in the hall took our dominoes but my mask was still in my hand as Nichols opened the door to the small parlour and I went through.

Richard stood by the fireplace, his face harsh, his eyes icy blue, cold and unwelcoming.

I went forward to face him alone. I heard the others come in but I took no notice. "Where have you been?" he asked levelly, quietly.

"Vauxhall."

He was angry but I couldn't see why he should be. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Not a bit." I didn't vouchsafe any further confidences.

"You had forgotten your exhaustion or the reason for it?"

He was drunk, although I hadn't noticed this at first. It was sometimes hard to tell when Richard had drunk a little too much. An extra recklessness, an exaggeration, was all most observers would notice. But he was drunker than I'd seen him for a long time. In this state he became reckless, harder, less caring, more like the man I first saw than the one I'd learned to love.

But I was in no mood to be careful with him. I'd had a difficult time of it.

I threw the mask I carried to the nearest chair and his gaze followed my gesture. "A masquerade?" His icy stare met

my eyes again. "Vauxhall? How salubrious. Did you see anyone we know?" His manner was smooth, formal, hard.

"Only Steven Drury with his hand down the front of Georgiana's gown. Didn't you get my note?"

That brought him up short. He stared at me then his anger began to dissolve into something else. I saw the ice melt. He must have known a Vauxhall masquerade wouldn't be my choice of amusement, especially without him and his reason was overcoming whatever anger he was still feeling. The rigid muscles about his mouth softened. "Note?"

"I left a note with Brangwyn. He didn't give it to you?"

He shook his head slowly, his eyes hardening with suspicion. "I saw him when I came in but he said nothing about a note."

I frowned in bewilderment. "It's not like him to forget."

"Was there a note?" He still held remnants of his anger, otherwise he wouldn't have asked. He stood completely still, only the glitter of his jewelled waistcoat buttons revealing his agitation.

I stared at him, daring him to call me a liar. "Yes, of course there was. I had every expectation of reaching home before you but I left a note in any case." Something else struck me. "Aren't you back early?"

"Yes. I came back to make sure you were well." The brevity of his answer couldn't disguise his concern.

"Did you think I had gone out for pleasure?"

He drew in a breath and held it, before letting it out heavily. "No," he confessed, the anger going out of him. "I

was worried. Nichols had gone and Carier had no idea where you were."

I shook my head. "I took two of our burliest footmen with me. You'd given Carier another task and he wasn't at home." We stared at each other and he let me see the fear that had driven him to anger.

Tom said, "We had better go, Georgiana, if you feel well enough?"

Georgiana flushed. "I'm so sorry for what happened tonight. I shouldn't have done it, I know, but—"

"You need not leave." I had offered them a bed for the night. I turned around to prevent him but unfortunately, I turned too quickly. I caught my heel in my gown and at the same time was hit by such a strong wave of sick dizziness, I fell like a stone.

Nichols and Richard caught me together but it was Richard who lifted and placed me on the nearest sofa and knelt to take my hands. I heard a faint scream and knew it was Georgiana.

"Her ladyship became faint at Vauxhall," Nichols informed him. "I had to support her to the carriage."

"Oh, dear God, Rose, I'm so sorry." His voice shook. "I was desperately worried when I found you gone and I could discover no note or any indication of where you had gone. I was in despair. When you returned, healthy, dressed for a masquerade—forgive me, my love."

Tom's anxious face over Richard's shoulder. "What's wrong, Rose? Are you ill? Oh, I knew I should have gone on my own, I should never have told you."

"No, I'm not ill." I didn't feel up to saying any more at that moment. The room still spun.

Nichols returned with a cold drink of milk. Richard helped me sit up then gave me the glass so I could drink, his steadying arm around my shoulders. I smiled at him gratefully and the atmosphere between us thawed. "Tom needed help. Georgiana had gone to Vauxhall with an unknown party of people. It was the Drurys and Miss Terry but we didn't know that until we found her."

"I should have trusted you to take care of yourself."

"Yes, you should," I told him, "but you should have received that note."

"I'll speak to Brangwyn in the morning. Don't concern yourself with that."

He got to his feet and faced Tom. "It seems we can't hide it any longer. You should know Rose is increasing and she feels faint if she stays on her feet for too long."

Tom stared at me. I smiled happily at him and took Richard's hand. "June, we think. But don't tell anyone else, please, until we've had a chance to tell our families."

Tom and Georgiana stared at us, open-mouthed. "I never thought—" Tom said, amazement in his face and perhaps a little hurt, too. "Congratulations."

"Oh no, and I caused you all that trouble!"

I smiled up at Georgiana. I could afford to smile now. "Don't worry about it. I could have easily fainted anywhere."

"Congratulations." Georgiana's felicitations weren't as fulsome as Tom's.

"Thank you." Richard turned back to me. "You should go up to bed, my love. Shall I carry you, or do you feel well enough to walk?" His solicitude overwhelmed me, as if he was trying to make up for his previous behaviour. It had only been a flash of anger, but I had not liked it and I didn't want him to think he was immediately forgiven. Anger borne of his concern for me, but it was not appropriate for him to behave so. From the way he gazed at me he knew it, too.

"I'll be all right in a moment. Let me finish this milk and I'll go right up. I thought Tom and Georgiana should stay tonight, there's no point in rousing Hareton House at this hour."

"All right." Richard went and found a chair, throwing the mask that lay on it to the floor. Tom and Georgiana also sat. "So what happened tonight? Was it the Drurys' doing again?"

Tom sighed. "Not entirely. Georgie left me a confusing note and all I thought was that Vauxhall on a masquerade night wasn't the right place for her, so I came to see you, as I didn't want to alarm anyone at Hareton House." Richard nodded and glanced to where I sat with my feet up. "I came here and Rose insisted on coming when I told her. Of course, I wouldn't have dreamt of allowing her to if I had known—" he broke off, blushing but then resumed, "but she came with her maid and the footmen and they both armed themselves."

I drew the knife out of my pocket. "Only this. Though Nichols might have had something else."

Silently Nichols, standing behind my sofa, drew out a small pistol. Richard nodded. "Good."

Tom raised his thick eyebrows in surprise but he made no comment. He continued to tell Richard about the misadventure at Vauxhall and Richard listened in silence. He sighed when Tom was done. "Drury may have been wanting to hurt us through Georgiana. It's his way to find weaknesses and Georgiana is young and inexperienced. He may have been trying to see how far she would go, or to hurt her. We know he's capable of that." He glanced at me, then away to Tom.

I had to mention her. "What about his wife?"

"Julia?" His tone was disparaging. "Feather brained. Look at the assassination attempt. I don't think she remembered it until we brought it back to her."

"I think you're mistaken. She's quite capable."

Tom's brain had just caught up with what Richard had said. "Assassination attempt?"

"The Drurys paid someone to have us killed."

Tom visibly paled and Georgiana clutched his arm in her shock. "Steven Drury? I never thought he was capable of that!" Tom cried.

Richard crossed to the sideboard and poured out a drink. "I've had enough for one night but you seem to need this." He gave the brandy to Tom and glanced at Georgiana in enquiry but she shook her head. Richard resumed his seat.

"Julia is more than capable of carrying out such a scheme," I said.

Richard regarded me, one eyebrow raised. "I never found her so. She didn't seem to be able to hold more than one thought in her head at a time and even that was an effort."

"She did that for you. Thinking that was what you wanted, she did it to please you, to bind you to her. She has Steven now."

"I wish her joy of him," Richard said sourly but on looking at me again, he got to his feet and held out his hands. "Time you were in bed, my lady." I put my hands in his and let him draw me to my feet. He nodded to Nichols, who was on her way to me and kissed me tenderly. "Goodnight, my love, I'll be up soon." I determined to be asleep when he came upstairs, to give him time to think on his behaviour. I bade him and our guests goodnight, going out of the room with Nichols and trying not to look too closely at Tom.

When I woke the next day, I found Richard awake already. He took me into his arms and bade me good morning. "I'm sorry about last night. You know I don't doubt you, don't you?"

"I know. Otherwise one of us wouldn't be in this bed."

He drew back and met my stare. He wouldn't seduce me into forgiving him. I wanted this clear. "Richard, I left a note that went astray. You should have trusted me enough to know I would do nothing to risk my health or the health of our baby."

He dropped his head so his hair grazed my chin. I couldn't see his eyes. When he lifted his chin again his eyes held misery. "I know. My lamentable temper has led me into trouble more than once. As it has now." He sighed. "I have never felt so protective towards a woman before. I want to surround you with fine cotton, swaddle you like a baby and

sometimes I go too far. Especially when I've drunk too much."

My mouth firmed. "I did notice that."

"Yes. I will try not to drink too much."

"And try not to suspect me of recklessness when it is you who is reckless."

"Yes. I swear it."

We sealed the bargain with a kiss, a solemn kiss of an oath given and accepted.

He studied me without speaking for a moment. "I knew I was right."

"In what way?"

"When I said on that first morning, that I'd never get used to waking up with you. It lifts me to see you when I wake, even like this, even when I have a humble apology to make."

I smiled and stretched up to kiss him. "Make sure there aren't too many of them. Do you think Brangwyn forgot to give you the note?"

"I met him in the hall as I came in. I bade him good evening and asked where you were and he said you'd gone out with Tom Skerrit, dressed for a masquerade. No, I don't think he forgot."

I was bewildered. "Then why would he do it?"

He didn't answer immediately. He drew his hand gently up my arm, touching my breast as if by accident, then lingering there. "I think he wanted to create trouble between us. If we trusted each other any less, he would have done so."

"Why would he do that?" I asked but then, as I slipped my hand around his waist, the realisation dawned. "Oh no," I

breathed and I looked up into his face. "Not Brangwyn. He's Julia's spy? He knows exactly where we're supposed to be, when—" I broke off, appalled at the thought. "We'll have to dismiss him immediately."

"Oh no. I stayed awake for some time after I came to bed, watching you and thinking over the events of the evening. Brangwyn told me enough to stoke my anger, but instead of believing you had gone off with Tom on some clandestine affair, as he obviously intended me to, I was only concerned for your health. That was what caused my anger. Brangwyn withheld the note and gave me misleading information. We can use him, as he tried to use us."

"But I don't like the thought of him knowing so much about us, if he's in the pay of the Drurys."

His caresses were soothing rather than stimulating. I let myself be stroked and listened to him. "I know, my sweet life, but think. While they believe they have Brangwyn, they think they have the upper hand. But if we know, we can use that. If you really can't bear it, then we'll dismiss him straightaway but we could use this and see what they do next."

"Are you sure it's Brangwyn?" I lifted myself up on one elbow and looked down at his dear face.

Richard nodded. "I'm sure. The Drurys have known our every move in society. They know we want to talk to that girl Julia is keeping so close and they've taunted us, not letting her speak, showing her to us. Think, my love, who else could have told them all that?"

He was right. Although Brangwyn had come from Thompson's, he was not from the special box. Julia, knowing

we had a financial interest in the agency, could have put him there for us to discover.

"So what do you think we should do?"

He smiled. "Let him think that his strategy was successful and we're estranged, that your evening at Vauxhall forced us apart. We can tell Nichols and Carier, and I will get Carier to ruffle the sheets on the other bed, to make it seem as if I slept there. Then we wait upon events. They won't be long in coming."

"They're spreading the rumour about you and Eustacia Terry. Steven made a point of mentioning it last night."

"I know. Shall I put a stop to it?"

"Can you?"

"Eventually. I can let it be seen how I feel about the girl."

"Won't that mean cutting her?" I didn't want her to be hurt. We had executed her father, and although she didn't know this, the guilt ate at my soul. That was why, despite disliking her, I tolerated her.

"It's that or ruin her reputation. Drury is just using her as a weapon."

I sighed. "I don't know."

"Then leave it to me. Eustacia played into their hands, letting them spread stories like that. She did it—I know she did, don't try to deny it—to spite you and she can't expect to emerge scot-free."

"What do you think the Drurys want to do?"

"Separate us, play with us, make us unhappy. I don't know. We'll continue to allow Brangwyn to arrange our social

calendar, then they will find us whenever they want to. So can you go along with the masquerade?"

"I don't know if I can be cold to you, even if it is just in public."

He laughed and continued his caresses, filling me with an urgency that had nothing to do with our present conversation. "It won't be for long." I decided to show him my forgiveness in the best way and moved, covering his body with mine. "Don't you think it might add an extra ... piquancy?" He would have said more but I had just moved that extra inch and made us one, so he drew in a delighted breath instead.

"Perhaps," I said, lifting gently but rhythmically, watching his face, seeing the pleasure reflected there. "We could try, I suppose." Then I felt his strong, urgent response to my loving and I forgot everything else.

Sometimes I wondered if another man could have provoked these responses, could have given me so much physical pleasure. Richard's breadth of experience meant I didn't need it, as he brought all the variety and adventure that several lovers might have done and I could never have loved anyone else in this way. We had fallen in love with the kind of relentless finality that swept everything else away, leaving us both breathless and beached on strange shores. We were still finding our way.

I cancelled my levee for that morning, hearing the disappointed mutters outside my bedroom, as Nichols informed my visitors that I had the headache. I smiled and settled down in the warm bed with my now exhausted husband for another hour and we decided we must tell our

families about our condition today. My pregnancy was becoming obvious, if not in my shape, then in my propensity to faint, so we couldn't keep our secret any longer. This was the last morning I could hug my secret to myself. I determined to make the most of it.

* * * *

Tom and Georgiana were waiting in the dining room when I entered. Richard had gone to see Brangwyn, so it was safe to tell them what we had worked out while he kept the secretary busy.

"Good God." Tom said. "Why would the Drurys go to such lengths?"

I finished filling my plate from the sideboard and returned to the table. "Because they hate us. Because they share a vindictive turn of mind. But there's something else. More than revenge."

"What? What can you give them?"

I thought of Thompson's. "Power. They may want to kill our interest, or even win us over to their side. It's one of the things we must find out. We intend to let Brangwyn think that his ploy last night succeeded, that we're estranged for the time being."

Georgiana looked frankly sceptical. "You don't have anything the Drurys want, surely."

I exchanged a glance with my old friend. Tom knew more than his sister and was evidently keeping his own counsel. "I was always taught," he said, "to think the best of people, to

assume they are essentially good but some of the things I've learned recently are making me think otherwise."

I was sorry to hear that. "I never had any illusions, Tom, even when I was living quietly in Devonshire. I saw more about the realities of human nature sitting against the wall in Exeter Assembly Rooms than I have almost anywhere else. People are a mixture for the most part, neither all good nor all bad but I've seen enough of the world to know what they're capable of."

Tom nodded in agreement and applied himself to his breakfast.

When I got up to pour some tea, Tom stood, too, then looked away when I tried to smile at him. I knew immediately what was wrong. "I'm not ill, Tom, just pregnant. We're going to tell our families soon, so it won't be a secret much longer."

"I'm pleased for you both." He still wouldn't look at me.

Richard entered the room, closely followed by Brangwyn, and after one glance at him, I immediately looked away. My husband's eyes were cold, unfeeling, in the way they had been when I had first met him but I knew mine might give me away if I gazed at him for too long. "We should be leaving, my lady," he said.

"Indeed." I tried to match his frostiness.

Telling our families proved to be a joy. After enduring the embraces of Martha, James and my sisters, we went on to Southwood House, where the joy was less unconfined but just as heartfelt. With our families we could behave as we always did but it was hard to be cool in public, as we had agreed.

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Chapter Sixteen

That same evening we attended the opera and we had every expectation of seeing the Drurys there, since Brangwyn also knew of the event. We were not disappointed.

This was the first time I had attended the opera in Covent Garden, the place where the cream of society liked to be seen and the place we had chosen for our first tussle with the Drurys. The auditorium dazzled and excited me, and while Richard couldn't be his usual attentive self, I knew I would still find some enjoyment in the evening.

We had a box at the front of the house. We'd invited Gervase and Lizzie to join us there, both of whom knew by now about our ploy to draw to out the Drurys, so they weren't surprised to witness Richard's coldness to me, nor mine to him.

"You make a daunting couple like this," Gervase commented in a low voice. "You could depress the pretensions of a prince. Both of you."

The opera was at the centre of fashionable life and it was magnificently appointed. The proprietor was well aware of the primary source of his income. Two great chandeliers lit the auditorium and gilding gleamed everywhere, enhancing the glitter of the people inhabiting the boxes that lined the front of the house. The great and the good filled the pit and they watched each other, commenting and criticising. Richard and I sat together, deliberately not looking at each other, gazing around until we caught sight of our quarry.

"There," Richard said softly.

I trained my opera glasses in the same direction as his. They had a box opposite ours, but lower down, nearly on the stage. Miss Terry accompanied them and the little maid stood at the back, next to Julia's maid. "I see them."

When Steven saw us looking, he stood and bowed, so we acknowledged him, then turned away, leaving the rest to them. "They must know this can't be a permanent rift, especially when they hear about your condition," Richard murmured. "They'll strike soon, I'm sure of it."

We settled down to watch the first act. The quality of the music thrilled me. At great expense, the owners enticed the best sopranos and castrati, usually from Italy. Richard informed me that although some of them had Italian names, they might hail from Lancashire; a voice wasn't considered worth listening to in this place unless it had an Italian name attached.

It was a shame the castrato tonight had run to fat and passed his first youth, as his fine, ethereal voice was one of the best I'd ever heard. In his *rôle* as handsome hero, he was best listened to with the eyes closed. The soprano was taller than her hero but her attitudes were splendid and hardly a note was flat. They enacted the story of Dido and Aeneas and if their bodies weren't suitable for the parts they played, their voices were.

I wondered how artists who depended on their voices for expression felt when they had a sore throat or a cold. Much as I would feel if my fingers were hurt and I couldn't play the keyboard for a time, I supposed. I shuddered at the thought

and felt Richard's hand briefly close on mine under the cover of the edge of the box. It heartened me to know that however much he was feigning indifference, his observation and care were still there.

Lizzie enjoyed the performance as much as I did but for different reasons. The costumes were of the finest and the special effects spectacular. I heard her indrawn breath as the scenery rolled back on hidden wheels, revealing a new vista. I turned to her to exchange a smile.

"This is one of my dreams," she told me. "When we were immured in Devonshire, I used to dream about coming to the opera in London. And now, here we are."

"No one could have deserved it more than you," I told her. "I always wanted you to have your dreams but I was never a part of them, not in my mind."

She laughed softly. "You were always a part of them in my mind. The only difference is," she lowered her voice even more, "I never imagined you would be somewhere else, with someone else."

"Who could possibly imagine Richard?" I countered. Sighing, she admitted it was true.

At the first interval, with barely a look or word to me, Richard got up and left the box. I asked Lizzie to watch for me and within a minute, she said, "He's entered the Drury's box. He's bowing over Julia's hand. Now he's bowing over Eustacia's. Horrid girl. Is he flirting with her?"

"A little more than that. There's a strong rumour that Eustacia is his mistress. She's encouraged it and the Drurys are fostering it too."

"Poor Rose."

"It's not true."

She laughed shortly. "I never imagined it was. Strang hates Eustacia. But why isn't he denying the rumours?"

I gazed at a lady in another box, dressed in puce with rubies, for some time before I nodded to her and turned away. "Because it fosters the idea that we're estranged. It gives it substance. We won't let it continue for much longer."

"He may destroy her reputation," said Gervase.

"It's her own fault," I snapped. Gervase stared at me, his eyes wide with surprise but said no more. I didn't like to admit, even to myself, that Eustacia had hurt me this time but she had.

Not wanting to watch, I asked Gervase to take us outside, to promenade along the wide corridor outside the boxes. My tension rose.

Richard didn't return for the second act. Although I knew this was a masquerade, it still hurt. It shocked me to discover how deeply, particularly since this wasn't real. My happiness was vested in the hands of this man, so unlike anyone I had ever known before. If he should tire of me for real, I would never recover.

The music swelled in intensity as Dido became aware that Aeneas would leave her, never to return.

They brought refreshments to us in the interval, then a knock fell on the door of our box. Glancing to where Richard was sitting next to Julia Drury, I knew who it was.

Steven entered and bowed low to Gervase and Lizzie, who returned the greeting frostily. They left shortly after, to

promenade outside. Lizzie didn't approve of our plan but she couldn't do anything to prevent it. Since Nichols was standing silently at the back of the box, the proprieties were, for the moment, being observed.

I allowed Steven to sit next to me and kiss my hand. "Don't you mind my husband sitting so familiarly with your wife?" I asked him.

"Don't you?" he countered.

"Why should I?" I stared at them. Richard's head was bent over Julia's, smiling. Julia smiled back at him. Eustacia, on his other side, moved closer.

I looked back at Steven in time to see his expression of pleasure. Caught out, he smiled in sympathy. I was sincerely distressed and I deliberately let some of it show, although it was hard to allow this man to see my true feelings.

"Julia expects tribute," he explained. "She wouldn't have rested until she got it from him."

"Is this public enough for her? Did she particularly want it to be in public?"

"Oh yes." He sipped the wine I'd had served to him.

"Is that why you married her?" I couldn't keep the edge from my voice, anxiety and distress colouring it.

"Partly. But she did attract me and your ardour had so obviously cooled. For me, at least." He smiled. "Well, well, it all happened for the best."

"Why did she take you?"

He gave a little sigh. "She was in such a taking when Strang declared for you that she would have gone with anybody." He took another sip of his wine. "She said she

would win him back but as far as I can see, you got the best of the bargain. You have the title and his wealth. *Is he wealthy?"*

That was the last thing on my mind but I told him what he wanted to hear. "Not as wealthy as your Julia." I watched the smile come, that triumphant curl of the lips.

"Then I win." He touched his glass to mine. I didn't drink. With a shrug, he turned his attention back to the box his wife occupied. "I detect trouble in paradise." He watched Richard flirt with Eustacia Terry. "What can you have done to upset him?"

I swallowed. "I went to a masquerade at Vauxhall, if you remember. And he has done something to hurt me. I said I could go where I liked," I improvised. After all, it could have gone like that and probably would have done if we trusted each other less. The thought of a true break with Richard fuelled the growing anxiety I was feeling. If he had taken a mistress, I would be in real misery, knowing my dependence on him, forced to share, knowing he was doing with someone else what he did with me.

The music increased in volume, swelling to a climax.

Steven patted my hand sympathetically. "Well, there's little he can do now. You're married to him, so you have all the security you need." The footman had left so he poured himself another glassful. "We've come a long way, haven't we?" He gazed out of the box at the company below, milling about in the game of courtship and scandal.

We had indeed. "It's the same game they play everywhere. But the jewels are finer and the music is better, that's all."

"Oh no, you're wrong." I turned away from the spectacle in front of us to see him looking at me with some warmth in his handsome face. I was glad of Nichols's silent presence. "The games here are far more interesting. Julia is inventive in her choice and I can add a certain amount myself."

I suddenly saw him as a person, instead of an enemy. I thought about how wretched and humiliating to someone as self-centred as Stephen his life must have been as a poor curate at the beck and call of everyone, knowing he could do better with a patron, a rich wife, a fortune of his own. I understood how he could consider himself lucky now. He had everything he wanted, without stint. "We don't play games," I lied.

"Everybody plays games." He looked across at his wife. "Look at him. Is he playing with Julia, or is he trying to make you jealous?"

I looked. I knew precisely what Richard was doing and he seemed to be having a modicum of success. He had drawn the girl from the back of the box to serve him some wine. He had kept her there and was evidently talking to Julia about her, since occasionally he glanced at the girl and smiled. That pang hit me once more.

"He wouldn't stoop to that," I told Steven grandly but whether he was stooping to it or not, jealousy twisted in my stomach. I was foolishly close to tears, made worse by Steven's next words. "I thought you two were love's young

dream. I'm glad to see you growing out of it. You may come to bless this rift, you know. The beginning of something new."

"You never know," I managed. When the door opened I was never so glad in my life to see my sister. She didn't hide her dislike of Steven and he soon bowed and left us.

I relaxed, letting my shoulders slump and Gervase leaned forward, anxious. "Are you well, Rose? Shall I fetch Richard back to you, or take you home?"

"No, Gervase, I'm well. I just found Steven to be so unpleasant. I can't understand why I ever found him attractive."

"He's extremely good looking," Gervase said. He would notice that, I thought, still a little under Steven's baleful influence. "He seems to be intelligent, too but his experiences have perverted him into a schemer. He should do well in a certain sector of society." His cold tones made his opinion clear.

As we settled down to the third act, Richard rejoined us. He sat in the place recently vacated by Steven and said quietly, "Some progress. Julia is maturing nicely. I wish Drury joy of her. Thank God I never fell into her clutches." He put his hand over mine, briefly. I just stopped myself clutching his hand. The emotion of the opera, seeing my husband engaged so provocatively with someone else, all served to bring me near to tears.

We stayed to the end, as Lizzie enjoyed the endpiece more than she did the opera itself. So did the Drurys, Julia exclaiming and fluttering her fan to attract attention to herself. Richard wasn't the only man to visit their box in the

course of the evening but as their reconciliation was so public and our new frostiness towards each other equally public, she was in high spirits.

At the end of the evening, I left on Gervase's arm. He put his hand on mine and smiled warmly, as though in consolation and indeed I did feel defeated and low.

It wasn't late but I decided to retire, while Richard went on to a reception somewhere, so I was surprised to find him waiting in the bedroom when I came out of my dressing room, ready for bed.

He was still dressed in brocade and satin, the solitaire pin he usually wore winking at his throat and all his rings still in place. He had taken off his heavy, elaborate coat and it laid thrown carelessly across a chair, his wig on another.

He took me in his arms and led me to the bed, where the covers had already been drawn down.

After he settled me, he covered me up, tucking me in as though I were a child, then he lay down on top of the covers, heedless of his fine clothes. He rested his head on his hand and studied me seriously. "I'm not sure I want to go on with this. You were distressed, weren't you?"

"You saw?" Of course he did. I could no more hide anything from him than I could from myself.

"Whatever I say, you know what I was, what I used to do. What I used to be capable of doing. I can only convince you by my actions. My love, I felt your distress across the width of the Opera House. Julia Drury is poison."

"Steven Drury could run her a close second. He hinted at things I don't even want to think about."

He frowned. "Has he propositioned you?"

"Not precisely but he's trying to draw me back."

His next words sent a jolt through me. "Julia propositioned me. In no uncertain terms, in front of Miss Terry. I think part of Julia's objective was to shock her, which by the way, she succeeded in doing."

"Did you accept?"

"What do you think?" There was an edge of exasperation in his voice. "She's delighted at the rift she sees opening between us and she'll do anything she can to widen it. I think—no, I'm sure of it—she wants to be the first mistress I take after my marriage. She knows I'm not with Eustacia Terry, much as she is fostering the rumour. It would be a triumph for Julia, something she could flaunt in front of you and everybody else."

He must have seen something in my expression, for he touched my cheek with the backs of two fingers. His tone changed to an intimate purr. "As far as I'm concerned, I'll have no more mistresses. You were the last, and the best."

His touch was balm to me. "I don't doubt you, it was the thought of the cold bloodedness of it all. If she loved you, it would be easier to understand, in a way. *Do* you think she loves you?"

"No. She has never loved anyone but herself. I'm sure she doesn't love her husband. She took him because he was there for the taking and of course, because of his lack of fortune, she could own him." He leaned back, still watching me. "I don't think she's entirely satisfied with her bargain though. He seems to be developing some independence of his own."

I moved closer so that I could touch him and he smiled and put his arms about me, holding me close and safe. He kissed the top of my head and when I looked up, my mouth. "I'm supposed to be meeting her at Lady Cavendish's but I'm tempted not to. Shall we throw the scheme to the winds and try some other way? I can't bear the thought of you so upset and that I should cause it."

"Certainly not," I replied, although I was tempted to agree. "We have to talk to that girl." His loving presence gave me the strength I needed. "What did you find out about her tonight?"

He sighed and stroked my hair, still damp from having the powder washed out of it. "She's more than a trainee lady's maid, more like a pet. I don't know what Julia has in mind but she keeps the girl close. I spoke to her once but only to flirt. It's as though Julia is tempting me with her. As though I would be attracted by a girl as young as that."

"You were once," I reminded him. I could have bitten my tongue out, knowing how much the thought of it upset him. It was my own foolish doubts that made me waspish.

He still held me, stroking my hair gently and in a steady voice he said, "I was younger than Lucy at the time." He paused before going on, "I've always preferred experienced women since I came of age. Until you."

I reached across to touch his shirt-sleeved arm. "I'll be here later, and tomorrow."

"So you will," he said, holding me close. He drew back and studied my face for a minute or two. "You're sure about this?"

I pushed all my doubts aside. "Yes. We have to. It's the only lead we have."

He sighed. "All right then, kiss me once more and I'll be off. Sleep well, my love."

So we kissed and he left, picking up his wig and his coat and going through to his dressing room.

The next day I got up early and left Richard to his slumbers. He must have reached home in the small hours. He had come back to me, to my bed, just as he said he would.

The day was bright, a crisp November day and the sun streamed in through the windows of my dressing room as Nichols helped me to dress. I was so much more content here, in our own house, where we could have things precisely as we chose. Since I was in such a sunny mood, I chose to wear a yellow gown, with the pearls Richard had given me just before I came out of mourning for my cousins.

I had little to do before breakfast, then some visits to make, so I read and wrote some letters. The one to my Aunt Godolphin, I desired sent round immediately. I would visit her soon but she needed to know about our progress concerning her late servant. Or to be more precise, the lack of it.

I was surprised to find Richard had woken in time for breakfast. He joined me in the dining room, where I had thought I would breakfast in solitary state with the morning papers and my post. He glanced at me, one eyebrow lifted, so I sent out the servant. We were in a position to be aware of the knowledge a servant had and how powerful that knowledge could be in the wrong hands.

"How was Lady Cavendish?" I asked him first.

"Tolerably well. The reception was the usual crush and our news hasn't filtered through to the majority of people yet, so the gossip wasn't new. Louisa Crich took me to task about our rift, so I told her not to believe everything she heard. She understood."

"I hope so. I know she's a hoyden but I'm fond of her. She has a good heart."

"She's settling down this season." He paused while he conveyed a portion of devilled kidney to his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "She's declared her intention of marrying soon."

"Who?"

"She's not sure yet," he answered with a grin.

After breakfast I found myself with an hour to spare, so I went into the smaller drawing room upstairs, where my harpsichord was kept and practised for a while. Carier interrupted me. He slid into the room, waited for my attention, then asked if I would step downstairs.

I assumed the matter was of some importance, so I closed the instrument and followed him downstairs. In the small parlour, I found Richard waiting. Resting on a table was one of the slim folders I was beginning to recognise as coming from Thompson's. Richard saw me comfortably seated before he told me the news. "We've found the manservant."

He didn't need to tell me which manservant, the one who ran away after the murder. My heart lifted at the news.

"Where did they find him?"

"In the stews at St. Paul's." My husband smiled. "Progress at last. They're holding him at Thompson's. Would you like to

come and see him, or shall Carier and I interview him on our own?" I loved the fact he considered me his full partner in everything and that he was consulting with me before he took any action. I elected to go with them. The route to the office was a little longer from Brook Street than from Piccadilly but it still didn't take long and I could recognise where I was, unlike on that first day. The streets held more interest now that I could track the changes from fashionable shopping and residential areas to the business and older parts, although there was little of the old left in the city since the Great Fire of the last century. The oldest parts were probably the stews around St. Paul's and the docks, where the dregs of London gathered in worlds of their own. I would be a foreigner there, just as I had been in Italy and would never dream of venturing alone into that district.

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Chapter Seventeen

It was a busy day at Thompson's, packed with clients and potential employees. The ubiquitous Barraclough met us at the door and took us directly upstairs, along the corridor to a small room at the end. This door was fastened by a larger lock than usual and had a small hatch let into it, like a prison cell. I put my hand on Richard's arm, feeling the need of support when Barraclough produced a large iron key and unlocked the door. "He doesn't seem to be dangerous," he commented. However, Richard and Carrier were both armed and they drew pistols out of their large coat pockets at almost the same moment.

Carrier went in first, followed by Richard. I came last. It was a small room, furnished with a narrow bed, a table and a chair. A covered chamber pot sat under the table, reminding me forcibly of something I would rather forget. I suppressed a shiver. A barred sash window provided a source of natural light. If the occupant had been determined to escape, it wouldn't have held him for long but the captive within showed no signs of wanting to leave precipitately.

Greene was a tall man with brown hair and eyes, obviously accustomed to wearing a wig, as his hair was so short as to suggest it had once been shaved off. He had the look of an aesthete, pale and wan but his strongly muscled body was easily discernible since he was in shirtsleeves. His coat was folded neatly on the chair and had obviously once been of good quality, as had his breeches but all his clothes were

badly soiled and torn in places. He had cleaned himself, as the bowl of water on the table was ringed with grime and the towel lying next to it badly soiled. He'd been on the run.

He stood and bowed as we went in, a bow that betrayed his former profession. Richard glanced at Barraclough, who hastily left the room and quickly returned with one of the chairs from Alicia's office. Richard settled himself on a corner of the table. He was as different from the exquisite of last night as could be, dressed in a simple dark green cloth coat and waistcoat, a plain hat and wig but still with that undeniable quality which was his own, imbuing his appearance with a basic elegance.

Richard took his time looking the man over, taking in every detail of his appearance. Eventually he asked, "Why did you run?"

The man sniffed, staring at Richard in a calculating manner but he was used to addressing the Quality. He remained standing, his arms flat by his sides in the approved manner. "Because it looked bad for me. I thought they'd caught up with us, sir."

"My lord," Carier corrected him. The man didn't look surprised.

"Who caught up with you?" Richard asked. The man's gaze shifted from Richard to me, to Carier, to Barraclough and back to Richard again. He bit his lip.

Richard pursued him. "Would you like to tell us the story yourself?" The man remained silent. Richard's tone was still smooth, conversational. "We can make you tell us." Still the man didn't speak but stood, the model of the perfect

footman, silent as he must have stood in my aunt's drawing room in Harley Street.

Richard tried a different tack. "If you're afraid of anyone, we can protect you. We can even send you abroad, if you wish."

Greene's attention went up. He met Richard's gaze before his chin dropped and he lost his upright stance. He put his hand to his mouth and dropped it again. "I asked her to marry me. She said yes."

"Lucy? Where did you meet her?" Richard didn't take his attention from the man's face.

"At Mr. Drury's house. We both worked there."

With an effort, I stifled the gasp that came to my lips and stayed silent, my hands still folded quietly over the fan in my lap. Richard didn't look away but nodded in understanding. "I thought as much. You both worked there?"

"Yes, my lord, but we were looking for another place."

"And you found Mrs. Godolphin?" Richard's questions came quicker, not giving the man a chance to think, to work out false answers.

"She'd just lost some of her staff when they married and moved away. We didn't tell her we were ... connected."

"Did you find the places through Thompson's?"

"No, my lord, through Black's." That was the name of a rival establishment. A pity, as we would have no access to the records to verify his story. "We wanted to get away but we didn't want Mr. Drury knowing where we were going, so we bought some references from a man I know."

"Why didn't you want Drury to know?"

The man paused, studying me doubtfully. "Because Mr. Drury was having ... relations with Lucy."

This time I couldn't hide my sharp intake of breath. Although the affair had been over a long time ago, it would still hit Richard hard. He and Steven Drury had shared a woman, someone who had once meant something. The mother of his first children. I'd avoided thinking about that, but it couldn't be denied. Richard's expression didn't change but I glanced at Carier, who was looking dourer than ever and saw his chest lift in a sigh.

"Was this with her consent?" Richard hadn't moved an inch. He held himself completely steady.

The man didn't look pleased to be asked this question. He frowned. "At first, yes."

"But not later?"

"He asked her to do ... certain things she wasn't disposed to do." He glanced up at me, then dropped his gaze. "I'll tell you, my lord, but I don't think it's suitable for ladies' ears." Richard looked at me and I saw the strain in his eyes, chilly with concern. I thought he should be spared rather than me. Then he nodded to the manservant and. "Go on."

"They were insistent and Lucy refused. These weren't ordinary favours, the sort a master usually asks of a servant. And by then Lucy and I had become ... friendly. We decided to leave. We got the position with Mrs. Godolphin with false references and our plan was to move two or three times fast, getting some genuine characters, then move out to the country." He stopped and his head dropped.

We gave him his moment. It seemed he had really cared about Lucy. He put his hand briefly to his eyes before he continued, his voice quieter than ever. "Then I came home and found her. So I got scared and I ran."

"Why St. Paul's?"

"I've got friends there," came the short reply.

Richard turned to Barraclough then, standing mute witness and asked him how the man had been found. "We also have friends in St. Paul's," Barraclough answered curtly.

"You have rewarded whoever it was, of course?"

"Naturally, my lord."

Richard sighed and stood, brushing down his coat in a nervous gesture not characteristic of him. Carier came forward to attend to him but Richard impatiently waved him away. "We'll keep you here for a while," he said to the manservant. "It's either that or hand you over to the magistrates at Bow Street."

A crafty look spread over the face of the man, the first time he'd looked anything but crestfallen in the whole of the interview. "But I've done nothing wrong, my lord," he protested, without raising his voice. "And if you gave me over to Bow Street, it might become public and you wouldn't like that, would you?"

Richard was crossing to where I sat but he spun round to face the man again. "Why would I care about that?"

"Society doesn't generally want its dirty linen washed in public, in my experience. Aren't you trying to save Mr. and Mrs. Drury from scandal?"

Richard studied him, his expression calm and unreadable. "We have no love for the Drurys here. Blab away to the Fieldings—it's none of our concern. I'm only involved because Mrs. Godolphin is my wife's aunt. The Drurys are nothing to us."

"I heard different. I heard as how Mrs. Drury jilted you for her husband and you'd dearly love to get her back."

"You heard this in their household, one presumes," Richard replied, his voice as cold as ice. "The point is, do you prefer to be here for a few more days, or in Bow Street?"

The man shrugged. "I'm better treated here."

Without another word, Richard turned and held out his hand to help me up. Followed by Carier, leaving Barraclough to lock the man back up in his cell, we went to the office at the other end of the corridor. It was empty, Alicia being busy elsewhere today but we were invited to make use of it and tea was served to us there.

Since this was Thompson's business, Carier sat with us but still kept his distance, seemingly more comfortable that way. While we took advantage of the comfortable armchairs, he chose a hard chair and sat on the edge, waiting to be called back to his duties.

"What do you think?" Richard asked.

"He's lying." I had watched the man closely, the way his eyes slid to one side at certain parts of his story, the way he clasped his hands together convulsively from time to time.

"I thought so, too. Some of his story was true enough but he's rearranged matters to suit himself. What do you think, Carier?"

Carier answered. "He's more involved than he cares to say, my lord. If he were completely innocent, he wouldn't be so eager to avoid the clutches of Bow Street. I don't know how he's involved, though."

"I hope he believed me when I told him it was nothing to me," Richard said. "But one would have thought if he meant much to Lucy, she would have told him about her connection with me."

"It was a long time ago," I pointed out, "and she hasn't come to you before."

Richard sighed. "I wish she had, instead of getting into this mess." He wouldn't say any more on the subject, turning instead to the girl, Susan. She could be the vital key to this matter. She knew something, otherwise Julia wouldn't be keeping her so close. And if we found who killed Lucy, we might find a clue to what had happened to Richard's offspring.

"He didn't mention her once," I said. "Was he trying to keep her out of it for reasons of his own, or is he ignorant of her involvement?"

"He must have known something, my lady. He's trying to excuse her for some reason." I agreed with Carier—the man was shielding her. We decided to let the manservant think we believed him for now, since Richard was hopeful of getting the girl to himself for a quiet word in the near future. We would try to get to the truth of the matter from that angle.

It was beginning to look as though the Drurys were implicated in this murder. They knew the servants involved and if the man was to be believed, they had driven them into

hiding. It would explain the lack of personal effects in Lucy's room but Richard had one more problem to share with us.

"Lucy's book," he said to us, his eyes brilliant in an otherwise expressionless mask. "She recorded payments made to her, presumably by Drury and others, for services rendered. The dates went right up to the night before she was killed. So she hadn't broken with her previous life."

* * * *

We attended a ridotto that evening. The company was witty and glittering, the Drurys were present, so were Eustacia and the little maid, and I was miserable. Freddy noticed my unhappiness after he'd taken me on the floor for a country dance. "Are you and Strang estranged?"

Out of earshot of most people, I was able to disabuse him. "We're pretending. Richard is trying to get closer to the Drurys, to try to find out about the maid she keeps taunting us with. She has something to do with the murder of Lucy Forder."

Freddy looked to where Richard stood, sharing a joke with Eustacia Terry. "And that one?"

"The Drurys spread a rumour. There's nothing in it."

"I didn't think there was. Not Strang's style, that one. Nothing much about her." He glanced at me. "And anybody who knows him well can see he only has eyes for you. Mind, if the field's free—"

I laughed. "Freddy, you are incorrigible."

"Worth a try. The girl's ruined her chances, for this season at least, letting a rumour like that circulate. If she had any

sense, she'd shun Richard, not let him be on such good terms with her. I suspect," he said, turning back to look at me, "he's getting his revenge now, instead of in Exeter."

I sighed. "Yes, I think so, too. But she was foolish to do as she did and I don't feel so forgiving toward her."

Freddy shot me a sharper look. "She's done something to upset you? I won't ask what but that would make Strang determined."

I knew it would but what I'd said to Lord Thwaite had been true. I no longer wanted to save Eustacia from the follies of her own iniquities.

That night I was anxious to get ready for bed quickly, so I would be there for him. Consequently I spent some time in bed on my own, fretting. When he came through, he cast his dressing gown aside and slipped between the covers, immediately taking me into his arms and lying in peace for several minutes. Then he kissed me and asked how I did. "Freddy looked after me wonderfully well but I wish it could have been you."

"So do I." He kissed my forehead as I lifted my face to look at him.

He looked tired but although my heart went out to him, I knew the subject had to be broached. "I'm so sorry that Lucy should have ended as she did." Part time prostitute, the book a coded record of her clients.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Yes. I studied her notebook. There are initials next to the payments. It seems she's been selling her favours for years."

"Are you sure it was that? Couldn't it have been for some other service?"

He looked down then and smiled, drawing the covers more securely around me. "No. I've been busy tonight. I thought I recognised some of the initials and I asked one or two of the men. They remembered her." He looked away.

I lifted myself on one elbow to look at his face. "Perhaps she did it for the children."

"Perhaps she did," Richard replied but then, looking directly at me, he burst out, "I should have found her, Rose. They shouldn't have taken her away from me like that!"

The cry was so unlike his usual controlled tones that I knew he was still hurt, would be hurt until we found the twins and probably for a long time after that. He needed me. He pulled me close and I rested my head on his shoulder, holding him, trying to give him some comfort. "They were my responsibility, no one else's." His anger was palpable, his muscles tense with strain.

We lay tightly entwined until he recovered a little, then I lifted my head again and gazed at him gravely, without speaking. He returned my regard dry-eyed and smiled tightly. "I'm sorry. It's done and we must do our best with what we have. It makes me more determined to care for this one properly." Gently, he touched my stomach.

"You don't have to tell me any more." It was hurting him too much.

"Yes, I do." A harsh note entered his voice and he took a deep breath. "I thought Julia might try to seduce me tonight and then Drury would bring you to see her triumph."

"I thought so too. I gave him every opportunity but Freddy and Gervase wouldn't let him too close after one dance."

He smiled, a genuine smile this time. "I must thank them. It would have been an unedifying scene and in public at that. She did try, though. She took me into a dark corner and confessed she still wanted me. I asked her if Steven wasn't enough for her and she shrugged and since I didn't offer to kiss her, she introduced the little maid." This had been what we'd been waiting for. He grimaced. "She continued where her mistress had left off." I wouldn't let him look away this time.

"What? She can't be more than fifteen."

He sighed. "She's no stranger to the ways of seduction. There was nothing subtle about her approach. They want something more, Rose. They want to draw us in, perhaps take us both."

"Dear God." I was truly shocked. Although I had known such things went on, I had never come across it at first hand before. "They're acting together?"

"We must assume so." His gaze softened and he laughed softly. I was relieved to hear it, the laugh, indicating that he had regained some control, was thinking again. "You're shocked, aren't you?" I confessed I was. "Then I'd better not tell you what she suggested."

"What, what did she say?" I demanded, indignant that he would hide anything from me.

He gazed at me, amusement creeping into the previously bleak features. "She thought I might like her to service us both," he told me, holding me tight so I had to look at him.

"Oh," was all I could manage. I took a few breaths as he watched. "Would you like that?"

Then he did laugh properly, his previous melancholy swept away for the time being in his delight at my answer. "Share you? Never." He drew me to him and kissed me soundly, releasing me to study my face, a question in his eyes. "Would you like it? Rose, I love you so much I can survive anything except you not wanting me anymore. If you want something like that, say so."

My shudder gave him the answer he wanted. "It eats me up to think of you with anyone else. To see it would be terrible."

"Rest easy, my love. I promise you it will never happen."

"What if we had really quarrelled?"

"We can't assume that will never happen. It probably will, in the years to come, but I'm not about to fall into the first pair of arms that open for me. I've too much to lose."

"Do you think they do it?"

"Julia and Steven Drury?" He lifted a lock of my hair, twisting it around and around his finger. "I always thought Julia was a cold fish. The only time she ever offered was when she was hopeful of trapping me into a compromising situation." I remembered that. I'd been hiding in his dressing room at the time. "But Drury might have unlocked something in her since then. She was certainly warm tonight. Perhaps the maid does pleasure them both, she seemed to know what she was about."

I wrinkled my nose in distaste, then, not wanting to dwell on it any longer, asked him if he'd discovered anything about

Jackson's presence in Aunt Godolphin's house. "She said she had been there. When I could finally hold her at arms' length for long enough." I shuddered. "She says she saw the body and ran in terror to her friends the Drurys."

"It sounds plausible enough. She's young. Such a sight would have frightened someone older than her. But it doesn't mean I believe it. Where did she come from?"

"That I was unable to find out. Yet. She said she didn't know Lucy well, having come up from the country to find a place in the big city. It seems strange to me, that both the maids should know the Drurys." He frowned. "There's something else. Perhaps they were placed there. It wouldn't be difficult to find out that Mrs. Godolphin is your aunt."

"You're not suggesting the Drurys had something to do with the murder?" I wasn't shocked. I knew they were capable of it.

"They might have." He paused. "Lucy might have threatened to expose them, or refused to do whatever it was they asked of her. If they asked her to seduce me, perhaps she might have balked at that. Especially if she didn't tell them of our previous connection."

Anxious not to see that look return to his face, I tried another tack. "If they are involved, what do we do?"

"We have a meeting at Thompson's and consult, once we know all the facts. That's why we set it up in the way we did. No one person takes the blame or the responsibility for what we do. We're slowly gaining the upper hand, I'm sure of it. If we continue to go softly, we'll get there. As for now," he continued in a different tone, letting go of my hair and rolling

me gently on to my back, "you were tired when we left the ridotto, so you must be even more tired now. I'll put out the candles and we'll sleep." He kissed me, then got out of bed to extinguish the lights, coming back to take me in his arms again and murmur soft endearments to me as I fell asleep.

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Chapter Eighteen

In the morning, Richard said he would go to Thompson's and check on any progress. I decided to go shopping, just to get some fresh air.

Standing in Bond Street, talking to the Skerrits, I saw someone I knew but didn't expect to see there, hurrying anxiously towards me. I excused myself and stepped aside to speak to him quietly. "Barraclough? Is anything wrong?"

The plump man was panting with exertion. "We have people looking for you, my lady. Mrs. Thompson thinks you had better come."

Tom hurried over to us I put a hand up to my heart. "What is it? Can I help?"

Barraclough managed to recover some of his breath. "His lordship has gone home but Mrs. Thompson thinks he shouldn't be on his own. She had some news for him he has found"—he glanced at Tom—"disturbing."

"What news?"

The man was obviously ill at ease. "I'm not at liberty to say, my lady but Mrs. Thompson thinks you should perhaps return home to meet him."

"How long have you been looking for me?"

Barraclough took out a large, practical silver pocket watch and flipped open the lid. "She sent people out to find you as soon as he left, my lady. He mentioned you were shopping, so we knew where to look. I suppose it has been ... twenty minutes."

I didn't know what it was but if Alicia had sent out messengers to find me, it must be serious indeed. I beckoned to Nichols, who had been standing a little apart. She lifted her skirts and, moving quickly despite not seeming to, she went to fetch the chairmen.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Tom asked in concern.

"Yes, no—I don't know," I said, distracted. I looked at Barraclough and he shook his head imperceptibly. "No. Thank you, Tom. I'm sure it will be all right." I put my hand on his sleeve and smiled, reflecting that I was getting as good at hiding my emotions as Richard. "It's probably nothing."

I let Tom hand me into the chair and I urged the chairmen to make haste but we met with a delay on Piccadilly. A carriage had overturned and two irate drivers were coming to blows in the middle of the road. The resulting fracas threatened to spread to the other drivers and loiterers and it took some time for my chairmen to turn and hurry off in the opposite direction, trying to find another way through. Consequently it took half an hour to get home and as I hurried through the front door, the first person I saw was Brangwyn. I slowed down and removed my gloves in a leisurely way while Nichols took my cloak and hat and passed them to a waiting footman. "Good afternoon, Brangwyn," I said, it being close on one o'clock.

He smiled, seemingly delighted to see me. "Good afternoon, my lady. Do you attend the Queensberry ball tonight?" He was, as usual, holding his little notebook and he opened it as he spoke.

"I'm not sure yet," I told him, trying to think of some way of getting rid of him. There was no need; he was on an errand of his own as it turned out. He picked up his hat from the chair where it was lying and excused himself. "If you have no need of my services at present, milady, I have an errand to run for his lordship. He is in the library."

"Really?" I said, feigning indifference. We were still estranged in the eyes of the world. "I've come home to rest for an hour. Nichols." Nichols glanced at Brangwyn and followed me upstairs. We heard the door close and I nodded to her and went back downstairs, hurrying into the small library at the back of the house and closing the door firmly behind me.

What I saw gave me deep disquiet. Richard sat, his back to me, staring into the fire. He didn't look around when I came in and he was hunched up, not his usual pose.

I crossed the room and lightly put my hands on his shoulders. One of his hands immediately came up to cover mine and without looking around he spoke. "She's mine, Rose. Susan is mine."

I let my hands rest on his shoulders, forcing myself not to grip. All I could sense was the soft figured velvet of his dark green coat, all I saw was the fire, blazing reds and oranges on its bed of black coals. His hand on mine was steady.

I gently slid my hands from his shoulders and went around to the front of the sofa, so I could see his face, then sat on a chair next to the sofa, rather than next to him. His eyes were brilliant, sapphire blue in a cold face as hard as stone. I felt as intimidated, as I had the first day I met him and terrified.

The knowledge that Susan was his daughter hadn't come as a complete surprise. I had considered it as a possibility in my own mind but kept it to myself. I had no proof, no evidence. Only something about the way she held her head, something about the shape of the face had reminded me, a distant echo of the man I loved. I was horrified to discover my suspicions hardened into fact.

I daren't even take his hand now I'd seen his face. His expression didn't soften at all when he turned his head to look at me. I thought I'd done something, displeased him in some way and I was afraid, not of what he might do but of what I stood to lose. But I realised he wasn't seeing me, he was looking through me at something else and I knew why Alicia Thompson had sent for me. Only I could get him through this with the least possible damage.

As surely as I knew my husband was sitting in front of me, I knew Carier waited upstairs, in case he was needed. He had looked after Richard since he was eighteen, the only person who had seen anything of the man inside the brilliant shell until Gervase had come back. I wished Gervase was here, then I knew that for the cowardice it was. I had to help him.

I moved so that I was sitting next to him and still fearful of rejection, I took his hand. He let it lie there, unresisting, unresponsive but I held it still. "Richard. Richard, my love, can you tell me some of what Alicia said?"

He was silent for a while and I didn't know if he had heard me, then he turned and caught my gaze with his. "Can you bear this?" he asked, his voice hard and steady. I knew he

was holding himself together with every sinew he possessed, every ounce of willpower.

"I can bear it."

He seemed to notice that he had his hand in mine then and he pressed it and looked down at it, at the rings he had put on my left hand that had made me his in the eyes of the law. The great ruby winked expressionlessly at him. Then he looked back up at my face. I agonised at what I saw there.

"Alicia found a servant who had known them in the country, and another to confirm and extend the story. The twins were brought up in the country as the children of the gamekeeper Lucy married. They took his name, Forder. There is a boy and a girl but we haven't yet found the boy." The staccato sentences followed each other as though he were relating something that happened to somebody else, not to him. "The girl followed her mother into service, then to London but she didn't find her at first, so she obtained a position in your aunt's service. That was the only true coincidence in all of this. Lucy was working as a housemaid from Black's, working for several great households and plying her other trade." He studied me, nothingness evening out his face, making it into an icon. But still the face of the man I loved. "We can't know if she did it for herself, or for her children but she made a lot of money doing it. Now for the other side of things." He drew a deep breath and something came alive in his eyes but only for a fleeting moment. "Do you remember, at Hareton Abbey, when I accused Drury of chasing anything in a skirt?"

I nodded.

"That was true, not just a ploy to get him away from our affair. Gervase and I had both seen him with what maids there were in that benighted house and he seemed as insatiable as I used to be but with less discretion. Didn't you know?"

"I had no idea." I was trying to say as little as possible, because I didn't want to stop his narrative. Knowing what I knew now about Steven, it didn't surprise me unduly but it would have at one time.

He kept his hand in mine. "As soon as Drury came up to Town, he joined some of the less reputable clubs. It was inevitable that he would eventually become aware of the existence of Lucy Forder. She was highly active amongst that circle and members passed her name and direction was passed by word of mouth. She's even in the guidebooks." I must have showed some of my surprise. "There are such things, my sweet. Guides to the best whores in London." I saw the ghost of a frown but it went as soon as it had come. "Apparently she offered particular services that appealed to Drury." With an inner jolt, I remembered when Steven had tried to rape me. He seemed to believe the violence was what I wanted and he became more aroused the more I struggled. I shuddered, despite my determination to be strong.

When he felt me shudder, Richard came back to me. He moved towards me and his eyes held real concern at last. He took me into his arms and soothed me. My thought had been momentary, my shudder an involuntary action soon over but I let him hold me and murmur soothing words, realising that was my way in to him, to let him care for me. The words were

as much for him as for me and when I lifted my head to look at him, I saw him and I smiled. His eyes were filled with the warmth I was used to seeing, his arms the loving care I craved.

"I have you now and he can't touch me any more." I was far from believing that but I knew Richard wanted to hear it.

"I don't want him anywhere near you. It was a mistake ever to let the Drurys back into our lives."

"No, we wouldn't have found out what we have, we wouldn't be able to act, if we hadn't dealt with them," I protested. "And they still don't know, they still think we're ignorant of all this. We can beat them, I know we can."

"Now they have Susan. They have my daughter. I have to get her away."

"Of course you do." My heart sank. To have his child by someone else close every day would be hard. I would do it for him. I'd been happy when he told me he knew of no by-blows from his years of bed-hopping; I thought I would be the only woman who would give him children. But it was only my pride that was hurt. Richard's devastation went far deeper. "I think I should deal with it for a while. They've hurt you and we don't want them to see it. They can play on you, make it worse and we can't let them, can we?"

He shook his head. "We can't let them see any weakness."

"I don't see it as a weakness. That you can care for your children is a strength, will help to give them strength as they grow. You're right though, the Drurys will seek to use it. But Julia trusts you and I don't suppose she likes me any better

than she ever did. Can you deal with her still, knowing what you know?"

He took a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh as he gazed at me. "Probably. If I have you." He pushed a loose strand of hair back from my face. "That's what they want; power. I come from a family used to taking its place in the world. Julia's father is wealthy, but his influence is limited, and Julia isn't happy about that. She wants her place, and when she was betrothed to me she was sure she had it. Then she took Steven, a puppet of her very own, and made her plans." His expression turned grimmer. "She doesn't care who she uses. We must find out for sure if they know who Susan is. They would only know if Lucy had told them or if Susan knows and told them. She might think she's the child of a gamekeeper. One of the worst things is that I don't know." He looked so tired.

I reached up and kissed him. "I love you." He seemed to need it and was rewarded by his answering smile. "We shouldn't think about it any more tonight. I'm going to bed for my rest and I'd love it if you'd join me."

I stood, keeping hold of his hand and he let me pull him to his feet. "Brangwyn is out but I don't care any more. Come to bed with me, my love."

He came to bed. Knowing him as I did, I let him undress me as he loved to do, then I loved him, giving him the release he needed. He'd been wounded and he needed healing, some rest from thought.

I took his hand and put it on my breast and kissed him, caressed him, tried to soothe him without fuss. If he wanted

to hold me, sleep for an hour or two, I would be happy with that, knowing I could bring him some rest. But his hand moved on my breast, took the nipple between his thumb and finger, rolled it until it hardened for him. He caressed me and let me touch him in return. We didn't say much, but I whispered "I love you" against his body, so my words touched his skin, heated him. I slipped down, kissing the hollow inside his hip, rejoicing when his stomach muscles tightened in response, and took his shaft into my mouth. He tasted salty, musky. He tasted of the man I loved. I had learned what he liked and I used all the expertise I possessed now, kissing the tip, tasting, and then sliding him into my mouth to suck harder, stroke my tongue around the ridge of flesh under the head. I cupped his sac in one hand, massaged. I would have stayed there until he exploded and counted myself happy to have given him this, but he sat up, slipped his hands under my armpits and pulled me up to lie under him.

He pushed into me, pausing only to test that I was ready for him, and drove me hard, relentlessly giving me no quarter. He set an aggressive, hammering rhythm, pounding into me with an intensity that echoed his desperation. But I had no intention of taking it and giving nothing back. I pushed against him, fighting him for control and with a low chuckle he responded, holding me down, his hands pressing my shoulders into the mattress as he ploughed into me with hard, deep thrusts.

I couldn't move, except to lift my knees to bring my body closer to his, to stare up at him, making him look back. Through gritted teeth I demanded, "Who am I?"

"Rose. My wife, my partner, the woman I thought I'd never meet." His words were punctuated by grunts as he drove deep and hard, forging inside me. His next words held an edge of desperation. "Never leave me, Rose. Promise me!"

I didn't hesitate in my answer. "Never. I swear!" My last word ended in a strangled shriek as he took one hand off my shoulder to push it between us, fumbling then finding the hard nub of flesh between my legs. He used his expertise to drive me insane, until I cried his name, over and over.

He needed this release, needed this edgy, violent lovemaking. We moved toward one climax that hit us both at the same time, cleansing and cauterising in its flood.

It would be some time before he recovered from this shock, if he ever did but I could start the healing process, as well as remind him that I was always there and always would be.

He fell asleep in my arms, the deep, dreamless sleep that comes after making love and I lay watching him until I too slept. We should have gone out to dinner but when Nichols came to remind me, I put a finger to my lips to hush her and sent her away. I knew she would have the necessary messages sent.

Richard didn't wake up until an hour later and when he did, he lay for a long time looking at me before he took me into his arms again. "Without you, I might have found Drury and killed him. You've saved me from that, Rose."

"You'll give him up to justice?" I was relieved to hear his voice had regained its low, soft timbre, losing the harsh edge I'd heard in it earlier.

"If he did it. It was murder and murderers must pay." He sounded much calmer, much more himself. "What's the time?"

"Nearly five. I've sent our apologies to Bedford Square."

I smiled and he laughed. "So we've officially reconciled?"

"It would seem so."

He kissed me soundly. "You *are* good for me," he said, his tones much lighter than before. "I love you so much." A shadow of concern crossed his face. "Did I hurt you? Did I hurt—" He caressed my stomach with his palm.

I shook my head. "No." I felt the flush rising to my cheeks but I didn't look away. "It was wonderful, Richard."

He smiled. "No. *You're* wonderful."

It was all the reward I needed. It was tempting to leave the matter there but I knew if we did, it would eat away at him and he might well try to act on his own, in a misguided attempt to protect me in my present condition. As far as I knew, pregnancy didn't affect the brain and I determined not to let it.

I lifted myself on one elbow, watching him closely. "I sent a message earlier today, asking your mother to send the Drurys cards for the ball at Southwood House tomorrow. I don't mind them being there and it might prove useful."

He was still smiling. "And they can see your triumph. I'll make sure it is. I know you dislike being the centre of attention, my love, but I'm determined upon it. No one will ever ignore you again." Only Richard knew how much that had hurt me in the past, as I had pretended not to care at the time.

He put his arms around my waist and swung me on top of him, making me laugh and call him a fool. "Not at all. You're elegant, graceful and beautiful and I'm determined that the world shall know it." If I'd still been by myself, I would have sought the anonymity of the wall and the card room but Richard gave me the courage to face it and the confidence, too. Or maybe, as he always told me, he was merely the wall I knew was behind me while I found my true self under the layers I'd hidden it in for so long.

"We should get up. We're supposed to go to the Queensberrys later this evening and heaven knows how many visitors we've had turned away."

"Damn them." he said, holding me tight. "We'll see them all soon enough and we have more important things to think about. I can think better and the solution is straightforward enough."

"What solution? Tell me, love." He seemed to be taking a better view of things but his next statement disappointed me. "We must take Susan away from the Drurys, by force if we have to."

"We can't do that!" The notion appalled me. "What if she doesn't want to go? What if she enjoys the attention she's receiving?"

"She's my daughter."

"She's Forder's daughter as well. Whoever he was and for whatever reason, he brought her up, gave her his name. You gave her life but he gave her everything else. I know it's hard and it wasn't your fault but that's the way it happened and we must face it."

He didn't say anything but gazed at me steadily. I met his translucent azure gaze and waited for him, lying still, holding me close. "You're right," he said eventually. "She should decide for herself. We can only give her the chance and let her choose. But I am determined she will have that choice." He sighed, so I let myself sink down against him so that my cheek lay against his and he didn't have to look at me. He ran his hand down my back and back up again, finally coming to rest on my hair.

"How do we find out who killed Lucy?" I knew he could bear to discuss it now.

"We've narrowed it down." His voice determinedly practical. "It's either Steven Drury, one of his agents, or the manservant Greene."

"Steven would have done it because of what Lucy knew, the manservant because of what he discovered. If he found out that Lucy was still seeing Steven, he could have killed her."

Richard concurred. "She wasn't killed for the money, because we found it without too much trouble. The notebook I took should have been removed. If Drury had done the deed himself, he would have taken it for the information it held. I've been wondering if he's been making enquiries about it but no one seems to know. My love, do you think you could visit your aunt, see if she's had any suspicious visitors recently?"

"I'll ask her tomorrow night," I promised. I lifted my head again so that I could see him. "What about that Smith man? The Bow Street man?"

Richard grunted. "He's a resourceful man. We're only just keeping one step ahead of him. He's looking for Greene and he'll soon find out the man was taken by some well-dressed bullies, if he asks the right questions."

"I'll talk to Steven tomorrow. I'll ask him how he feels about Lucy's murder, see if he knows Susan is her daughter. I'll let him know we know that much, shall I?"

He considered. I slipped around to the side, taking my weight off him and he took my hand, softly kissing the first knuckles of the fingers. "I don't like the idea of you near him but if you want to do this, it's better done in public." He kissed the palm of my hand and the wrist. "I'll try to find out what Julia knows." He worked his way up to the inside of the elbow, then drew me close to him. "That's tomorrow," he murmured, his lips against mine, "But for now, *adorata*, you have won an evening's grace for us and I mean to make the most of it. Unless, of course, you object?"

"Oh no," I whispered, then after a moment, "Oh yes."

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Chapter Nineteen

I left my schedule as clear as I could for the next day. If I was to be the centre of attention, I was determined to look my best. I ordered a bath, one of the few times a maid was allowed in the bedroom while we still occupied it. When it was poured and I was safely installed in the steaming water, Richard sent Nichols away and insisted on helping. By the time he had soaped me, rinsed me and taken me back to bed, I needed another bath, so I sent him away and this time Nichols helped me.

I didn't dress that day, donning a loose robe that didn't need hoop or stays and I had a wonderfully leisurely breakfast, just me, the newspapers and the post, as Richard had already left for his round of the coffee houses.

Towards the end of my meal, Gervase called and I asked him to join me, which he did with some alacrity. Gervase had an alarmingly healthy appetite and I rarely knew him refuse food. I told him Richard's news. Richard had agreed that Gervase should know.

Richard's twin watched me carefully while I told him, his food, for once, forgotten. "It's a shame she's fallen into their hands. And I'm sorry it should come at this time for you, when you should be looking forward to your own addition to the family."

"It could hardly have come at a worse time."

"You still have the boy to find," Gervase said. "Rose, if you need my help, you know I'll always come."

"I know. Thank you, Gervase. Richard is upset but he's coping."

"I don't doubt it. He has you now."

Gervase left soon after breakfast, leaving me to a blissfully empty day. I saw Brangwyn to discuss the appointments for the next few days and looking at his frank, open face, I wondered how we could have been so deceived in him. A secretary was a useful member of staff but we were vulnerable if we couldn't demand absolute loyalty from whomever we employed. Reluctantly, I thought we would have to employ someone from the special box next time. The loyalty of the staff in there was beyond question but that made them considerably more expensive and unavailable for duties elsewhere.

I went up for my rest after a light meal at noon and was surprised to find I could sleep, although I had done nothing all day except please myself. Martha had told me she'd been tired all through the beginning of her first pregnancy and since that had produced a boy, I was hopeful. I would love to produce a boy first time. It would take the pressure from us to produce a Kerre heir, but Richard's only concern was that I should be delivered safely. I tried not to think about that part. It was a long way away yet.

Nichols woke me at two. We were to dine at Southwood House with the most eminent of the guests before the ball, which was, to all intents and purposes, my coming-out ball. Our old rooms were available to us again, should we need them, so I didn't expect to return home until the small hours.

I'd decided to wear my wedding dress, cerulean blue embroidered in silver, with a white and silver petticoat. Nichols brought it in and laid it on the bed, then crossed to the dressing table to attend to me. Her helper was with her, a young, keen housemaid, wishing to be a lady's maid one day. Much as Susan Jackson was reputed to be to Julia Drury.

I leaned back in my chair and watched Nichols dress my hair, which she did with great swiftness and skill. We went into the little powder-closet and I suffered the powdering well enough, only sneezing a couple of times, then I could return to the bedroom. I hated powder, it was so messy and it didn't suit my pale skin as well as my own rich, chestnut locks. Perhaps I would be glad of the powder when I became old and grey, if the hair I ended up with was an unbecoming shade.

I stood in my stays and under-petticoat and they fastened the side hoops about my waist. When the maid made as if to undo my stay laces to tighten them, Nichols stopped her. I thought she was being a little over-anxious, as I wouldn't begin to significantly increase in size for at least another month but, surrounded by people determined to care for me, I said nothing. They fitted the white lustring petticoat, heavily embroidered in silver and watching the dressing process in the big mirror, I let my mind travel back to my wedding day. Until I saw my lord I'd been terrified of facing all those people I didn't know but I was sure I was doing the right thing as soon as he clasped my hand in his. The gown had been to a London mantua-maker for a little London bronze but was much the same as it had been that confusing May day.

The stomacher was plain. It was pinned into place, then the maid held the gown up. It was a sacque, the pleats at the back sewn down to the waist, the robings at the front embroidered to match the petticoat. The skirt was embroidered in silver, heavy at the hem, lighter towards the waist, small flowers falling down the skirt, cascading toward the hem. The sacque style had begun as a loose, casual gown worn in the mornings as undress but the pleats at the back had been sewn down for a tight fit and now it had superseded the mantua for almost every occasion.

The maid hooked the stomacher to the front of the gown and Nichols surveyed me critically. She pinned folds that wouldn't lie straight, pulled the stomacher down to plump my breasts up and arranged the lace at my elbows and neck. When she was finally satisfied she went and fetched the box from the safe in the dressing room which contained the diamonds.

Lady Southwood had the stones recut and set when she came into possession of them but the larger ones were reputed to have been presented to a previous Lord Southwood by Queen Elizabeth for undisclosed favours. They flashed at my neck, set in an elaborate design of flowers. This gown had been made to compliment the design, so I was all flowers this evening. The aigrette for my hair was a new one. The old one had been lost on my wedding day but some of the stones had been recovered and this new one made, the butterfly hovering on its spring above the flower as well as it ever did. There was a bracelet and girandole earrings, not as

heavy as most girandoles but still with the extra hook to put over the top of the ear for support.

I applied a little paint to my face and a single patch near my mouth, then I filled my pockets with vinaigrette, necessaire, handkerchief, pencil and writing tablet, slipped on my shoes and I was ready.

The finished effect was a work of art with me held inside, not trapped but safely cocooned. The great lady I saw in the mirror wasn't me, not the shy, plain, awkward girl from the provinces. This beautifully coiffured, elegant, tall lady in the breathtaking fashionable gown was someone else: a parody of me, someone perfectly used to the luxury and inconvenience of great country houses, who expected the adulation of others. It would be easier to act the part, looking like this. When I moved, my rich, full skirts swished and rustled invitingly.

Nichols handed me my fan and I went downstairs to find my husband.

He wore his wedding-suit, white velvet embroidered with silver and looked like some creature fashioned from ice straight out of ancient mythology. I caught my breath. The last time I'd seen that coat it had been liberally bedaubed with my blood and I'd been sure that I would never see it again. Smiling, he told me, "I had the front and sleeve remade. I thought you'd like it and it seemed appropriate, since I knew you would be wearing your wedding gown."

He held out his hand and I went forward and took it. "You must know you look beautiful."

I smiled. "The woman in these clothes looks well but I keep thinking there's someone left discarded upstairs."

"It's all you. And this is your evening."

We went out to where the carriage was waiting for us and made our way to Piccadilly. It was too early for a crush outside but the roads were busy with the carriages of the people who had been invited for dinner.

Lady Southwood complimented me on my appearance, so I must have done something right. Despite my reservations about her character, I had to admit that she was a woman of exquisite and demanding taste. She led me in and I was happy to see the party had arrived from Hareton House. Only the family was there, as the Skerrits and Miss Terry would arrive later. When I saw Martha, dressed as grandly as I had ever seen her, I remembered the practical, kindly, motherly lady who tried so hard to ease my failure in Devonshire society. She was always the same, would never change.

James, standing next to her, suited this society. His tall, broad figure looked well in fashionable dress. At home he'd spent his days visiting tenants, riding to hounds and attending to business and he didn't intend that his new status would change that overmuch. He was my rock, my strength, a tacit comfort and support. Ian was still conspicuous by his absence. He'd had a sickly childhood and he still used that excuse for anything he didn't want to attend, so he remained at Oxford with his books and his scholarly friends. I didn't mind because I knew and loved Ian enough to know he would have hated this.

Lizzie and Ruth had reached out and taken fashionable society with both hands. Ruth looked lovely and Lizzie was ravishing.

So there we were, on the night when I would be presented to society, the beautiful Golightly sisters, two years ago unregarded members of a small community, now the toast of fashionable society. It was foolish beyond permission.

Richard was by my side, attending to my needs, making sure I was given the respect he thought I was due. If he'd been a yeoman farmer, I would have loved him the same but I nearly laughed out loud at the thought. He was what he was and I loved him. Unobtrusively he made sure I was seated comfortably and it must have been obvious to everybody present that if we had quarrelled before, we were in perfect accord now.

I sat next to the Duke of Newcastle at dinner. He and his brother were the main powers in Parliament at present. Their main rival, Mr. Pitt, wasn't present but had been invited later. I was a little intimidated by the duke's presence at first, but he was kind and Richard was near, sitting opposite.

The first thing Lady Southwood did was make sure that everyone knew of my condition, by asking a deliberately pointed question about my health, then, when I said I was perfectly well, announcing with a beaming expression, "Of course, ladies often are well at this time. I'm glad you are, my dear. When I was expecting, I'm afraid I was in poor health but you seem to be coping with it excellently."

"I'm not ill," I protested but everyone at that end of the long table congratulated me, then the news rippled down, so I

became the centre of attention. I blushed but smiled and accepted the congratulations. Richard watched me, a slight smile quirking his mouth at the corners but saying little.

"I must say I never thought I'd see the day, Strang." The duke's words boomed across the table. "Perhaps now you've settled down, you'll take more of an interest in matters of importance."

"Such as?" Richard lifted his wineglass to his lips and sipped delicately.

"The affairs of the day. It seems war may be unavoidable, though we will do our best—what do you think about that, hey?" The duke moved a little so that the footman could take his glass to be refilled—the man took up a great deal of space. His brother, Lord Henry Pelham, sitting farther down the table, watching with interest. Pelham was the brains, and the leader of the Commons, but the duke matched him perfectly, adding pomp and influence to the mix.

"What I think seems immaterial, sir," said Richard. "It isn't something I can do anything about."

The duke wasn't so easily put off. "But you could, if you wished it. Now you've abandoned fripperies, you'll have more time for such matters. You father must have a convenient seat you can take and if he hasn't, I have."

"Fripperies remain a great interest of mine. And I have no wish to enter Parliament. At least, not at this time. Have you spoken to my brother?"

The duke glanced at Gervase. Conversation began to buzz again. It was evident that Richard's sunny mood extended to

the guests. He was no admirer of the Duke of Newcastle. "I have," said the duke. "We're still talking."

Gervase appeared to be concentrating on his conversation with the lady on the side furthest from the duke but, I would guess, with one ear trained on the conversation between Richard and Newcastle. "I'm nobody's man." Richard turned his half-full wineglass slowly round on its base on the white tablecloth. The wine cast a pale shimmer, reflected through the glass by the candles which sent the expensive scent of burning beeswax into the air to mingle with the perfumes of the guests and the smell of the food. "I study each issue on its own terms, then make decisions based on the merits of each case."

"You've studied political philosophy? Locke, Doria?"

"And Machiavelli, Ficino and St. Thomas Aquinas," Richard reminded him. "No theory seems to encompass the whole. Each has its merits."

"That could be seen as a philosophy on its own."

"I daresay it could, sir."

There was a pause, while the duke passed a dish of buttered carrots I didn't really want and Richard finished his wine and returned his attention to the food on his plate. But Newcastle wasn't about to give up. "So you're not decided, sir?"

Richard smiled gently. "Not yet."

"But you run something—which gives you a certain amount of personal power."

Richard frowned then. The reference to Thompson's was unwelcome, especially in such a public place. "You must have been misinformed."

"I think not."

Pelham frowned at his brother and, with a courtly gesture, his elder brother waved him away. The more astute Pelham probably realised this was not the best way to get the hidden power of Thompson's on his side. Richard was far more likely to respond favourably if approached in private. He blocked all Newcastle's attempts to draw him out on the subject. "What little power I have rests entirely with my father's interests. I can claim nothing else." But the duke and his brother knew better. Like the Fieldings, they were anxious to gain access to the espionage network Richard had set up amongst the domestic servants of Europe. If it weren't illegal, it might be termed a private army. If the politicians listened to the entreaties of the Fieldings and set up a non-military law enforcement organisation, they would have that power for themselves. But currently, the thought of setting up a civilian army was a vote-loser, and so not to be thought of. Although I'd wager that, in their beds at night, they did think of it.

The dining room at Southwood House was one of the most spectacular rooms in the building, decorated from floor to ceiling with paintings of mythological figures, all busy about their business. Richard saw me studying one particular figure and laughed to see my puzzlement. "It's not a flaw in the paint. It's Daphne turning into a laurel tree. Look to her left. That's Apollo, catching up with her just too late."

I looked again and saw Apollo. "The wall is so full of various figures it's hard to pick out the different stories." I turned to him, then back at the artistically draped figure on the wall. "You look like Apollo."

Lady Southwood overheard my remark. "Not altogether unfeasible since he is supposed to be a portrait of Strang's grandfather." I was amused, and studied the paintings closer, wondering if I could tease Richard about the activities there. "Many of the figures are supposed to represent the eminent people of the time. The Lord Southwood of King Charles II's day was a rake, chased anything that ran, they used to say." I laughed, reminded of Richard's reputation but I didn't say anything about it, although I was sorely tempted. "Daphne is a portrait of his wife. He was married to her and ignored her for years, left her in the country. Then she tired of that and came to town and of course the king noticed her and took her for his own." I was mildly shocked that she could mention this so casually but that was a different time, with different standards.

Richard took a hand in the story. "Then Southwood wanted her back. That's why he's shown in that story."

"But she didn't turn into a laurel tree."

"He didn't get her back until the king died. He treasured her for the rest of her life."

I thought the story was romantic but Richard saw the other side. "We might have been tall and dark. God knows enough of the aristocracy is, thanks to Old Rowley." That was a scurrilous nickname King Charles had won, named after the largest stallion in his stables. There was general laughter.

Richard went on to point out some of the other people depicted on the wall. Zeus had been James II but this had been hastily altered into a more vague heroic figure after the king's flight abroad. "It's said," Richard concluded, "that they're all based on life, they all posed for the artist as you see them." He paused, watching me while I stared at the paintings, trying to imagine them in the flesh. "Would you pose like that if I asked you to?"

I looked back at him, astonished until I saw his gentle smile. "If you wanted it." Privately, I thought they would probably hire models to pose, as we did when we had our portraits taken. The painter did the hands and face, then we sent the clothes to him to be draped on models with the same figures as ours. His smile was an intimate one. "I'd prefer you to keep to modern convention."

When the meal was over and the ladies retired, Lady Southwood prevailed upon me to play for the company, so when the gentlemen joined us shortly afterward, I was at the harpsichord, playing one of the fiendish pieces I used for showing off. Lizzie was turning pages for me and when I finished, I received most gratifying applause.

Richard escorted us to a sofa, thus preventing any encores and making me comfortable. Someone else began to play country airs softly, a pleasant interlude before we went to the ballroom and I was able to relax with a glass of wine. What came next would be an ordeal for me, and he knew it. But all I had to do was get it over with.

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Chapter Twenty

The ballroom had been created from the great drawing room on the first floor of Southwood House. With most of the furniture removed and the great carpet rolled up to reveal the polished floor, it made an excellent space for dancing. Southwood House was unusual in that it was a large house, one of the few remaining from the great houses of the previous century, so it had the space for a large drawing room as big as any found in the country. The other rooms, small only in comparison to the drawing room were laid out as card rooms and rooms for more gentle pursuits. Servants stood by the stairs and the other exits to ensure the guests didn't stray too far into the other regions of the house.

It contained what to me seemed like all the flowers from Covent Garden Market. The floor gleamed in the reflection of thousands of candles, set in the two great chandeliers and all around the room and the flickering fire sent its own erratic shadows into the space. The dinner guests went into the room, the orchestra tuned up and began to play gentle airs and the first guests arrived.

We were fortunate that most of the principal guests arrived early. I stood between Lady Southwood and my husband, curtsying and receiving felicitations from those who had heard of my pregnancy. With the support and strength of Richard next to me, I actually began to enjoy myself. When the Skerrits arrived, Lady Southwood released me into Tom's care, although I protested that I could stay longer. Tom

escorted me down the stairs and found me a seat, where I could hold court.

The people fast becoming our set arrived shortly afterward. The Flemings and Lord Thwaite joined Tom, Georgiana and me. Lady Caroline sat next to me and took my hand. "Congratulations, my dear. When is it due?"

"June."

"So you won't have to go through the hottest weather with all that bulk as I had to do with my little Georgie. I suppose you're pampered by your adoring husband?"

My answer was careful. "I'm being well cared for." I didn't want to hold Richard up to any kind of ridicule.

Caroline smiled, her eyes understanding. "And your father-in-law will be thrilled. Everyone knows he's been champing at the bit for a grandson any time this past ten years."

That made me smile. "To tell you the truth, I'm glad we're in Brook Street. Too much attention would be so irksome."

"Indeed it would. For the last three months of my first pregnancy, I was hardly allowed to walk upstairs. True, I was as big as a house but my mother and dear George fussed over me so much I thought of running away." She laughed. "I was robustly healthy and just tired of waiting by the end." She smiled at her husband, who was chatting to Tom. The two men had met for the first time the previous year and liked each other. Her husband paused in his conversation and smiled back. Although their marriage had been arranged, they had found companionship and love and their son had added to their contentment. Caroline was a bright, merry person, always ready to laugh and I liked her much. Her

attitude to childbirth was practical and went a long way toward allaying my fears about what was to come. I would try to see more of her in the coming months.

"Your sister is attracting her fair share of beaux," Caroline remarked to Tom.

He smiled in pleasure. "She deserves it. She's enjoying herself hugely." We watched pretty Georgiana, decorous and charming, with her small court.

"Will you come back?" Caroline asked.

Tom shook his head. "I don't know."

"You know Georgiana is always welcome to stay with us," I reminded him.

He smiled politely. "Perhaps after the baby."

"Oh pooh, I'll be fit for months yet. Don't you trust her with me?"

I was sorry to see the faint trouble in his face but he denied that. "She couldn't be safer than with you. Lady Hareton has invited us, also."

"Has she invited Miss Terry again?" Caroline wanted to know.

Tom's gaze went to where Eustacia, one of the early arrivals, sat on a wide sofa, fluttering her fan and her eyelashes at a flurry of admirers and young women. "No."

"I didn't think she would."

"I should think you'd be glad to see the back of her, Rose," Tom said bluntly.

I smiled. My good friend Tom had seen Eustacia's antipathy to me at home in Devonshire and here in London. "She's done herself more damage than me."

Caroline smiled in sympathy. "It can't have been comfortable for you."

"No but no real harm was done."

Eustacia was enjoying herself hugely. I watched her from where I sat, turning from one to the other, using her fan to threaten them with banishment from her presence and I wondered if she knew what was happening. She was attracting as many married men as single ones. She looked well in light green satin and ribbons, made over from one of the gowns she had new last year.

The ballroom was filling up and the orchestra preparing for the first minuet, the one I was to dance alone with Richard. I hoped the guests were charging their glasses liberally. I might appear better to them if they were a trifle befuddled by alcohol.

Richard, released from his duties at the door, came across the room to me and I watched the gazes following him. He seemed, as always, supremely unaware of any onlookers. He took my hand, kissed the fingers and drew me to my feet, not taking his gaze from me, a slight smile expressing his pleasure. Caroline sighed.

He smiled his society smile. "Remember, keep your chin up and stare them down."

He led me on to the floor to officially open the ball as the orchestra waited for the signal from Lady Southwood. I dared not look around. I knew people were watching but I kept my gaze on his until I regained my composure. His presence gave me strength, not just because he was my beloved husband

but because he was in his milieu and he would help me to make it mine, too.

I brought the pattern of the steps to the front of my mind and we began. The minuet was a supremely elegant dance of flirtation and courtship in the right hands and Richard had certainly perfected the art. I tried hard to be worthy of him, remembering the tricks of hand extension and ankle rotation he'd taught me. I kept a smile on my face but he didn't need to think as hard as me and his smile was encouraging, loving and amused. He glittered frostily under the lights, unreal, ethereal in grace, out of my orbit but always cognisant of me and my needs, taking his time and making me take mine.

When the minuet came to an end and I sank into my final curtsey, I realised with surprise that I felt calm. My concentration had overcome my nervousness and I smiled at Richard in more than relief as we acknowledged the applause that followed when he led me off the floor.

"You were enchanting."

"You," I replied, "were perfect." That made him laugh and he took me to Gervase who, with Richard's contrivance, had bespoken the next minuet.

Gervase approached with his own version of Kerre charm. He was dressed in deepest red and the contrast with Richard's garb couldn't have been greater but the brothers shared the same grace in the dance and it must have made a piquant contrast to the onlookers, to see me dance with his brother immediately afterwards. The floor was full but I knew we were watched, so I did my best.

Afterward, Gervase escorted me to find a glass of wine. "You've repeated your Venice success tonight. They were transfixed, you know. Did Richard do that in Venice when he danced with you at the Contessa's?"

"Do what, Gervase?"

"Open up, show everyone how much you mean to him."

"Yes, but we were newly married then."

He handed me a glass of ice-cold white wine. "He's never done that before."

"They may think it's because of my condition, that he's proud of me."

Gervase smiled. "Oh, he's proud of you but not because of that."

I only just had time to drink my wine before Tom came to fetch me. He led me out to take our places in the set. He seemed rather subdued at first and wouldn't meet my look directly but we were good enough friends to share any trouble. "What is it, Tom?"

He swallowed. Then he did look at me, his brown eyes showing nothing in his serious face. "Your husband just showed the whole of society how much he loves you. They're all talking about it."

I smiled and flushed a little, as I rose out of my first curtsy in the dance. "He did, didn't he? Gervase tells me that Richard has never done that before." I knew the reason for Tom's reticence then. "I'm sorry, Tom."

"Nonsense. I'm glad you found someone worthy of you."

"You think Richard's worthy of me?" Tom hadn't always thought like that. I carefully brought my hand to a gentle stop

with a tiny flourish. Richard, dancing nearby with his sister, smiled as he saw the movement he'd taught me. I smiled back.

Tom sighed. "Yes. You've let me see enough of your private life to see how close you are. He cares for you very much. I don't know him well at all but I know he means to make you happy."

"I'm glad you see that, Tom. I'm just sorry—about the other thing, that's all."

He shrugged. "I'll survive. And I'll always have your friendship."

"Yes, Tom. Always."

If my love for Richard had been unrequited, I could have lived happily with marriage to Tom but I would never have known the kind of passion Richard brought me and I wouldn't have achieved anything like my potential. I still hoped Tom would find someone to care for eventually, someone deserving of him.

I did my best when I danced with him and I was rewarded by a smile at the end, much more cheerful than when we had stepped on the floor. "I can still remember the seventeen-year-old Rose counting her steps under her breath," he explained as we left the floor. "Do you remember that time you said "turn" so loud that you startled all the couples near us?"

I remembered only too clearly my embarrassment and the sniggers but Tom had been generous. He'd counted with me and turned the whole thing into a joke, so by the end everybody was counting out loud and voicing the moves,

forgetting who had initially made the *faux pas*. The remembrance made me laugh and I was glad to see the cloud leaving Tom's brow as he led me to a chair. "I'm happy for you." He saw me seated.

"Thank you, Tom. We're relieved." I smiled and went on, "There's been a certain pressure on us since we returned from abroad."

He saw my point at once. "It must have been uncomfortable for you,"

"It was. Although it's early days yet, at least we've proved it's possible." I spoke with caution. Richard and I had a long way to go yet.

Richard strolled over for a word. "I'm glad you're sitting down at last." He turned to Tom. "She's showing a tendency to faint if she's on her feet for too long."

Tom looked at me in concern. "Rose doesn't faint," he said stupidly and then, "Forgive me, I was just surprised. I've never known you as the fainting kind, that's all. I thought when you did it before, it might have been a stumble."

I smiled up at him. "I'm not used to it but strange things seem to be happening to me lately."

Richard's face suddenly grew serious. "The game begins," he said *sotto voce* and I looked up. Steven was approaching us, as suavely dark as Richard was sublimely fair but both had a glitter of danger. Glamour, the old witch-finders used to call it.

I felt rather than saw the whole company watching. The feud between the Kerres and the Drurys must be well known

by now. Steven bowed to me. "You were wonderful." I inclined my head in acknowledgement, not smiling.

Richard's tension and Tom's antagonism were difficult for me to ignore but I tried to relax and smile at Steven. I got to my feet in one graceful movement. "I have learned to enjoy myself."

I put my hand on Steven's and let him draw me away and I knew Richard would go in search of Julia Drury. He walked past Eustacia Terry without a glance. She stared after him and people noticed.

Steven wanted to outdo Richard on the dance floor. He was a good dancer, his talent enhanced by his height and virile good looks but he hadn't Richard's ethereal grace and the care that had led my husband to show me off. Steven was absorbed with his own appearance, leaving his partner to look after herself, expecting her to keep up with him. This attitude spurred me on rather than deterring me and I did well, putting a haughtier tone into my movements in response to his.

Steven was happy with the dance and led me from the floor, smiling graciously. One swift glance around the room showed me where Richard stood, conversing with Julia. I couldn't see Susan, for which I was truly thankful. I asked Steven to find me a glass of wine and walked to a sofa by the wall, deliberately choosing one that would seat only two, away from the main press of the crowd.

Steven returned and gave me my drink, sitting down next to me and disposing himself gracefully. What seemed second nature to my husband required conscious thought in Steven's

case but he still showed to great advantage. The white wig, almost compulsory at a formal ball, didn't suit him as well as it suited Richard but Steven's classically handsome features looked good whatever he was wearing.

"You seem to be blooming, Rose." I thought he might have heard about my pregnancy but he didn't mention it specifically. "I never thought you would show to such advantage."

"Why is that?" I waited to see how he would extricate himself. I didn't like his casual use of my first name; it reminded me of past intimacies that I would rather forget.

He sipped his wine. "You were always so reticent. So shy. Has that husband of yours insisted on it?"

"Far from it. When we were first married, he offered to buy a house in Devonshire and retire from society. I said no."

"I shouldn't think his father would have allowed him to. Besides, men make foolish promises on their honeymoon."

I found the remark unpleasant. "Did you make any?"

He shrugged. "Oh yes, many. Fidelity, constant love, total compliance. I never intended to keep any of them, any more than I suppose your husband did."

I lifted an eyebrow. "He tends to keep his promises." But this wasn't the approach I wanted to take, so I banished the cold note from my voice. "Fidelity?"

"Your husband isn't known for it," he reminded me, smiling urbanely.

"No indeed." I let him draw his own conclusions. "Are you?"

"Not any more." He looked directly at me and I met his velvet gaze. I used to spend hours just gazing into those dark eyes. "But Julia prefers it that way."

"I can't believe she prefers you to stray." His choice of words surprised me.

"She has her own preferences." He kept my attention. If I looked away, it would seem as if he'd shocked me and I didn't want him to see that. I said nothing and let him talk. "We have a workable arrangement."

Finally, his gaze left mine and released, like a rabbit by a snake. He glanced at Eustacia, standing not far away surrounded by beaux. "She developed well, didn't she?"

"She seems to be behaving exactly as she always did." I wasn't really interested in Eustacia now. "I don't see your wife's little maid tonight."

"She's upstairs with the other servants." Steven still watched Eustacia with the same intensity he had used on me a moment ago.

I took a chance. "Do you know whose daughter she is? The little maid?" I kept my voice clear of emphasis.

At last, I'd pulled his wandering gaze back. I met it then looked away, on the pretext of putting down my glass. "Do you?" he asked.

I'd hoped to get more out of him than that. "I think so."

He watched carefully, eager for my response. "She's the daughter of that maid, Lucy Forder."

"The one found dead at my aunt's house," I continued for him, reminding him why I would be interested. "You had

some connection with her, I believe." I was proud of my ability to remain coolly detached.

He shrugged. "She did some work for my wife. Sewing and the like."

"There was a lot of money found in that room. More than Forder could have earned by sewing."

He smiled then, a slow, reminiscent smile. "She did a little more than sew."

I didn't know what to say to that. If I enquired further he might tell me. I didn't think I wanted to know but I was determined to protect Richard from further hurt if I possibly could. Steven watched me, trying to gauge my reaction but I was jolted out of my thoughts.

"Have you forgotten, Lady Rose? This is my dance." I knew who it was from the familiar nickname bestowed upon me in Venice. Only one or two people called me "Lady Rose" instead of my correct appellation of "Lady Strang." Less formal than the proper title, not intimate enough to indicate impropriety.

It was Freddy, his face creased in a familiar smile. I was never so glad to see him. I was feeling the strain of keeping up appearances with an unpleasant person like Steven and I needed a break. I stood and took Freddy's arm. "I thought you were to dance with me later," I murmured as we moved away.

"You needed it. Your back was so straight, it reminded me of my old governess."

"He's not a pleasant person. And the thought he once fooled me fills me with contempt—for myself."

Freddy laughed. "Foolish woman." Then he led me into the set for the first of the country dances.

I saw Aunt Godolphin later and after I had thanked her for coming and made sure she was comfortably circumstanced, I asked her if she'd had any unusual visitors recently. "No," she replied, "but now they know I'm related to you, I'm getting many more of them." She smiled beatifically. "Lady Hareton comes to see me and dear Lizzie and you, of course, so I have no time at all any more for my ordinary household duties. And I hear you're in the family way." She took both my hands and pulled me to her to give me a kiss. "I'm so pleased for you."

I thanked her but I was getting a little tired of the constant congratulations. I guessed that Richard was feeling the same. We would both be glad when the spate of news giving was over.

I couldn't see Richard but Julia was there, dancing with one of her beaux, a man I didn't know well. Lizzie was talking to Sir Willoughby Fletcher, who was showing her something he had drawn out of his pocket, a little box that glittered with jewels. I supposed it was a snuffbox and I watched them idly for a few moments, admiring Lizzie's capacity to flirt.

It was comfortable to sit next to my aunt watching the company. I was far more used to doing that, even now. If affairs had turned out differently, I might, after all, have enjoyed my season in London as Miss Golightly. I would have been content. Then I would probably have gone home and married Tom, lived happily at Peacocks and had a brood of children. It would have been a comfortable, pleasant life

without any of the shocks that I was presently subject to—but with none of the excitements either.

I danced several more times, then Richard came to fetch me to supper. I was getting tired by then, weariness creeping over me but I don't think anyone noticed except my husband. I assured him that I would go to our old room if I was tired but I thought he looked tired, too and I decided that I must stay as long as he did.

The supper revived me, as did the glass of cold lemonade Richard managed to find. His care for me had not gone unnoticed, any more than had his disregard for the woman it was supposed he'd taken for mistress. I hadn't spoken to Eustacia but I hadn't cut her either.

Despite the fact that it was November, the rooms were warm and the windows at the end of the drawing room open to the night air. Several people took advantage of the fresh air. Some couples even went out to the balconies, a perfect place for flirtation, where a chaperone could still keep an eye on her charge without being oppressively close.

After supper I retired to a sofa in the ballroom and held court. I had friends to amuse me and some men who imagined they were in love with me, much to my amusement. Richard danced with me once more, then made sure that I sat again before he left to dance with Lizzie, after which he danced with Ruth. I enjoyed my coming-out ball far more than I'd imagined.

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Chapter Twenty-One

It must have been past one o'clock when I found myself without a partner, so I decided to go into the drawing room in search of something else to eat. So many people told me that I was eating for two that my mind turned relentlessly in pursuit of food. I made my way across the ballroom and into the smaller room. As I strolled past smaller rooms I heard a scream, not of flirtatious protest but a full-bodied, leave-me-alone scream.

No one else seemed to have heard but an urgency in the sound demanded immediate action. If I hadn't known the house, I might have overlooked it but I'd had the guided tour, so I knew where the small door led. I opened it and went in.

The first person I saw was Steven. He stood in the middle of the room, a frown of annoyance marring his perfect features. I closed the door behind me. Then I saw Eustacia Terry, backed against the wall by the door, a look of terror on her face.

I tried to be practical. Eustacia was given to histrionics. "Why, whatever is the matter, Eustacia?"

Dramatically, she pointed a trembling finger at Steven. I sighed. I hated dramatics, except on the stage. "He—he said things—"

Her neckline was a little disarrayed but apart from that, she seemed presentable enough, so I crossed the room to her and began to tidy her up. "Control yourself, Eustacia. Words

can't hurt you." I turned to face Steven. "Whatever have you done this time?"

He shrugged. "I assumed she was more game than she actually is."

Eustacia promptly burst into tears and Steven turned away. "Find your handkerchief, Eustacia," I told her, then went over to where Steven was standing, uncomfortably fiddling with something in the pocket of his coat. "What on earth did you say to her?"

He glanced at me and sighed, then looked away, not at all as composed as he had been earlier in the evening. "I'm having damnably bad luck recently."

"What did you do to Eustacia? Was it anything like what you tried to do to me at Hareton Abbey?"

A smile crept over his features. It might have been a pleasant smile under other circumstances. "What a shame we were interrupted."

"Not from where I'm standing." My own fears a thing of the past, he merely disgusted me.

He looked over my shoulder at Eustacia. "I only suggested one or two things. She was game."

Despite my better judgement, I asked, "Game for what?" Knowing Steven, there would be more to it than a simple affair.

Turning to the mirror above the fireplace, retying his neckcloth, he told me, almost casually, "We've started a club, my wife and I." He glanced at me to make sure he had my attention. He did. "There are many kinds of love, Rose and ours is a little different to yours. Or maybe not." He regarded

me again, his mouth curled up on one side in a half-smile. Eustacia's sobs quieted.

Steven continued his explanation. "When we first married, I discovered that Julia enjoyed what you evidently did not." He paused and waited for me to catch up with him. I remembered only too well.

In Devonshire when he'd been courting me, he'd always been respectful, considerate but he became more insistent in Yorkshire when he saw he had a rival. That must be what he was referring to. The violence had not sickened me so much as his assumption that I might enjoy it.

"No one can enjoy that."

"Oh but you're wrong," he said, his voice a caressing murmur. "And other things that can be enjoyed, too. Have you ever engaged in"—he studied me strangely, with a sort of hunger I didn't want to define—"forced acts before an audience?"

At first, I didn't understand his meaning. I wasn't a complete innocent, I knew such things went on but I thought men paid for it and kept away from respectable women. I was glad my stomach felt empty and I hadn't drunk too much.

"You suggested this to Eustacia?"

His look of contempt scored her. "She would wear a mask. No one would know her unless she wanted them to."

The thought didn't disgust me. Only that Steven would think that women wanted to be forced, and that he'd force them despite their protests.

"Eustacia's a respectable person. How *can* you suggest such a thing?"

He smiled again. "I was merely continuing where your husband left off."

"He's done nothing to her."

He shrugged and turned away from the mirror to look at me. As far as he was concerned, Eustacia might not have been in the room with us. "So you say. We'd prefer a virgin but she's close to one. The thought of a respectable maiden being laid down on the altar of virginity for us—" He almost drooled.

I turned to leave. I suspected he was trying to shock me, to upset me and I was equally determined he wouldn't.

Eustacia still wept but more quietly now. I went back to face Steven. "I can't stop you from doing these things but I can stop you abusing respectable girls. You'll have to pay a prostitute to fake it for you because if I find you've tried this again, I'll make sure my friends know about it."

He sneered at me then, as though I was still shy Miss Golightly of Devonshire. I wasn't. I'd changed. "My friends include some of the most influential in the land these days. We could stop you, if you became intrusive and create such a scandal that you would be forced to retract."

His low voice filled with menace. "You'll find that we have as much influence as you do."

I left it there. I took Eustacia by the elbow and led her to the door, not to the outer door but to the hidden servants' jib door by the fireplace. I opened the panel and ushered her inside. I closed the door behind us with a determined click.

Once out of the little room, I was completely lost. A long corridor stretched before us, presumably leading to the

service rooms on this floor but I couldn't see any stairs until I turned to look the other way. I knew where I wanted to go but not how to get there. Then a servant I knew, hurried towards us, head down. "Peters?"

She looked up in surprise. "My lady?"

"This lady has received a shock and I would like to take her to my room without the other guests seeing her. Could you show me the way?"

The maid curtseyed and we followed her down several narrow passages and up a set of narrow wooden stairs, where she opened a door into a corridor I knew. I found a tip for her from the deep pocket reached through a slit in my skirt and asked her to tell Richard that I was tired and had gone to rest. She didn't seem to see anything unusual in this, merely curtseying and leaving.

I took Eustacia into the bedroom and left her to fetch brandy from the sitting room. Fortunately the decanters had been replenished and I brought one back with some glasses on a silver tray.

Eustacia sat silently in one of the chairs by the fire, staring into the glowing depths. I poured her a drink and pressed it into her hand. She looked at me then. I'd never seen her so vulnerable, so shocked. It seemed she hadn't any reserves of spirit to draw upon. I was shocked, too but only by the fact that Steven, who was still a man of the cloth, could indulge in the practices he'd described. I knew among the many clubs dedicated to eating, literature, mathematics and so on there were some less salubrious ones dedicated to other appetites and that people of my acquaintance belonged to them. I had

strong suspicions that Freddy Thwaite knew more than he ever told me but a lady was supposed to disregard such things, especially in mixed company. I knew Freddy well enough to know that he wouldn't involve himself in any vicious activity.

I watched Eustacia sip her drink and recover. I took the chair opposite her and waited for her to speak, content to roam amongst my own thoughts. Steven's new hobby was vile and I couldn't believe that the fastidious Julia consented to be involved. Perhaps he forced her. Try as I might, I couldn't get the mental picture of Steven forcibly deflowering a virgin out of my mind and I shuddered to think that fate might once have been mine. But who would think a more than averagely handsome curate in a small village near Exeter would have such exotic tastes? Certainly not I.

When Richard came in, as I knew he would, Eustacia was still sniffing a little but had revived her spirits to a great extent. Her face was blotchy and red but tears no longer coursed down her cheeks and her mouth had regained its pretty pout, automatically assumed whenever men were near.

My husband's first look was at me and the tense lines around his mouth relaxed when I smiled and he realised I wasn't distressed in any way. Then he looked enquiringly at Eustacia. "Steven Drury suggested some particularly vile things to Eustacia," I explained. "I have a strange aversion to repeating them but I'll tell you what he said later."

Richard nodded and, spotting the decanter and the remaining glass, went over to help himself. Then he came

back to the fire and stood by me, looking Eustacia over. "You seem to have a penchant for assignations in private places."

Eustacia sniffed but lifted her chin in a challenge. "You didn't seem to mind once."

Richard smiled. "That was for a particular reason." He let his hand rest on my shoulder. "If you can remember that far back, I was leading you into error to repay you for certain disfavours you did my wife in the past. As I recall, you didn't take much persuading. I hope you'll consider future meetings a little more carefully."

"I did consider it." she retorted, stung by his cutting words. "I've known Mr. Drury for a long time, long before his wife met him. I never dreamt he would offer me the insults he did."

Richard didn't allow a pause between her statement and his, cool, reasoned response. "In this society, an assignation in a private room is only accorded one meaning. Be careful, Miss Terry, lest you gain the reputation that would prevent a decent man from thinking about you in any but a clandestine way. I have made it clear tonight that I have no interest in you. If I'd been even cordial to you, the gossips would have had us in the same bed by morning. You spread the rumours yourself. I'm just cleaning up your mess."

Aghast, she stared at him. I decided to take a hand. "In Exeter, you knew many of the people from childhood. That's not the case here. You must behave with far more circumspection than you did there, Eustacia."

I was trying to help but she resented it that I, of all people, should give her advice. She stared at me. "From what

Steven was telling me about you, circumspsection is the last thing that will get me a good match."

I couldn't help it, I burst into laughter. "He's told you far more than you have any right to know. Yes, I was Richard's mistress before we married but there was never any doubt about our marrying. Many couples pre-empt the marriage." Richard pressed my shoulder. "It's a different matter to throw yourself in the arms of someone as vicious as Steven Drury. Richard was my affianced husband. Steven is married. You should at least stick to the single men."

"Do you wish to remain here?" Richard asked. "Or shall we go back?"

"I'm all right but Eustacia had better wash her face before she goes back, if she intends to do so."

Richard looked, one brow raised in query at Eustacia, who stood. He took her elbow and led her to my dressing room, where she could put herself to rights. Then he came back, took my hands and drew me to my feet. "Well, my dear delight? I always said you were a hoyden. I don't think I was ever so taken aback as when you seduced me."

I leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek in a chaste manner. "I wasn't before I met you. You put all manner of thoughts into my head that weren't there before."

He smiled at me. "It was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted everything to be right where you were concerned."

"Oh, it was."

Still smiling, he drew me to him for a proper kiss. He didn't release me when the dressing room door opened but kept an

arm about my waist and turned to see Eustacia, nodding his approval at the improvement in her looks.

Eustacia gazed at us, eyebrows raised in surprise. "You've been spending a lot of time with the Drurys lately, haven't you?" Richard asked her.

"They were kind. I was flattered," Eustacia said, then added, looking at us with curiosity, "I thought you were estranged from each other."

I wondered how I had ever allowed her to intimidate me. "As you see, we're not. What made you think that?"

"Steven Drury told me. He said you'd had a falling-out and the honeymoon must be over. He asked me if I'd succeeded." She had the grace to blush. "I wouldn't tell him."

"Was he pleased?" I asked her.

"Oh yes. Both of the Drurys seemed pleased. I thought it was spite but they wanted more from you."

She stopped and looked cautiously at Richard. "Go on," he said calmly. He kept his arm about my waist.

"Steven—Mr. Drury said he wanted to recruit you for his little group. He said your approval would add a stamp of—of modishness to it, that where you led, others followed."

"Was his wife present when he made those last remarks?" I was sure Julia had something to do with this.

Eustacia turned her gaze to me, the expression changing to familiarity. "No. It was tonight, just before he tried to do those disgusting things."

Richard asked, "Will you be associating with them in future?"

I saw her shudder, even in the dim light from the fire and a single branch of candles. "No indeed."

"Just so," Richard agreed. "You would be well advised to stay away. Will you return to London after Christmas for the Season proper?"

"Mama says no but she's hiring a house in Bath for later in the year, so I'll meet with many people then, won't I?"

"You will. And you'll be safer in Bath. It's so much nearer to home, isn't it?"

Eustacia nodded. "I don't know if the Drurys are going. They said they hadn't finalised their plans yet."

"I'll bet they haven't," I murmured and Richard's face tightened a little at my bitter tone.

We took Eustacia back to Martha, explaining she had felt unwell. Martha examined me curiously but said nothing.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

We didn't get to bed until late. I had to be undressed and have the powder washed out of my hair. I was almost asleep while Nichols washed it out but managed to get to bed, where Richard waited, still awake. I slipped into his arms and fell asleep almost immediately. The last thing I heard was his chuckle as he kissed my forehead and held me close.

I slept dreamlessly and felt marvellous when I awoke. Richard was still asleep but he woke when he felt me move and drew close. "Last night wasn't such an ordeal, was it?"

"No, except for the part with Eustacia. People were kind."

"They like you," he answered, still sleepy.

"Are you sure it's not because I'm married to you and you're related to half of them?"

He laughed. "Cynic. No, it would work the other way. Most of them thought I brought the family into disrepute in my previous life, before you."

"Redeemed by the love of a good woman? Like Mr. B?" I was referring to the male protagonist in *Pamela*.

He made a disparaging sound. "Not at all like Mr. B. Pamela sold her virtue to him for the highest price. I hate to prick your self-esteem but if you remember, I'd given up my philandering some time before."

I turned my head to him. "Did you give it all up? When we made love for the first time, I thought you must have been celibate for that six months but knowing you as I do, I don't think you'd be able to do that, not completely."

"Why not?" He reached up his hand and caressed my breast where it touched his chest. "Because I'm so uncontrolled with you doesn't mean I can't control the physical side of my nature."

I tried to explain. "But that's it. It's because you *are* so controlled. You were using it as a release, weren't you, so you had control of all the other aspects of your life?"

"You, my love, are far too perceptive for comfort." He brought me closer for a kiss. He refused to answer any questions, deciding instead to demonstrate the physical side of his nature.

He rolled me on to my back, kissed and caressed me, made sure I was ready for him. He knew by the sounds I made and my movements against him exactly when I wanted him and he lifted his body over mine, pushing his way inside.

He moved gently but slowly and exquisitely built up to an insistence with which I was wholly in accord. I helped him at first, then became helpless beneath him, arching my body and wrapping my legs around him to achieve ultimate fulfilment. The harmony between us sweetened the encounter rather than dulling it with familiarity, the awareness of each other's needs and desires gave us the knowledge to heighten each other's pleasure. We gave and took in turn and achieved the apogée of desire together, crying out in joy.

It was always good but this time was better than ever. I rested against him, recovering my breath. His quickened heartbeats settled down again. I slid my arm around his waist and felt him kiss my hair, heard him murmur, "My sweet life, my only love. Nothing else matters but you."

"Do you *need* me to love you?" I lifted my head to look at him, last night's conversation with Eustacia in my mind.

He smiled. "Most definitely. To achieve this level of happiness, it's essential."

"What's it like without love?"

"Pleasurable. Friendly at its best, an amusement, a game. Nothing like this, my love, nothing like this." He bent his head to kiss me, his mouth sweetly persuasive. "Why do you ask?"

"Because of what I learned last night."

His look became sharper. "You'd better tell me."

I hated to do it, but he had to know. "Steven has started a club, to which he hoped to recruit you. They specialise in public acts with virgins."

He thought it over for some time, pursing his lips. "I've never been interested in that kind of thing but there's no particular harm in it. You can buy what passes for a virgin at any whorehouse in Covent Garden. Contemptible but not usually a problem. A club means they want to engage in private, so it's up to the members." He smoothed his hand over my shoulder. "Thompson's should exert itself to get a list of the members, though. It could come in useful."

I added the part that made the scenario unacceptable. "Unwilling victims. Unwilling virgins. He wanted to recruit Eustacia Terry as a virgin, to act the part of unwilling. She wouldn't tell him if she had succeeded with you or not. He told her she could wear a mask if she wanted to."

He made a sound of disgust. "She may be irritatingly flirtatious but whatever made him think she would agree to with anything like that?"

"He said they were looking for society maidens to lay themselves down on the altar of virginity." I said it in such a matter-of-fact way that I didn't think he'd understood until the distaste on his face demonstrated that he did.

"That is not tolerable. The other things are, I suppose, acceptable if all parties consent but to try to involve young girls is not, especially when they are unwilling. We should arrange a meeting at Thompson's and see what can be done."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"But you have an equal share in the office, you can call a meeting if you choose." It had been his bride gift to me, worth so much more because he had built the agency into what it was himself, with no help or influence from his family.

I kissed him, needing the reassurance of his love. "I know. But I wasn't sure if I was overreacting."

He smiled and caught my chin in one hand, looking at me lovingly. "No, my sweet life, you were right to be concerned. No one should condone that."

"It doesn't seem to bear any relation to what we've just done."

"It doesn't. But not everyone is as fortunate as we are, not everyone finds the one they were meant for." He kissed me again, just to prove his point.

"He implied Julia was involved."

He still smiled but the tenderness changed to amusement. "From my experience of Julia, her husband has probably never seen her naked, much less stretched out on an altar of virginity for his friends' amusement."

I doubted that but I didn't think he would be easy to persuade. "There's something else that concerns me, as well as the way they are using Susan."

His smile vanished. "What, my love? Is it all too much for you? Shall I handle it on my own?" His concern was touching but not necessary.

"No. Why should it worry me? I want to see this attempt at corruption fail. What worries me is that Steven is still a man of the cloth. He's taken holy orders and that can't be right."

His expression grew serious. "If we attempted to have him defrocked, it would cause a scandal. I can try to prevent him taking it up again as a profession, though. One of my many relatives is a bishop. I'll go to see him, explain the situation privately and leave the decision for him to make. That would effectively bar Drury from an active *rôle* in the church again. Would that do?"

"Oh yes. I want justice, not revenge. He mustn't be allowed to bring his perversions into the church. He spoke about altars as though they were a casual alternative to a table."

"I'll make arrangements to see the bishop as soon as I can," he promised. "I'll do it myself, not through Brangwyn. By the way, what do we do about him? I'm tired of having a spy in my house."

"Better we know who the spy is. Let's finish this thing and get rid of him before Christmas."

He smiled his agreement, holding me to him for one last kiss, then throwing back the covers and swinging his legs

over the side of the bed. "If I don't get up now," he said, looking back at me, "we may not have a day at all."

"I thought I would visit Julia." I watched him carefully for his reaction, not always expressed in words but in subtle movements of his graceful body. "I might goad her into telling me what she knows."

"Maybe." He picked up his robe from the chair by the fire and threw it across his shoulders. "It can't do any harm, if you take Nichols with you and a likely footman. But I don't want this to go on for much longer. I hate that you should see such ugliness, but we need to stop this, as quickly as possible. I'll talk to Carier, get him to arrange a meeting at Thompson's." He blew me a kiss and left the room, going through to his own room to dress.

I called on Julia that day, just after noon. It was a bleak day and I wore the furs that were a recent and welcome addition to my wardrobe. I waited in the carriage after I had sent up my card, my feet on the hot brick, but I didn't have to wait long.

The house the Drurys lived in was much like ours from the outside, neat and part of a fashionable, recently built terrace. Stairs led up to the front door and brackets, now empty, stood on either side to hold the flambeaux that lit the façade at night. A crisply dressed butler came out to ask me inside. Nichols and I went up the steps, like Daniel going into the lions' den.

All was orderly and pleasant inside, the black-and-white tiled floor reminiscent of ours but the stairs were in a different place. A superior footman took me to the drawing room. I left

Nichols sitting on one of the hard chairs in the hall, wishing I could change places with her.

I would rather have had Richard or Lizzie with me when I went into the drawing room to confront a mildly surprised Julia Drury.

She stood and greeted me, then offered some tea, which I accepted gladly. Her drawing room was decorated well in pale blue, a colour I was sure she knew enhanced her colouring: golden blonde with pale blue eyes, set in a pointed, cat-like face that seemed always alert. She wore blue as well, in a darker shade, the hue de jour, it appeared. Except that I wore peach, a shocking contrast to all that blue. This was an impersonal room, nothing in it proclaimed the owners' taste or style. All was fashion.

The pictures were insipid, as detached from their owners as Julia's cool stare. She hid her feelings almost as well as Richard but I knew there must be something else there. Richard had never found it but he'd never looked properly. He regarded Julia as a doll, an impersonal thing who would bear his children but not impinge on his life. He also thought she was stupid. I was sure that she was not.

I tried to be affable and pleasant. I asked her how she did, noting from her answer and corresponding enquiry after my health that she didn't seem aware that I was in the family way. Maybe so self-centred she never listened to any gossip that didn't concern her. All to the good. I wasn't about to tell her. Her expression was bland, as though I were any visitor, although the tension between us stood out for me like a bristling cat. She knew I was here for a particular reason and

I was wondering how to broach the subject with her. I didn't know how long I would have before another guest arrived, so I decided to take the plunge.

"I was present when your husband upset Miss Terry last night. I know you've struck up a friendship with her so she may be more reticent in coming to see you."

Her world-weary sigh could have graced a leopard facing the fawn she had caught when she'd hoped for a full-grown deer. "What did he say?"

"He asked her to join his little club. Before I go on, Mrs. Drury, do you know what he's been doing?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Some of it."

I didn't find that at all helpful but I had no choice other than to accept the answers I was given. "He says he's started a club."

"He and some of his like-minded friends. It's not the only one of its kind in London."

"Steven is trying to make it different." I was still not sure how much she knew. I waited, took a sip of tea. I didn't really want anything to drink but it provided a useful pause. Steven's wife didn't speak, so eventually I put down my tea-dish. "What do you know about it?"

She shrugged. "I helped set it up. He takes great pleasure from carnal delights. I thought this club might amuse him." She watched for my reaction.

It was just as well I'd put down my dish, or I would have choked on the tea. I never expected her to be so frank. For the first time I saw an emotion in her, something akin to triumph. My poorly concealed astonishment seemed to

encourage her. "Until I met Steven, I never believed I would get any pleasure from the essential acts of intimacy. You remember, when you were busy sleeping with my fiancé?"

I nodded; I'd never denied it to anyone who asked. "Well," she went on, her eyes gleaming coldly, "I secured your Steven. I found him exciting where Richard was dull, eager where he was apathetic." I couldn't believe she was talking about my husband but I kept my counsel and let her talk.

Julia wanted to brag, to vaunt her triumph and she expected me to let her, to be the admiring acolyte. If she had lost Eustacia, perhaps I would do. I knew Julia's arrogance of old, I knew it would blind her to what she didn't want to see, so I tried to look suitably admiring. The Rose of the year before rather than the Rose I was becoming.

"I saw your foolish weakness when Steven wanted you," she continued, her voice filled with scorn. "I didn't mind. I wasn't jealous you understand—the contrary. I was sure of him by then and I wanted as many people as possible to see how good he was, what a prize I'd secured."

I couldn't imagine feeling that way about Richard, to want to share him like that. I let Julia continue. "But you weren't the woman for Steven, so I took him from you. Richard seemed to be besotted." Here her voice took on a disparaging tone and she lifted her chin, smiling. "I always planned to come back for Richard. I take it that's one of the reasons you're here?"

I shrugged. "Why should you think that? I might be interested on my own account." I felt cold in this blue room,

despite the fire blazing in the white fireplace. I wanted my furs back.

"Everybody's welcome in our little group. In fact, you might say the more the merrier."

"How does one join?"

"A woman has to lay herself down on the altar of virginity—my husband's idea, titillating, no? Then as many as want her, have her, in full view. After that, there's a celebration, rather like a kind of mass, which Steven leads, then a free for all. But our special desires are catered for here. Have you found any lovers of your own?"

I supposed she was entitled to ask but I couldn't believe I was hearing this. She was so ethereally pretty, so sweet, that I couldn't believe she would do this, would need it. I shook my head, too unnerved to speak. But she didn't know of the other matter, surely? I had to know.

Julia leaned forward and I automatically passed my teacup to her to be refilled, although I didn't want to take anything from her now. I had to find out as much as I could, because I wouldn't be able to come back.

"It's one of the things we pride ourselves on, finding out people's preferences." It was just as though she were discussing an ordinary society, like the ones devoted to good literature or music. "We thought Miss Terry might benefit from our attentions." She looked at me, a question in her eyes.

"Miss Terry seemed upset. Steven wanted to take her forcibly."

She frowned, her mouth tightened. "I told him not to be so hasty. He would rush ahead. I was going to ask them for Christmas, and have her then. It's the wish of one of our members to deflower a respectable virgin on the altar. One who is well known to the other members. I believe he has bet on the outcome in the coffee houses at St. James'." That was worth knowing. "I thought Eustacia Terry would be perfect but she'll take a great deal of persuading."

"Would she be willing?"

Julia shrugged. "Unwilling adds a touch of spice—don't you think?" She gave a sly smile. "Did Richard take you forcibly?"

I wouldn't tell her that I took him, and not at all forcibly. He hadn't wanted me to give up my virginity, when he could promise me nothing, but I wanted him to have it. At least once, I wanted to know what it would be like to make love with the man I was meant for.

Julia Drury seemed to live in a world of her own, where she could buy whatever she wanted and take by force what people didn't want to give her. She was an heiress, greatly indulged by her father and now she had bought herself a husband. I didn't know anyone could be this far removed from reality this side of Bedlam. I couldn't believe that she didn't see through my motives. Could she believe, for one moment, that I might want to go along with her sordid schemes? Then I remembered what Richard had been like before I knew him and I understood some of it. His cold, calculating attitude to life had been chilling. "Was that what Lucy Forder was doing?"

She looked at me sharply and I feared I had shown my hand too soon but I met her gaze with a forced blandness and she smiled. "She wasn't precisely a prostitute and I was good to her. She liked me and told me all manner of things. Do you know who the father of her children was?"

I hoped I wasn't showing my apprehension but it seemed not. She was so sure of herself that she assumed everybody would come under her spell.

I shook my head. "Does it matter?"

"Oh, it does." Malice was present, like another being in the room. Julia was opening up with a vengeance, letting her inner thoughts show and I wished Richard were here to see the proof of my suspicions about her. "But never mind." Oh yes, she knew. She thought I didn't and she wanted to keep it like that for now. "Susan is a delectable little piece and she'll be worth seeing when I decide she's ready."

"Is she a virgin?" It suddenly seemed important to know.

"Intacta. She has been subjected to certain ... things she wasn't averse to but I'm saving her. If anything can draw Richard in, she can."

I tried not to look appalled. "Why do you want to draw him in? You wanted to kill us earlier this year."

She looked at me, so innocent appearing that I could almost doubt what she had been telling me. "That was a mistake. I was so angry that he had thrown me over, I didn't want him to live to enjoy it. Now I know I can share and not mind—" She gazed at me curiously. "Can you?"

I managed to meet her harebell stare and to shrug. "Things change but not as much as you want them to." The wooden arms of the chair felt cold under my hands.

"Has he taken any more mistresses since you married?" She stared at me, curling her lip. "I always thought you were a provincial, insisting on fidelity but I knew you wouldn't hold him for long. No woman can."

"You could be right."

She seemed satisfied with that and she proceeded to give me an account of the last meeting of the club, to which I listened with mounting disgust. This was outside my experience; I couldn't imagine how people could get any pleasure from debasing themselves so much and forcing innocents to submit.

I tried to keep Lucy in mind, to remember that she was why I was here, to find out who had killed her and to rescue the daughter she and Richard made.

"Will you bring Strang to me, as soon as you can?" Julia asked at last. "Steven has arranged another meeting soon. Strang's talents would be warmly appreciated."

"Of course."

The doorbell rang. Never was a visitor more warmly welcomed. I made good my escape.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Nichols studied me hard when I went downstairs. After she helped me into the carriage, she said quietly, "You're shaken, my lady."

I explained matters to her as we drove home. My maid had a varied life before she came to me, including being a maid in a Covent Garden brothel, so she wasn't as shocked as I. The frown above her thin brows showed her disapproval. "Even the poor ones are used. In desperation for money, they agree to something they have no idea about. They are corrupted until they think what they're doing is acceptable, but often it starts with rape. Then they get the pox and die." Her words were cold but not uncaring. That was what had been missing in the woman upstairs in her immaculate drawing room.

"I thought they could do something about the pox these days?"

"You have to have money. It's expensive. And it's not certain."

We spent the rest of the short journey in silence while I thought over what I had just learned. The immediate problems were finding Lucy's murderer and rescuing Susan but this use of poor young girls from the country was anathema to me and I wondered if Thompson's could help. I knew there were people who meet the coaches from the country. Perhaps the girls needed to be offered an alternative. A respectable one.

That afternoon I dressed for dinner more quickly than usual, so I could tell Richard and Carier my news. When I went into his bedroom, Richard was still seated at his dressing table, but he rose and kissed me. Carier made to leave. "No, Carier, this concerns you also." He turned. "I went to see Mrs. Drury this afternoon." He came back and quietly continued with his duties while I told them the vile things I'd discovered that afternoon.

They listened in silence. By the time I finished, Richard was manicured, powdered and dressed except for his coat and his wig was in place. Usually I loved to watch the transformation of the private man into the public one. It seemed like a magic trick unless one saw all the effort and skill that went into it and the practised ease with which it was accomplished. Richard stood while Carier misted him in perfume, one created just for him, a masculine musky fragrance with a sharp citrus edge.

"I don't know if the Drurys want you to try to rescue Susan and thus fall into their clutches, or something else." I didn't want to admit, even to myself, that the Drurys might think of anything else.

"We must find out who has joined this club." Richard sat again, still careful to dispose his elegant body properly. It was second nature to him. "If there's a bet running, I should be able to find out who and when. I'll ask tomorrow." He stretched his arm along the dressing table, turning his hand over, regarding it. "You mustn't go there alone again," he added, turning to look at me. "You have arranged for us to see Susan and if you can bear it, that would help but after

that I want to keep them at arm's length." His mouth was set in a hard line. "If we fall out with them publicly, there's always the chance they'll set another assassin on to us and if they do that, I fear we may have to take drastic steps." He looked up at his manservant and partner in Thompson's, who nodded wordlessly in agreement. They meant ensure that Julia and Steven weren't threats anymore and there was only one way to accomplish that.

Carier said, "There will always be people who enjoy more vicious forms of entertainment, my lord but this oversteps the mark."

"Agreed. Julia wants power, and Steven has found that rape is his particular pleasure. She is using that to ensnare him, but we have to stop that. And if Susan ceases to amuse them or form an adequate bargaining piece, they could get rid of her."

I nodded, still bewildered. "I don't understand how people can enjoy such things."

"Good." He smiled briefly.

I wanted to ask if he had ever taken part in anything like that—without the rape—but I couldn't until we were in bed later, settling for sleep. We left one candle burning on the nightstand. I could just make out his face by its golden glimmer. He frowned when I asked him but he'd always been truthful with me. I moved my head back to look at him.

"Once. When I was twenty and just entering the worst of my despair. I was looking for anything that would take my pain away. Many brothels specialise in some kind of public performance, you know." He laughed at my appalled

expression. "You did ask." I stayed where I was. "I didn't enjoy it. I prefer the company of attractive, intelligent women fully aware of their actions and able to choose. I came to see sexual congress as fun, a pastime, not a deadly serious pursuit." He kissed me on my forehead. "Until I met you, that is." He drew me close and yawned, putting his mouth to my shoulder to cover the yawn and kissing it before settling again. "And now, my angel, you must kiss me and go to sleep. I noticed your listlessness tonight, even if no one else did. You're tired, aren't you?"

I had to admit I was and I settled down against his warmth, asleep almost before his lips had left mine.

I had a levee in the morning and Richard took himself off to the clubs and coffee houses. I went shopping with Lizzie and Louisa, a light-hearted expedition that did much to restore my spirits. Now that my pregnancy was generally known, I didn't need to conceal my new aversion to standing for long. I was helped to a chair in every shop and the goods were brought for my inspection.

Lizzie and Louisa seemed to be getting on well, not surprising because they were similar in outlook. I thought Lizzie was more beautiful than Louisa but Louisa had charm and a quality that drew people to her, born of privilege and confidence. She confided in us that she was thinking of accepting an offer soon. "I want the prerogatives of the married woman and I've finally met someone I could get along with."

Lizzie was immediately enthralled. "Do tell. Who can it be? I've not noticed you give one man any preference over

another." The man attending to our needs in the draper's shop feigned not to hear. He climbed on his steps to the top level, where bolts of cloth sat neatly on top of each other.

Louisa smiled. "I've been careful not to." Try as we might, she wouldn't say who she had chosen, only promising that we would be the first to know after her mother. Louisa had a considerable fortune, being an only child of a man fortunate enough to be able to leave the bulk of his estate where he pleased.

Lizzie hadn't yet settled on anyone. I hoped she wasn't looking for the kind of cataclysmic event Richard and I had experienced. I had come to realise that was as rare as hens' teeth but many pleasant men had expressed an interest in my lively sister and she confided in me that she had already received a couple of serious proposals.

When I returned home, it was to discover Richard's success in the coffee houses. The man who had boasted he could deflower a respectable virgin had also bet on the date of the event and named witnesses. It was one Lord Jervis Grey, a portly gentleman I knew by sight, perhaps fifty years old, much scarred by the pox. He would probably frighten an inexperienced young girl half to death. His wife lived in the country, caring for their vast brood of children.

"It gives us the date of the event," Richard said. "We have until next Tuesday." Today was Wednesday. He regarded me seriously. "I want to visit the Drurys. Can you bear it? Your visit to Julia upset you so much that I'm not sure I want to subject you to another again."

I couldn't let him down now. "I've had a little time to get used to it." I smiled and took his hand. "That they should think we would even consider it. No, my love, I'll come with you."

My reward was his smile. "Thank you."

So that afternoon we went together to visit the Drurys. As we drew up in front of the door, I took Richard's hand, seized with a combination of fear and anger. He pressed my hand, then asked once more, "Would you like to go home? I can say you were taken ill."

I shook my head. A footman let the steps down and he helped me out of the carriage. We didn't send our cards in this time.

The butler informed us that only Mrs. Drury was available and showed us into a small parlour, as well appointed and impersonal as the one upstairs to which I'd been shown last time. Julia Drury waited for us and standing behind her chair was Susan.

She dropped a curtsey and stared at us as we greeted Julia and sat. Richard ignored the girl for the present. She was doing anything but ignoring him. Now that I had the opportunity to study her closer, I did so, meeting those candid blue-grey eyes when she gazed at me.

Julia was talking inconsequential social chit-chat with Richard, as though they had been in the habit of visiting each other for years. I looked away from Susan and listened while Richard gently introduced the reason for our visit. "Your husband has a new club, I hear."

"Indeed." Julia's pale eyes lit up, something flaring into life. "It will be a great success."

"Your meeting next Tuesday is to be a special one."

Her eyes widened. "How did you hear that?"

Richard shrugged, the dull sheen of his heavy, dark red coat moving, then settling again. "I hear most things. You had someone in mind but you must have mistaken her. Miss Terry has too much at stake to risk anything like that."

Julia sighed. "It's a great disappointment, I was so sure. Steven must have mismanaged her badly, don't you think?"

"I don't think even I could have persuaded her and she had a *tendre* for me at one time."

"Really? I didn't know that. If I had known, perhaps—" She regarded him with a slight smile.

Richard shook his head. "Sadly no."

"Can we look forward to your presence on Tuesday?" Julia asked then. A polite enquiry, like an invitation to a rout.

"I think not. It's not something for which either of us feels the need."

She stared at me in surprise. "Neither of you?"

"No," Richard replied with finality but no heat. "We have no wish to take part. We came to talk to the girl."

Julia sighed. "Perhaps she may persuade you." She motioned with one hand and Susan stepped out from behind the chair. She had a fine figure, set off to advantage by her tight bodiced, ivory silk gown. She had no fichu to soften the neckline, so her bosom spilled over the top from tight lacing. She breathed deeply and looked at Richard as though he was

the only man in the world. "We hope to have Susan with us on Tuesday," Julia said.

Richard's head snapped up and, for the first time, he met the eyes of the girl he had fathered. "She is to take Miss Terry's part?" I hoped I was the only one to realise he was cutting his words short so that no one would notice the unevenness in his voice. He took a deep breath and looked back at Susan.

She spoke, in a light, sweet voice that seemed to carry the fresh air of the country with it. "Do I please you, my lord?"

"In what way?" Despite his superb dissimulation skills, a harsh note entered his soft voice.

I studied Julia. She was enjoying the whole scene. If there had been any doubt in my mind that she knew who Susan was, it was dispelled at that moment. The malicious, delighted smile on her features could mean nothing else. She had planned this and she wouldn't have missed it for the world. I felt sick and it was nothing to do with my pregnancy.

"Some people," she said, "would give their fortune for this opportunity."

Her words dropped like poison into a wine cup. She knew and she was offering him the unthinkable.

"What about Lord Grey?" Richard continued to keep his words tight.

"We have another girl in mind. We could have a double celebration." It was as though Julia were discussing a coming-out ball. Which, in a twisted way, she was.

"Who else would agree to it?" I was startled into making the comment. The girl and my husband were still regarding

each other with rapt concentration. "Who said anything about agreeing?" Julia replied carelessly.

Richard had regained some of his self-control; he'd had the time to put that steel restraint into action. His voice was much easier, much more his social self. He spoke directly to Susan. "Do you know anything about your mother's untimely death?"

The swift changing of the subject without warning had its desired effect. The girl, until now perfectly *au fait* with the situation, looked uncertainly at Julia, who waved at her. "Sit down and tell him what you know."

Susan obeyed, going to sit next to Richard. She leaned forward a little as she spoke, the better to let him view her charms. He kept his gaze on her face, not revealing the revulsion I was sure he must be feeling. "I don't know much. What I told you before was true. I came back, found her dead and ran."

"What do you know about Greene, the footman?"

"He was sweet on her. She kept stringing him along but she was tiring of him." Susan paused and took a deep breath, freeing her bosom that little bit more. Someone had taught her well. "I heard he ran, too. He wanted her to break with this life, to go away with him and he thought she had. She didn't though." She paused, glanced away. Julia watched them both intently. I might not have been there. "The money was too good and she didn't mind what she had to do to get it. Perhaps he found out." Susan didn't sound concerned or distressed by any of this. Her mother seemed to mean nothing to her and I wondered how anyone could feel like

that. I still loved my mother, although she had died when I was a little girl and I'd loved the woman who had brought me up, my father's second wife, whom I'd called "Mama". It must take a great deal of self-centredness to feel indifference about your mother's murder. But Susan's expression was untroubled, as though she referred to a mere acquaintance.

"Why did you go to Mrs. Godolphin's?" Richard's voice was patient, expressionless.

"The position was available and the lady has the reputation of being a good mistress," Susan answered. "Greene thought we were running away but we never intended to do so."

"Did you see what your mother did to earn the extra money?"

"Sometimes. It didn't seem too bad." That careless reference made me feel sick. God knew what it was doing to Richard.

I took a hand, afraid that Richard might go too far and try to take the girl away. His questions were beginning to pass the general enquiry level and enter the personal and if Julia thought he was that interested, it would give her an advantage I didn't want her to have.

"You're willing to do all that?" I asked. "What your mother did?" Susan didn't look away but kept her gaze trained on Richard's face.

Susan pouted, remembering her part. "With pleasure," she said lasciviously, letting her tongue linger on her lips. Richard's chest heaved and I thought his control had come to an end.

I got to my feet. "We'll speak again."

Julia slowly turned her look on to me, as I meant her to do. "Indeed we will." The wide cat-like smile of the victor.

"Does she know who her father is?" I tried to speak innocently, as though I didn't know. My little ruse seemed to work.

"With a mother like that, does anybody?" Julia asked. Although I had been sure before, now I had a moment of doubt. Perhaps it had only been a stratagem, a way of luring her prey.

Richard stood, his social skills coming to his aid and we took our leave. He saw me to my seat in the carriage with his usual care, then sat bolt upright and silent on the way home.

I knew why. When we returned, Richard went straight upstairs and I signalled for Carier, who was hovering in the hall, to come with me. We went into the morning room. A fire burned in the hearth and I went over to it, needing warmth. I spread my hands out before it and rubbed them together, then turned round to talk to the dour valet, Richard's only friend for so many years.

"She offered him his daughter as a sexual plaything," I told him. Carier made a sound and his lip curled in disgust. "We must have a full meeting of Thompson's soon, tomorrow if possible, otherwise he'll do something on his own. He may need some help upstairs. When he's done, I'll be here. Send for me if he needs me."

"My lady." Carier bowed and turned to leave but was struck by another thought. "Do the Drurys know she's his daughter?"

Even the fire felt cold. "Mrs. Drury knows. I don't understand how, unless Susan has told her."

Carier's shook his head but bowed and left the room, intent on seeing to his master's needs.

Richard entered half an hour later. He'd changed, into a light banyan and he looked paler. "I was sick." He sat near to the fire and looked at me, sitting with my feet up on the sofa. I let one hand rest in the skirts of my dark green, ribbed silk gown and I clutched a handful of the fabric. I couldn't let him see my disquiet or he wouldn't allow me to be a part of this disgusting business.

"I want to get her out of there. It might be too late but I want to go and fetch her today." Claspng his long fingers together, Richard regarded me.

"She's safe until that meeting they've planned." I kept my voice quiet and steady. "They'll look after her until then."

"But what are they teaching her?" His voice rose a little at the end of the sentence, quavered on the last word. "Even if she weren't mine, I'd want to get her out of there."

"I've asked Carier to arrange a meeting at Thompson's," I said.

"I know, he told me."

"Then wait until then, my love." I must try to convince him to wait. He would be playing right into their hands if he tried to go and collect Susan on his own. "Remember, you told me to do that once? Well, now I'm telling you. Please wait. If we get her away, it must be done properly. What if she insists on being taken back? Forgive me but what if she has been so corrupted that she wants to do this thing?"

He studied me gravely, his hands still tightly gripped together. "I never dreamt Julia might be capable of doing such a thing. Until recently, I'd thought it was all Drury's doing."

"He just follows his appetites."

He shook his head but not in disagreement. "How could I have been so blind? How miserable I would have been if I'd married her!" He looked away from me then, staring down at the pattern on the rug before the fire. "That she can do that and think it normal explains a lot about her relationship with her husband. I never knew Julia had a sensual bone in her body and I still don't think so. It's the control she enjoys, moving puppets around a stage." He sounded weary now.

"Yes, you're right. She's shown her hand. But she's arrogant. She thinks you are as easily manipulated as her husband. That's our strength, Richard, that's what we have to work with."

He glanced up at me and his face cleared. "You're right. She thinks that because of my behaviour in the past, I'll condone all this. But I never forced a woman against her will, Rose."

"I didn't think you had to." My grip on the gown eased a little.

His smile was bleak but there. "I don't think either of them know that I'm her father. This is a simple case of seduction. I still think Julia's ultimate aim is to make me her lover. Susan is just a pawn."

I didn't argue; it was best that he continued to think that.

Harley Street [Richard and Rose Book 4]
by Lynne Connolly

That night we lay together like children and I held him
while he slept.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

As far as Brangwyn was concerned, the next day I went shopping, Richard went to White's and Carier went about his own business. But we all met at Thompson's at noon. I invited Nichols to join us, since she had some expertise with the *demi-monde*. We had a lot of information to exchange, so the meeting took some time. Together, we'd found out a great deal about Lucy's murder and the Drurys' activities, so the files were stacking up satisfactorily. The Drurys had expanded to their second file.

I gave an account of my encounter with Julia, then the subsequent visit that Richard and I made. Alicia was appalled when I described how Susan tried to use her charms on him but I didn't venture an opinion, not yet. Richard added the name of the man chosen for the defloration, then Alicia told us what she had discovered.

She opened one of the files but as usual referred to it hardly at all while she spoke. "That Susan is your daughter is beyond question. Since the twins were born in France, I haven't been able to find the registration of their birth but that wouldn't tell us much in any case. I've traced their whereabouts until now for Susan and until three years ago for the boy."

"What did she name him?" Richard asked.

"John," Alicia told him with no emotion in her voice, as though it were a normal business matter. "He went to work in the north, for a merchant there but he left suddenly and I've

not been able to trace him since. He was thirteen when he left. I don't despair, though, I haven't had replies from everyone yet. He may have gone farther north, or abroad. Perhaps his sister knows what happened to him." She stopped to have a drink of tea, watching Richard. He was tense today, lines of strain around his mouth and eyes, but back in control.

Alicia turned over a sheet of paper. "Lucy Forder was a busy woman but I can find no reason why she would have been murdered by any one of her clients." This time she kept her eyes firmly on the paper before her but I didn't think she needed to. "The main suspects are Greene and Drury, Greene because he found out what she was doing, despite her protestations of love to him and Drury because of his vicious nature." Alicia turned over another sheet and glanced up at me. "Steven Drury. You were lucky to get away from him." Her expression was sympathetic.

"I know it," I said.

She nodded. "I've made enquiries in the Covent Garden area. We even have staff there, you know—the best whores want the best maids. Some of them won't see him and the ones that welcome him have specialities that he seems to need. They are of a violent nature. If you need details, it's written down here but basically he prefers a helpless woman at his mercy." She paused and looked around at us and the tension in the room grew a little. Alicia kept her tones businesslike; it was the only way we were going to get through this. "Drury's violence and preference for helpless women are the only parts that seem to be relevant to our enquiries. The women who accept him have enough

protection to prevent serious injury." She frowned, then went on, "But Lucy was stabbed."

"Once, in the chest," Carier confirmed. He, too, kept his voice cool and low.

"That isn't his *modus operandi*," she commented. "Knives don't feature at all in his reported repertoire. Hands and whips are his preference."

"Have you still got Greene?" I heard the tension in Richard's voice but I wasn't afraid of him snapping. He'd had time to put his self-control back in place.

Alicia tapped her pen on the paper in front of her. "Yes. He doesn't seem to want to escape, he's lost all his will, and any spirit he might have had in the beginning is gone. He sleeps, he eats, he sits."

Richard shrugged. "Drury could have killed her because of what she knew and what she could tell. He may not have done it in passion but if he prefers violence, it would have helped him."

"Do you think he minds if his ... predilections become public? He doesn't seem to be concealing it at all." The thought of what I had escaped was creeping through me now. I wondered if it had taken Julia to bring this trait out in him but remembering incidents in the past, I thought that he would have found his own way to it without her.

"He won't want society in general knowing." Richard bit his lower lip in thought. "These things are done in private, with discretion. The moment they become generally known, the participant is regarded with disfavour—gossiped about, in conversations and in letters and avoided by mothers of pretty

girls. The letters can ruin a person and nothing that can be done about them, because they're private but they can be circulated. If anything is suspected, then people will give him the benefit of the doubt and gossip wildly about him but if it's known, then steps will be taken to exclude him."

"Them," I reminded him.

He looked at me then. "Yes. Them." He turned back to Alicia. "If Rose was lucky to escape Steven Drury, then I was lucky to get away from Julia."

"There is this. It's from Drury to his wife." Alicia picked up a smaller sheet of paper, from its size and the folds obviously a letter and she read it out to us.

"Sweeting,

Received your last, for which many thanks. I carry it next to my heart.

I have had some luck recently, looking for our requirements. One or two have let me try them and—"

She broke off. "There follows a particularly lurid and disgraceful description, which I have no desire to read aloud—" She looked up, then back to the letter, turning the sheet sideways where he had crossed his words.

"I hope the thought will keep you warm at night. Your descriptions of the arrangements for our Society are fine and will bring us more influence. We will be the only people who know their identities and then we can bring our influence to bear. You told me that was what you wanted and I have done my best to give it to you. I hope you'll agree I deserve my reward.

Our other friends have just arrived at their family home in London. I suggest we try to reconcile ourselves with them, keep them guessing. I know how you feel but there are other ways of getting your revenge, dearest bedfellow, and our first plan would be over too quickly for me."

They wanted influence but not the regular way, did they? To what end? I listened while Alicia read the end of the letter, my hands carefully disposed in my lap, my eyes lowered so that no one saw my distress.

"I will still have her stretched over that altar and when I do, she will lose her mask and he will see it. So will everyone else. She balked me of what was my right and I will get that before we do anything else. You can console him, or do what you will.

There are two girls I want. The maid, Lucy, is tired and her body droops. She doesn't learn her lines well, so I suggest we let her go and concentrate on the daughter.

Believe me, etc, etc."

Alicia looked up. The letter dropped from her fingers as though she couldn't bear to touch it any more.

Carier filled the appalled silence. "We knew most of that."

"We didn't know they were letting Lucy go," I said.

"Perhaps she threatened to expose them."

"Where did you find it?" Richard's voice was cold, no emotion at all reflected there. He had shut it all out, letting his brain do the work.

She met his eyes. "Sewn into Greene's coat. He knows we have it but I don't know how much of it he understands."

"It leaves us no wiser than before," Richard said. "It could be Steven Drury, or it could be Greene. And if it's neither of them, then it might have been one of the women. Julia or ... Susan." The pause before he said her name was brief but painful to hear.

Alicia leaned forward, her elbows supported on the large, paper-strewn desk. "We must face that and decide what to do in that case. In all the cases. Then we must find out who did it." She drew a fresh sheet of paper toward her and found a pencil. "Greene. If he did it, what do we do with him?"

"Kill him," suggested Carier briefly.

I demurred. "No. At least, we don't have to do it. He knows the Drurys' secrets but not ours. We could safely give him up to Bow Street and satisfy the authorities. They know we're interested."

Richard looked at me and I warmed to see his expression. "You're right. We can send him to the Fieldings and they can deal with him. If it was done in a hot-blooded moment, he might get transportation, which is better than he could expect from us."

That was agreed on by all.

Alicia threw her pencil down. "I suggest we leave the rest until we have discovered the truth. Shall we move on to the subject of Susan Jackson?"

We agreed. Alicia picked up another piece of paper. "If she stays where she is, she'll be corrupted, probably poxed, by the end of next week. If we take her, she might escape. I say we abduct her and talk to her. Tell her what is to happen and what we can do to help her."

"And that is...?" Richard asked, his tones as icy as his eyes.

"We can train her to be a lady's maid, or, if she should wish it, set her up in her own establishment. She could make a good living with her body but on her own terms, not on someone else's whim."

"If you weren't an old friend," Richard said slowly, "I would leave now." His dispassion had turned to dislike and a spark of anger dawned in his eyes.

But I saw the sense of Alicia's proposal. "If that's what she's been bred for, then it might be the only way of preventing her from returning to the Drurys. And it's a way for a young woman to earn a great deal of money. We can't acknowledge her as your daughter, you know that."

Richard was looking at his hands, which lay in his lap, completely steady, like a still life of beautiful repose, except he was deliberately keeping them that way by an effort of will. He stayed like that for a long time, while letting his brain work. "We take her before next Tuesday. Then we talk to her. If what you say is true, then any fate away from the Drurys has to be an improvement. I can give her an income, enough to keep her." He looked up but he didn't look at any of us. "Bring her to Brook Street. We can keep her there."

"It won't be secure enough," Alicia said quietly. "No one must know of your connection with her."

"Julia Drury knows," I said.

Alicia turned her clear gaze to me. "How can she know? We may be able to persuade her that she was mistaken. As

long as Richard plays his part and refuses to acknowledge her."

"Easily," said Richard. "I want this cleared up soon, because I won't have Rose disturbed much longer."

They all gazed at me and I blushed, because I knew what he meant. He reached out, took my hand and smiled to reassure me, so I was glad I had blushed. I smiled back.

Alicia cleared her throat and we looked back at her but he kept his hand lightly in mine. I took comfort from the connection.

"Do you want to bring her here?" Alicia asked. "It would make sense. I can tell her you have paid us to provide accommodation. There's no reason she should know where she is, unless she's clever. The upper floor here is, as you know, furnished comfortably. She can't escape from the window, so a guard on the door will suffice."

"Agreed," said Carrier before we could speak. I added my voice to the consensus.

We set about devising a scheme to take Susan. It would mean separating her from Julia and the rest would be easy.

To my surprise, Alicia had a copy of Julia's schedule for the next few days. "She's not the only one with a spy in the camp. The housemaid obliged for me." The usual round of shopping, theatre, dinners and dances was there, so we could be where she was.

We formed the plan rapidly and after Richard had extracted a promise that I wouldn't be in any danger he gave his consent. I found his concern touching but a little overwhelming, as I explained to him on the way home but he

wouldn't let me finish. "You're the one thing on which I won't compromise. I'll hear no more on it." I had to leave it there, I didn't want him to feel harassed on all fronts but I was disturbed by his insistence. It was his fear again, that I was carrying twins, I would be damaged or even killed in childbirth. The fear he didn't talk about to me and I didn't share with him.

* * * *

We knew which shops Julia Drury tended to patronise and the next day we had a watch put on them all. I lingered at a mercer's, taking my time choosing the materials for the new, looser gowns I would need before too long. Eventually, a man blocked the door of the shop temporarily and nodded twice, the prearranged signal that Julia Drury was out and about, accompanied by Susan. I finished my business with the merchant much more quickly than he was expecting but I still got a good price for the silks. Martha hadn't taught me good housekeeping for nothing.

When Nichols and I left the shop, the man waited outside. The knot in my stomach tensed. Without a glance at us, he led us in the direction of the Royal Exchange, then to the second floor, where he glanced down at the floor below.

We saw Julia Drury, her maid and Susan. They'd stopped so that Julia could exchange a few words with someone we couldn't see.

"Why, Lady Strang. I haven't seen you since I heard your excellent news."

I turned to face Lady Cavendish, whose ball I'd been unable to attend the other night. I managed it well. "We're both delighted."

"Your mother-in-law is in alt. I saw her the other evening and she told me all your news. How proud she was."

"Thank you." I glanced at Nichols, who shook her head, then back at Lady Cavendish, herself the mother of a considerable brood. "We'll stay in London and engage an *accoucheur*."

"How right you are. They are all the rage at present. I really don't know how I managed my first two without them." Lady Cavendish launched into a description of her first pregnancy and I listened with half my attention, nodding occasionally, while keeping the other half fixed on what was happening on the floor below.

Eventually, to my relief, the lady completed her narrative, then meretriciously added, "But I mustn't keep you. You'll be at the Bath's ball next week?"

"Oh yes, I should think so." I wasn't thinking that far ahead. With a pleasant smile and a nod, my torturer moved on and I was free again.

"She's in a shop on the floor below," Nichols told me. "She's left her maid and the girl outside, my lady. If I draw the maid away, can you take the girl?"

"I'm sure I can." We didn't want the Drurys to find out who had taken Susan. They could guess but they weren't to know. Their lack of knowledge would give us more time. We'd chosen the Exchange because the office wasn't far off and it would be easier to take her there.

Accordingly Nichols and I took separate routes to the floor below and, acting as swiftly as we could, approached from different directions. Nichols played the part of a lady carrying parcels, provided from a stack carried by a footman for that purpose. She staggered up to the maids and dropped the parcels at the elder's feet, carefully keeping away from the window of the shop, where Julia was ensconced. It was a toyshop, I noticed, with all manner of delectable trinkets in the window. She might be some time choosing her patch box, or whatever she had gone in for. I hoped so, anyway.

At first, it looked as though Julia's maid wasn't going to take the bait. Nichols would never have done so but this lady wasn't Thompson's trained and after a sigh and a shrug, she knelt to help Nichols pick them up. A parcel of ribbons had inexplicably come undone, tangling around the other parcels in colourful confusion. It would take some time to retrieve them all.

While the two women were busy, I approached Susan and tapped her on the shoulder. Her blue-grey eyes widened in surprise and while I had the advantage, I took her elbow and drew her aside. It was just as well she was sixteen years old, because anyone older would have immediately suspected something was wrong. Perhaps she did but assumed this was a subterfuge for a few quiet words alone, because she followed me round the corner willingly enough.

"I have a note for you," I told her. "I left it in the carriage. I'll bring you back afterward."

"Who's it from?"

"My husband. He wants an immediate answer." That interested her. This was the task she had been set, so she came with me to the carriage. There were two footmen behind us but this was a busy street and we had to be as discreet as possible.

I entered the carriage and beckoned her to follow me. She did so and as soon as she entered, the door was firmly shut. The driver whipped up the horses.

Susan stared at me in alarm. "We're not going far," I assured her. "But it would be nice to be private, don't you think? We have a lot to discuss."

"Why?"

"You want my husband to ... perform the ceremony? He wants to know one or two things first."

"Are we going to him?" Her hands shook, although her voice was steady. A strand of golden hair came loose from the knot at the back of her head and she pushed it back impatiently.

"No, not today. Just somewhere we can be private."

"Don't you mind him doing this?" That was the first time I'd heard Susan express a concern for anyone else. There might be hope for her yet.

"That's one of the things I want to talk to you about."

With relief I saw we'd arrived at Thompson's. Instead of going in the front, confronting the never-ending parade of humanity gathered there, we went inside via a side door.

A burly footman seized Susan's arms and pinned them behind her back. Before she could scream, he clamped his other hand around her mouth. She had no choice but to go

upstairs with him. I followed. "Don't worry, we mean you no harm, I swear it." It sounded inadequate even to me.

While the girl was taken up another flight of stairs, I opened a door onto a corridor I knew and made my way to Alicia's office, where she waited with the inevitable pot of tea. Its fragrance was a balm to me. Alicia poured the tea and I watched the steam curl up to the grubby, whitewashed ceiling. "Did everything go well?"

"Sweet as a nut." It had worked better than we hoped; not a head had turned as the rolling of the ironclad wheels and the jingle of the harness muffled Susan's initial alarm. I needed the tea, though.

We heard a door slam, then a drumming noise, presumably of fists against the door. The room where Susan was being held lay immediately above us. We presumed she would look out the window, decide the drop might kill her, then settle down to think or cry.

We decided to give her a little time to compose herself. "What sort of view does she have from her window?" I asked Alicia, sipping my tea.

"The back of the building. Yards, other houses and the like."

"It's best if I see her alone. Can you overhear any conversation?"

Alicia frowned. "Richard told me not to put you in any danger. The girl could be armed. Most women carry something, even if it's just a little knife."

"I'll take a footman in with me. He can stand between us." She nodded. "That should do."

"Then, if she decides to take the lady's maid option, she can come back here for you to find her a place."

Alicia smiled. "So she can."

I was beginning to like Alicia much. Her basic kindness, coupled with an ability to take things as she found them, made for a attractive personality. Our difference in rank was nothing; in this society, we could easily have found ourselves in each other's seats. I envied her the financial independence I didn't have. After some time we heard the commotion above subside and we ventured upstairs. Two brawny footmen stood outside the door of the room but Alicia turned aside and took me into the room next door. It was a small, sparsely furnished room, with several stacks of papers tied up with tape resting on the floor. A misting of dust covered everything. Putting her finger to her lips, she gently moved aside a print that hung in a frame on the wall, revealing a knothole. She carefully replaced the print and took me over to the other side of the bare little room. "She's lying on the bed, looking around. She's been crying."

I nodded and left the room, motioning to one of the men outside. "I want to speak to her but she might have a weapon about her. Come and stand between us."

"My lady," the man said expressionlessly, before turning the key in the lock. We went in, him first.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

The moderately sized room was comfortably furnished with a simple bed, a clothes press, a desk and two chairs. There was a rug on the floor and the fire was lit against the chilly November day.

The girl sat up as we went in, glaring defiance from red-rimmed eyes. She said nothing but kept her attention on me. Knowing the power of silence, I was in no hurry to speak, sitting down on one of the chairs, meeting her stare for stare. Now that she was angry, I could see the similarities. I saw Richard in her but also someone else; she wasn't a traced copy of him. The shape of the face was the same, as were the fair hair and the light, mobile eyebrows but the eyes came from someone else and the sensuous mouth with its full lower lip was entirely female.

"You're safe. We only wanted to get you away from Mrs. Drury for a while."

"Why?" It was the first word she had spoken and it came from a throat clogged with tears. She cleared her throat noisily and fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief. "What do you want to do to me?"

"Less than they want to do. Only to talk to you."

"What's he doing here?" She indicated the footman, who stood just in front of me but not impeding my view of Susan. If he stood behind my chair, he wouldn't be in time to save me if she lunged at me and his instructions were clear about that.

"He's here in case I need anything."

She sat up on the bed. "Mrs. Drury says I've got a great future."

"If a short one." Without waiting for her to comment, I went on, "Do you know about the pox?" She nodded. "Well, if you subject yourself to this next Tuesday night, you'll undoubtedly get it. Then no one will come near you. Those people will use you, then abandon you. Do you know why virgins cost so much?"

She shook her head.

"Because they're guaranteed pox-free, although many whores masquerade as virgins."

She stared at me, eyes wide with wonder. "Where did you learn all this?"

I had her attention. "I'm not blind. When somebody has it, it's easy to spot. We have a few alternatives for you, that's all. If you go back there, they'll abuse you and abandon you."

A spark lit in her eyes. Something had made sense to her. Unfortunately, it wasn't the sense I wanted. "You've taken me so that your husband can't fuck me, haven't you? He wants me, anyone could see that. Mrs. Drury said he was undressing me with his eyes. And you don't want him to have me because you're old and pregnant."

A child's reasoning. I sighed. "There is no way on God's Earth that Lord Strang would, as you so crudely put it, fuck you. There are many reasons, most of which you need not know but believe me, he knows exactly where you are and he can see you at any time."

That wasn't entirely true. Richard wouldn't be aware of her presence here for some hours. I had every hope that he wouldn't have to be involved in this part at all. He had suffered enough.

"I don't believe you," she sneered.

"Believe what you like. I've told you the truth and I'll offer you some alternatives to your present course. Do you want to hear them?"

Her tear-stained face gained a new strength. A slight smile curved her pink mouth. "I might as well."

She stretched her arms above her head in a gesture of relaxation and I saw an echo of Richard's gracefulness about her. I didn't want to see it, I was trying hard not to but it took me by surprise and it was a few minutes before I regained my self-control. I stood and turned to the fire, then back to look at the pretty, plainly dressed girl sitting on the narrow bed. She stared, still smiling.

"You may become a lady's maid, with some suitable teaching. I can place you with a household that will teach you, then obtain a position for you with some great lady. That's what Mrs. Drury said she would do, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied flatly.

"That's one alternative then. Or we'll set you up on your own account. You can be an independent woman."

"Set me up?" She stared at me, uncomprehending, then the truth dawned. "You mean, on my own?"

I tried to keep my voice steady. "With the right backing, the world would beat a path to your door. We will give you a small establishment, provide a maid and a footman and the

rest would be up to you. A shop, maybe, or whatever you chose."

"I always wanted to be kept by just one man. It's what Mama dreamt of. She nearly married a great man once, or so she told us but we never really believed her." There was no recognition in her voice. It was clear she didn't know who the great man was and it heartened me that she didn't know she was being asked to corrupt her own father.

"You would be on your own," I pointed out. "Independent, and we would make sure that you didn't starve or were desperate enough to take anyone. A few Vauxhall masquerades and who knows? It's not what I would choose. I'd take the shop." I smoothed my hands on my gown.

She regarded me in a contemptuous manner. "But you great ladies sell yourself to the highest bidder. How is it any different?"

The footman moved but I put my hand up to stop him, but I wouldn't try to explain how different it was. "So we do. Is there any other ambition you'd like to see fulfilled?"

"What's the catch?"

I smiled, knowing she would come to that. "Less than the Drurys demand of you, that's for sure." I paused. "You might be in a position to provide us with information from time to time. You would, of course, be well paid, but that's all we require. We don't want your body, or your total obedience, or even your soul, just a little information."

"Who's 'us'?"

I shook my head. "If you accept our offer you'll be told. You may still choose to return to the Drurys' roof and if you

do, you will be escorted there. We'll keep you here for a day or two to give you a chance to think things over but if you wish it, you'll be released in time for Tuesday's ... event." I paused, then deliberately added, "My husband won't be there."

I prayed she wouldn't choose to return. It would damage Richard to hear of it. He might not allow it but I gambled on offering her a completely free choice. I knew nothing else would do. And I didn't want him to give her a regular income, because the danger lay in someone uncovering the connection. Better a few anonymous gifts of substantial amounts. "Our offer is sincere. If you like, believe it because you know we're not friendly with the Drurys and to do this would be a blow against them. But choose what is best for you. Do you think Mrs. Drury will treat you fairly? Or would you rather trust us? Or no one? We can send you abroad, if you wish."

She gazed at me, lost in thought. "I don't know who to trust. Mrs. Drury is kind but I know my mama wouldn't have approved of some of the things she's asked me to do. Mama always said that she wanted to save me from the life. She talked about the pox, too."

I added something to the consideration. "There are some things we're interested in and our offer is dependent on you answering honestly."

She looked up at me. "My mother's death? I've told you all I know."

"You came back, found her and ran. What did you see when you found her?"

For the first time, a grimace crossed her pretty face but whether it was distaste or grief, I couldn't say. "She was lying half on the bed and half on the floor with a knife in her heart." She was dry-eyed. "I couldn't get to the money because it was under the mattress, so I left."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"Only Greene."

"The manservant?"

"No, the girl, his sister, the one who shared her room."

"His *sister*?" This time I couldn't hide my astonishment. Why hadn't we asked the girl's name? It had all been confusion at the time but how could we have overlooked it?

"Where was she?"

"On the stairs," Susan answered. "Going down."

"So she saw you and didn't tell us?"

"She certainly saw me. I was out of that place as fast as I could run. I ran all the way to Mrs. Drury's before I recovered control of myself."

I couldn't imagine how we had overlooked such a detail. Alicia must have heard, too. We would have to get hold of the girl and see what she knew, quickly.

I stood. "You've plenty to think about. The choice is yours."

The footman opened the door and we let her get a glimpse of the other man outside before she was locked in.

Alicia met me in the hall. "I'll have someone watch the Godolphin house and I'll make sure the girl stays where she is."

"I'll tell Richard," I told her.

* * * *

Richard was startled to hear my news and he wasn't fooled in the least by my explanation that he was out when the message had come. He stood behind my chair, watching as Nichols brushed and dressed my hair before dinner.

"Knowing Alicia, she probably waited until I was well settled in White's and then sent for you." He frowned. "But you're more detached than I am about all this and you have probably got more out of her."

"I didn't want you to suffer any more pain." I looked up at him apprehensively. Nichols tutted when I turned my head but I ignored her. "Susan thinks you're attracted to her and she's determined to draw you to her. That could only get in the way, I know how difficult you found it. Alicia is having the Greene girl watched so that she doesn't get away from us." I couldn't help a note of triumph creeping into my voice at the end of my speech.

He heard it and smiled in acknowledgement. "Very well. You deal with Susan until I can accustom myself to the idea and I'll deal with the other aspects of it."

I was glad he agreed. I would have insisted but his basic good sense made him see that Alicia and I could probably deal with her better.

We were hardly up the next day before we received a visit. Richard had been out early and returned for breakfast and I'd had a leisurely morning. I was still wearing a loose morning gown when the butler came into the dining room and told us there was someone to see us. I took the card and looked up

at Richard, who was sitting on the other side of the table. "It's both of them—Steven and Julia Drury."

"Good. I'm glad we're together to receive them." He put down his knife and finished his coffee. "They must be anxious, to call on us so early."

He paused in front of the mirror to straighten his shirt ruffles and run a finger around the top of his neckcloth, then turned back. "Ready?" I glanced in the mirror, too but I didn't bother to adjust anything. I would do. I took his arm and we went in to the morning room.

Steven and Julia sat on the far side of the room, by the front window. Steven stood as we entered. His smile looked strained and Julia wasn't smiling at all. "How delightful. A return visit." Gracefully, carefully, Richard saw me seated.

"While of course it's charming to be received by you," said Steven painstakingly, trying to match Richard's courtesy, "we have come on a particular errand." Julia glared at us.

Richard ignored her and remained standing for the moment, regarding Steven with an amused, superior air that was guaranteed to rile him. "We'd be delighted to help you in any way you can. What seems to be the problem?"

"Our maid—Susan Jackson. She has gone, been taken. Or so my wife's maid says." Despite his evident determination to be polite, a worried frown crossed Steven's face. I felt an unholy joy at their discomfiture and wondered if they knew we had her.

Richard looked at Steven, his expression of amused interest not faltering. "Taken? How could she be taken?"

Julia spoke for the first time, not as carefully well-mannered as her husband. "By someone who knew what they were about." She looked from Richard to me but I kept my face smooth and clear. "They took her yesterday, while I was shopping."

"How on earth did they do that?" Richard wondered aloud. He too looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "The shopping areas are so busy at this time of year. I could understand if you'd said she'd left at night, or been spirited away while you were busy elsewhere but if you were with her, how could this have happened?" He gazed at Julia, one eyebrow crooked.

She flicked her tongue between her lips before she spoke. "I was inside the shop, my maid and the girl were outside and an accomplice dropped parcels in front of them, compelling them to pick them up. While my maid's attention was drawn away, Susan was taken."

"My, my," Richard said. "Are you sure she didn't just run?"

"Why should she do that?" Julia demanded. I thought I saw Richard's gentle smile widen. "She ran to me after her mother was killed." Her face was like a stone.

"So you know Lucy Forder was her mother?" Richard prompted her gently.

"Yes, of course."

"And you think her mother was killed, that she didn't kill herself?" Richard's smile faded away.

"As to that," Julia replied, as though unaware how important the question was, "I really have no idea. She might have killed herself but I haven't a notion why she should do such a thing."

I was watching Steven and he, too, looked as though the question were an aside, of no moment. "I thought there was no question. That she was murdered, that is. It's always been presented to me in that light. It's unfortunate but it's nothing we can mend. We can help the daughter, though."

That was too much. "You call that help? To put her on such a path? To use anyone in such a way is abysmal." I could have bitten my tongue out, for the passion in my voice had been obvious but the damage was done now. Richard kept his gaze on Julia, didn't turn around to me.

Steven stared at me in surprise. "I thought you understood. She wants it, she thinks it will bring her great fortune. And it might well do so, you know. Lord Grey may take her into his keeping, if this goes well."

"A fat, poxed old man." I was goaded to make an unwise comment. "Goat."

"Maybe," said Julia silkily. She saw my emotion was coming through and knew, just as Richard did, that she could take advantage of it. "But it needn't be Lord Grey. We've already found an alternative. There was the other suggestion." She looked up at Richard as though she were asking him to come to tea; polite interest and friendliness were all that we could see.

He met her stare with all the frost his blue eyes possessed. "You think I could do that?"

She smiled but amusement was no part of it. "I know you are supposed to have a sensual nature. Your wife has indicated that she wouldn't be insulted if you took such a step. By the way, is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Are you in the family way?"

I knew it couldn't last forever. "It's early days."

"Then you won't be ... available for a while," Julia said.

"You might like to watch. I know Steven does." She turned a look of such melting fondness on her husband, I knew it had to be false. Did he enjoy watching his wife with other men? I wouldn't call it making love—nothing could be further from it. The physical act went by many names but not always making love.

Steven returned her look but didn't smile. I knew Richard had glanced at me, to see if I minded, if I wanted to leave but I wasn't so easily scared away. I had recovered my composure and turned a blank stare on them. Julia, in her favourite blue, showed some heat for the first time. Steven merely looked pleased.

"Something occurs to me." They both turned to look at Richard, although he hadn't raised his voice. "If you're indulging in these activities, what happens when you"—he indicated Julia—"get into the family way? Who has paternity?"

"Why, Steven does," she said. "Besides, there are ways of arranging these things."

"So there are but none of them are certain."

He was caught by something in Julia's gaze, something of enquiry and he lifted one eyebrow but said nothing. "I'd always heard you had a sensual nature," she confessed. "It was one of the reasons I accepted your offer but I never saw anything of it."

This was the first time I had heard it from her side, that the betrothal period had been as cold as Richard had always described it. I wondered why. Julia was attractive, it was obvious she wasn't as frigid as Richard had always claimed and he had given up his other women for her. As he and I had discovered, to make love during the betrothal period wasn't considered a particularly venal sin and since we'd found such joy with each other, what could have put him off Julia before he met me?

All he would say was, "You shouldn't believe everything you read."

"I have heard you talked about by women who would know," she persisted.

I remembered that night on our honeymoon when we had both been bettered by drink and desire, when love and tenderness had temporarily left us. The passion and excitement of that raw evening had helped me to understand what it would have been like to be his mistress. It would still be worth having.

"Perhaps, Julia, it was something in you," he said then, chillingly. "I can't recall receiving any complaints elsewhere."

Steven glanced at me. I smiled at him, as I would a friend across the room at a public gathering. I pretended to disregard him but I knew I must be careful.

The door opened and refreshments were served. I could busy myself pouring tea, so the moment was lost, although I knew without looking that Steven still held me under close scrutiny, his gaze burning and steady. Bolstered by Richard's presence, I had nothing to fear.

"Julia," Richard said, attracting her attention again, "you confuse having a sensual nature with having a perverse one. I tried many pastimes and I discarded most of them years ago. I have no interest in putting myself under your jurisdiction in any way. This new activity is just another method of control for you. I don't think you care about it one way or the other."

Julia put down her tea-dish with a sharp click and I made a mental note to bespeak another one from the shop before they ran out of stock. "I was introduced to certain things by my dear husband. Things you're probably not capable of. We are as one in that respect." I didn't believe her. It was the control, the power she wanted, I was sure of it. "We thought you were of a similar mind but it seems not."

"Mind seems to have little to do with it," Richard said dryly.

Julia shrugged. "Perhaps that is the appeal. Certainly, we can number many eminent people amongst our number."

I fought to control my distress. "And you think that gives you power?"

"It doesn't matter." Steven put his hand over Julia's to prevent her reply. It was the first time he had touched her. "We don't do it for that reason. If you're not interested in our concerns, there seems to be no more to say about it but the purpose of our visit remains." He turned back to us and his voice hardened, becoming more demanding. "Where is the girl?"

Richard, who had been so still he might have been emulating a statue, finally moved, sitting down in a chair by

the window. From there, he could look at me without turning his head and still keep the Drurys in view.

Since Steven was looking at me, I said, "How should I know?"

"You know because you took her."

I was ready for that. "Why should I do that?"

He shrugged, a far less elegant gesture Richard made of it. "Who knows? Chivalry probably. But she wants to, so you're saving her from nothing."

"There is the other reason," Julia said. We all looked at her with different thoughts in our hearts. She faced Richard. "You know, I'm not sure *you* do," she went on, turning to stare at me. There was a silence while I waited for her to speak. I would not make the grave mistake of saying something about Susan's parentage and perhaps provide the Drurys with information they did not possess.

Eventually, when it was obvious that the Drurys were waiting for me, I said, "Tell me."

Julia smiled again then, a smile of pure triumph. "I thought you were close to your husband." She didn't take her pale gaze from mine for a second, savouring her moment. "Susan Jackson should really be Susan Kerre. She's the daughter of your husband, Richard Kerre."

I met her gaze calmly.

Her husband sprang to his feet in shock, or perhaps consternation. "You don't mean it." He stared down at his wife. His mouth was open, his eyes wide with amazement.

She met his gaze calmly. "Lucy Forder told me. She worked at Eyton when she was a girl and once she'd been seduced, they sent her away."

I saw a movement from the corner of my eye. Richard, hit again by the injustice done for his benefit, moved his hand towards his face, then stopped and moved it slowly back down again. Julia saw his reaction and while her husband was absorbing the enormity of the information he had just received, she turned her attention to my husband. "You told her?"

"We have no secrets. It's why your suggestion was more than repellent to us. Now that I know you knew, it is doubly vile."

"Or doubly intriguing?" She leaned back in her chair, fully in control of her emotions. Her husband was dumbfounded; her ex-betrothed as overcome as she'd ever seen him. I chose to appear cowed. I knew it was important to let her have her head—people are most forthcoming when they think they are in control—so I remained silent. If Richard needed me, I was there but I would let him lead.

"Don't you think it would be a delicious piquancy to see a virgin deflowered in public by her own father?" She fixed her pale eyes on Richard. "Especially when everyone but the girl knows it?"

Richard held himself together with bands of mental steel. "How do you think that would make the girl feel? Would it improve her in any way, do you think?" He leaned back and crossed one leg over the other, seemingly at ease.

"She wouldn't mind what she did after that. To be honest, I was hoping you'd take her into keeping."

"Do you think I would? Do you really think that little of me, Julia, that you would drag me down to your level?"

She studied him in silence. "Or up? Why should there be any limit to what we can experience?"

"Incest is against the law," Richard replied. "And against most of the instincts of man."

Steven sat with a thump, still staring at Julia, who was still ignoring him. He was peripheral to this discussion, as was I. "And I was to keep Rose busy while you oversaw all this?"

"Yes." She didn't look at him.

"And you didn't trust me enough to tell me?"

"It wasn't my secret," she replied. "Lucy made me promise not to tell anyone but she thought, since I was betrothed to him once, I should know. She didn't make me promise not to use the knowledge."

Steven shook his head and regarded me. "I didn't know." He looked bleak, as well he might.

"So you would have gone through with it without knowing that final piece?" I answered him. "Isn't the whole sordid affair bad enough without knowing Susan's identity?"

Steven shrugged. "Julia opened the door for me."

Richard drew everyone's attention when he spoke. "And pushed you through it." For the first time, I began to see Steven's side of the story and felt sorry for him, despite his vicious proclivities. After all, he'd managed to control them until he came into Julia's orbit. "You're a manipulator, Julia, a user. Are you a murderer? Did you decide Lucy was in the

way, that she had to go? We have good reason to assume you're capable of it, at least of ordering it, so did you do it?" He stood again, so he could look down on her.

She lifted up her face, flower-like in its purity. "She didn't know I planned this. She knew about the club; she appeared there once or twice herself." She paused, waiting but Richard didn't respond. "She didn't want Susan to appear there, she had higher ambitions for her but she could have been brought around, I'm sure of it." Julia sighed. "Actually, I wanted her to see you at the last minute, to see you having her daughter, not knowing. That would have been exquisite."

Richard let his contempt show. "Exquisite isn't the word I would use." He looked down at her and the silence was tangible. "So you think you had Lucy under control?" Without warning, he turned his icy blue stare to Steven. "How about you?"

He blinked, looked away. "I didn't know any of this. I've been following my desires, my needs for the last year."

"Then we'll leave you to wallow in your own filth. Did you kill her?"

"Of course not. I was fond of Lucy." He would say no more, staring down at his clasped hands, the knuckles white.

There was a pause that no one rushed to fill, although eventually Richard did. "Your wife needs controlling. If I were you, I would assert my authority. From what I've heard—and seen—you should enjoy that." Steven didn't look up.

Richard turned his attention back to Julia, who was smiling sweetly. "Besides, there was a meeting of our club that night. It went on until the morning and no one was alone until late

on the next day. Most of the members paired off, none with the partner they had arrived with. I can produce witnesses, of course and there are the minutes."

"Minutes?" Richard echoed. Where Julia's evil designs had seemingly left him unmoved, the thought of detailed accounts was incredulous.

"I keep them and they're approved before the next meeting. It is a club, after all. Everyone has a code name but I can put identities to them all." Julia's face held that look of calm serenity seen on paintings of saints in ecstasy.

Richard stared at her in silence for several minutes. "I shall ask you to leave now. Needless to say, any but the most remote social contacts between us will cease from today. I will not have you polluting my wife's presence, or disturbing her any further. Attempts to exact any kind of revenge will be met with stronger reprisals than before. If you accept my terms, we'll leave you alone and you can continue with your activities—within limits. However, if you try to entrap anyone in this way again, we will work against you." He lifted his gaze to Steven. "And if I hear of you forcing an unwilling woman, you will hear from me. Count on it."

Julia's beatific smile had slipped to a sneer but Steven stared down at his hands. He wasn't a stupid man and I felt sure he would curtail his wife, or attempt to, now that he was aware of the full extent of the workings of her mind.

Her triumph would have been to see my husband deflower his own daughter in front of witnesses, to give her a hold over him with which she could threaten him for years to come. I didn't think she would stop. I had thought her motive was

revenge but it was more than that; she actually *enjoyed* using other people and it seemed that the more perverted the use was, the more she enjoyed it. Her own sacrifice on the altar would have been a small price for her to pay.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

They took their leave. Richard saw them to the door of the room, then came back to me. When the front door slammed, he took my hand and smiled reassuringly. "All right? I'm sorry you had to hear such filth. If I'd known, I would have seen them alone."

I shook my head. All the emotion he'd held back was there for me to see. Shock, disgust and overriding it all, love and concern. "I want to share your life, Richard, not be a pet for you."

He raised my hand to his lips. "Brave, wonderful woman. My sweet love, my instincts are to look after you, to shelter you. It seems I'll have to curb my more protective instincts, won't I?"

I smiled. "No, just be aware that if you try to shut me out, I'll push my way back in. Where you're concerned, I have no pride."

He touched my face, moved a gentle thumb over my cheekbone. "I don't deserve you. But I thank God you didn't fall into Drury's clutches."

"Thank God indeed."

Later a neatly written copy of the minutes of the Cytherean Society was delivered by hand. It was brought to us and left outside our room, since I had returned to bed and Richard had decided to join me. One thing had led to another and we were now nicely sated, naked and warm.

The note was brought in with the light meal Richard had ordered. "To keep up my strength," he'd said.

Richard glanced at the note, then tossed it aside. "It seems there were some eminent people present that night and Julia was doing the honours. They would both have been in clear sight."

"So they couldn't have killed Lucy?"

He sighed. "It seems not. It doesn't prove they couldn't have had her killed but that's unlikely. Lucy was under their control and they think they could have brought her around. They had no need to kill her."

I nodded. "We have to concentrate on the Greenes. It will be a relief, a breath of fresh air after the Drurys."

He took my hand. "Much as you are, my sweet, after the rigours of society." Then he took much more, with my willing co-operation.

The next day we went together to Aunt Godolphin's to see the maid. I'd sent my aunt a note, briefly requesting an interview with the girl and she had replied in the affirmative by the same messenger.

When we arrived in Harley Street, Aunt Godolphin and the maid were waiting in the parlour on the ground floor. My aunt kissed me, curtsied to Richard a little shyly and poured us all some tea. Richard sat next to me on my aunt's sofa, near the friendly fire. I'd been in a lot of these parlours recently and this was one of my favourites. It seemed like a real home, with prints and family pictures on the walls and signs of wear on the comfortable furniture.

I had a distinct fondness for tea these days and when I mentioned it, my aunt smiled indulgently. "Women in your condition often get fancies. I myself couldn't abide tea but I couldn't get enough toast."

"Toast?" I smiled, amused by her words.

"Yes and I don't care for it in the usual run of things more than anything else." She smiled back. "But when I was in a similar condition, I had it with every meal." She motioned to the girl, Greene, who was standing quietly by her chair. "Will you need her for long? She has duties she should be attending to."

"Not long, ma'am." Richard looked at the girl and she looked at the floor. "I have a disinclination to look at the top of your head." The maid lifted her head and, blinking, stared straight at him. She wasn't as young as I'd thought but small and scared looking. Her grey eyes were wide with apprehension and the corners of her mouth shook a little.

"You're the sister of the man who left after Forder's death?" Richard asked.

She bowed her head. "Yes, my lord."

"Then you'll be glad to know that we have him safe and sound."

She didn't look glad, she looked apprehensive. "Yes, my lord."

His hands lay relaxed on the arms of his chair and he looked at his ease. "Did you know where he had gone?"

"He left in too much of a hurry, my lord, he had no time to tell me." Her voice grew stronger.

"And we caught up with him before he could let you know. I understand." Richard was careful to talk in quiet, measured tones so as not to upset her any further.

I saw little resemblance between this girl and her brother. Where he was painfully thin and tall, she was short and comfortably upholstered. Her hair was mostly hidden beneath her large, carefully laundered, white housemaid's cap but it looked darker than her brother's. Because she was plumper than he, her face was rounder and I thought she would look pleasing when she smiled. She wasn't smiling.

"Could you tell him I'll do what I can for him, my lord?"

"Of course. You care for him then?"

"Oh yes." Animation crossed her features for the first time but it took the form of worry. She must have been fretting, waiting to hear from him. "We've always cared for each other. At least, until—"

"Until?" Richard prompted, looking at her enquiringly.

She gazed at him, all emotion gone again. "Until Lucy." She swallowed, then realising she must say more, she continued, "He truly loved her and when he found out what she was doing with—"

"We know. We've been told." He didn't say who had told us. He kept his voice steady, soothing. He curled the fingers of his left hand around the arm of his chair. Aunt Godolphin glanced at him but he took no notice. There was no need for her to know.

The maid grimaced and went on, after clearing her throat nervously. "He wanted her to stop and she promised that she would. We got the positions here and things seemed to go

well for a while. Mrs. Godolphin is a good employer and she was kind to us." My aunt looked pleased and smiled indulgently, nodding in acknowledgement of the compliment. I took it to mean she was lax making sure her staff were where they should be. It must have been easy for Lucy to leave the house secretly when she wished.

Since Richard showed no inclination to talk, Greene continued to speak. "But I shared Lucy's room and I knew she was still doing it. When I talked to her about it, she said it was easy money and that she didn't care what people did to her body." I glanced at Richard but his face was impassive. I expected nothing else. Aunt Godolphin's face had clouded, however; she'd heard enough now to realise what had been going on. "She showed me her money once and a book where she wrote all her appointments, in code."

"Not difficult to interpret," said Richard dryly.

She stared at him, startled. "I thought that Bow Street man had it."

"No, I have. Go on."

"Then I asked her to stop, said my brother would make an honest woman of her. She laughed and said she'd tried that and dishonest was best." My aunt tutted but, at a glance from me, said nothing. But it was too late—the girl had stopped talking. She'd come to an important part of her narrative and we needed her to go on.

"Please, dear Aunt, we'll explain it to you by and by." I smiled at her and she said something that sounded like "humph" and leaned back in her chair.

Richard hadn't taken his gaze from the girl. It was one of his greatest gifts, the ability to make other people talk. "You may as well continue. We know most of it."

She looked up in alarm but he showed her nothing in return. For all she knew, her brother could have talked to us. The purpose of this interview was to see if she could help us. I felt sorry for her but for Lucy's sake and Richard's, we needed to know the truth.

She sighed and groped for her handkerchief. I drank more tea and passed my dish back to my aunt for more. She poured and Greene found the strength to continue. "I couldn't stand it any more, the way she was stringing Harry along, promising to marry him while she was still doing—all that and so ... so ... I told him." She was crying in earnest, mopping away the tears coursing down her face but nobody moved to help her. I hated to see the maid's distress but we had to know.

"What did he do?" asked Richard quietly.

"He ... he ... killed her." She gasped and she buried her face in her handkerchief, sobbing for real.

Aunt Godolphin, that kindly woman, could stand no more. She stood, guided the maid to a seat and put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "There, there."

Richard sighed. "I'm sorry to distress you but we must know the truth. Is there a possibility that anyone else could have done it? Someone you don't know about?"

Greene regarded him over the top of her capacious handkerchief, sniffing, her voice full of her tears. "No. I saw him do it. But he wasn't in his right mind, my lord, he didn't

know what he was doing." She dropped the handkerchief on her lap and showed us her tear-streaked face. "She said some awful things, my lord, things I wouldn't repeat and she laughed when he said he was disgusted with her. She brought some food up with her from the kitchen for a late supper and he took the knife and he—" She broke off again and buried her face in my aunt's shoulder.

Aunt Godolphin looked at Richard with sorrow. "Is that enough?"

Richard stood and held out his hand to take hers and bow over it. I stood with him. "More than enough. Thank you for your time. We'll tell her brother what his sister has said. With any luck, we should be able to keep her out of this but you should guard her well, Mrs. Godolphin. He will have to take his chances in Bow Street but there is a good chance he will be transported, not hanged."

He sounded dispassionate, as though none of this concerned him but he took my hand after the carriage door was slammed shut on us, gripping it tight.

In the carriage on the way to Thompson's, I asked him, "How are we going to keep her out of it, if she saw it?"

Richard leaned against the squabs and closed his eyes. "If he confesses, there may be no need to ask her to witness."

"So you mean to give him up? You meant what you said to my aunt?"

"We must."

"Would you have given Steven Drury up if he'd done it?"

He opened his eyes, turned his head and regarded me steadily. "Yes. If I could be sure of justice, that he wouldn't

buy his way out of it. And if our name was kept out of it." He smiled. "Until last year, I didn't give a damn about the name I bore but now I've given it to you, it suddenly means a great deal." He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it.

We arrived at the office and Barraclough took us upstairs. The curious stares of the inevitable occupants of the benches in the large hall below followed us. I hardly noticed them.

He took us straight to the room where Greene was being kept but before he opened the door, Richard stopped him and turned to me. "This could be uncomfortable. Are you sure you want to see this?"

"Would you rather I didn't?" I didn't want to cause him distress in any way.

"It's up to you. If you think you can bear it."

"I can bear it." I put my hand on his. He nodded and turned to Barraclough, signalling for him to open the door.

We went in. There was someone there with him, a brawny man, sitting quietly on a hard chair by the door. As we went in he rose, bowed and brought two similar chairs forward for us. Richard saw me seated and only then turned his attention to the maid's brother.

The man was under restraint, his wrists fastened before him with leather straps. For his sake I was glad of that, as I knew only too well the damage rope binding could do. His feet were free. He wore a relatively clean shirt and breeches and a simple woollen coat lay across the narrow the bed. At a nod from Richard, he sat on the fourth hard chair in the room. None of the chairs matched.

"We've spoken to your sister." Richard watched him carefully.

Greene's head jerked up. "What did she say?" He had forgotten the proper address, something that came almost as second nature to a well-trained servant.

Richard regarded him in silence for a moment. "What did you expect her to say?"

"I ... I don't know." He wouldn't meet Richard's gaze.

"She told us what she saw," Richard said. Before the man could interrupt, he continued, "She saw you kill Lucy Forder. If you don't want her to witness to this in court, you can confess to us and later to Mr. Smith of Bow Street but you will come to trial for this, come what may."

I watched Greene's face carefully and saw him blench, then look at my husband with renewed hope. "I don't want my sister involved in all this. If you promise to look after her, I'll tell you."

"So long as I'm satisfied she had nothing to do with the murder, I promise she'll be looked after," Richard said readily. "If Mrs. Godolphin turns her off, I'll secure her a good place elsewhere. She may change her name if she likes, I'll see to it."

They surveyed each other in silence for a few minutes. Greene was trying to ascertain whether Richard meant it but eventually he nodded and glanced away. "I can't do anything else," he commented, half to himself. Then he looked up again, straight at Richard. "I killed her."

Richard nodded and waited for him to continue. We listened to Greene's story. "I loved her. She said she wanted

to get away from ... from Mr. and Mrs. Drury and I said I would help her." He put his bound hands to his forehead. "We got the job with Mrs. Godolphin, then Lucy went back and did whatever they wanted. I couldn't bear it but I didn't know for sure until my sister told me." He stopped and silence fell on the room like a blanket. When he spoke again, it was as if life had been resumed. "Lucy told me and she suggested I do it, too. When I said no, she said the money was good enough for us to buy a place of our own in a year or two. I said no, how could she, but it was only when she laughed at me that I hit her." He stopped again and for two pins I would have left but I knew Richard needed me. Both men had loved Lucy. One had betrayed her and the other had killed her.

"I didn't know there was a knife in my hand, I swear it." He looked earnestly at Richard again. "I don't even know where it came from but I hit her and she was too surprised to resist. She fell back but I could see it was too late, I could see that she was dead."

Greene buried his face in his hands, sobbing and I felt the pain for both of them. Bitterly I thought that although the Drurys hadn't done the deed themselves, they had caused it; they had broken this man and made him kill. Not that they would care.

But as much as I wanted to, I couldn't put all the blame on them. It was obvious that what Steven had claimed was true—Lucy had done it by her own choice and if she had told them she was leaving, they could have found someone else and not used her at all. But she would have missed the money. What we still didn't know was why she wanted the

money. Was it for her own purposes, or was it to help her children?

Greene lifted his head again and I wished he hadn't. His pain was etched deep, the lines at the corners of his eyes glistening from his tears, enhanced by them. His eyes, reddened from so much grief, seemed to have sunk into his skull. "You can keep my sister out of all this?"

"Tell them what you've just told us. And don't mention the fact that your sister was there. In fact, don't mention her at all unless you're asked. I can't see why they should ask you, so she should be safe from them. All we want is for the truth to come out." Richard said the last part grimly, his face set in more serious lines.

Greene nodded. "They'll hang me." There was no expression to his voice, as though he were already dead.

Richard shook his head. "It's more likely you'll get transportation. The deed was done in passion, without forethought and they tend to save hangings for the most deserving these days. Have you a good character?"

"Nothing before this," Greene managed. The tears still poured down his face, a cataract of misery.

Richard stood and looked down at the helpless man. "Tell them what happened and you'll be sent abroad. I'll promise you what influence I have will go toward that and in return, as a favour to me, will you try to leave the Drurys' names out of it?"

He looked at Richard, Lucy's two lovers frozen in a tableau, the exquisite and the wretched, closer than any of the other men who had ever used her. I wondered if Lucy had ever told

Greene about Richard, if Greene knew the significance of Richard's involvement.

"I thought you didn't like them," Greene said eventually.

"I don't but at the moment they have influential friends who will be anxious that their names aren't mentioned in this context. It would do no good to try and cause a scandal here, because there won't be any and it will make the Drury's influential friends aware that I know more than they want me to. If you can manage to leave their names out, I promise to deal with them in due course. We have a history and I'd like to see it through myself."

They stared at each other again and eventually Greene nodded. "I won't tell lies but I won't mention it until I'm asked." At last, he remembered his training. "My lord."

I watched the bargain made, fairer than any bargain Greene may have made in his life before. Richard leaned forward and offered Greene his hand and they solemnly shook on the bargain. The dull autumn day gave no shards of light to illuminate the diamonds on Richard's hand and at his throat, everything was as muted and as pared down as a Vermeer interior. The only highlights were the white stock at his neck and the fine lace ruffles at his wrists. The other man's linen was soiled from days of wear, its tones blending in with the faded white paintwork on the shutters and on the door and wall panels.

I was content and when I saw Richard's face, I thought that he was content, too. The tighter lines around his mouth and eyes had faded, I was relieved to see and although his mien was serious, it wasn't as strained as it had been,

perhaps because he had found something he could do to help. Greene wasn't a murderer, he was a man who'd been caught in circumstances he hadn't been able to control and he was prepared to face what was coming.

We left the room and had some tea in the office with Alicia, who talked to us of sensible things far removed from Lucy.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

When I was sure that Richard felt less stressed, I left him with Alicia and went upstairs to see Susan. Alicia hadn't mentioned her during our sojourn in her office but she knew where I was going.

Susan didn't have anyone on guard outside her room but it was locked, so I turned the key and carried it inside with me, closing the door without locking it. She was sitting on the bed, reading a book. When she closed it and looked up, I saw it was *Clarissa*.

I smiled and was surprised to see her smile back. "Have you come to a decision?"

"Yes. I've never had time to myself like this before and I've been able to think. I suppose I should thank you." She was smooth, at ease with herself.

"Think nothing of it." I found myself a chair. "And I meant what I said. If you want to go back, I shan't stop you."

She nodded. "You were right. If I go back to them, I'll be their creature. They pay well but it's uncertain work and I'll have to do what they say. So I've decided. But you must promise not to tell him some of it."

"Who?"

"My father." I sat as if struck and she smiled. "It's all right. I worked it out shortly after Julia made me try to seduce you both. I looked closely at him and realised we have certain features in common. My mother told me years ago, but I

didn't believe her. She was fond of telling stories. I don't think my brother knows but then he's never seen him."

"Do you know where your brother is?"

She shook her head. "We lost touch years ago. I tried to find him recently, sent a letter to the last place I knew where he was, but I never received a reply."

"What do you want from us?"

"I'm not blind. Neither am I stupid. I don't want to make trouble, I don't want to claim anything that will cause any problems but I would like some of what I'm entitled to."

I remained silent, waiting to see what she meant. The thick autumn sun streamed across the counterpane of her bed, touching her hair to gold. "It was only after Julia Drury set me on him that I realised my mother had told the truth. I'd always thought she was romancing. You know, the maid seduced by the master but she also said it was the parents who sent her away. He was upset, wasn't he?"

"He was," I managed.

"Then I looked at him and I looked at me and I realised that what my mother had told me was probably true. She was a bitter woman, your ladyship, and she would have made trouble if she could. She was never happy with the man I called Father and he was a good man, he loved her dearly." She halted, clearly remembering happier times. Then she looked up at me again. "That's what decided me against the Drurys. Do they know?" I nodded. "I thought so. Mrs. Drury was always kind to me but I didn't think she had my interests at heart. And Mr. Drury only has one interest. She had to work hard to keep him away from me."

"I can imagine." I remembered the tussles I'd had with Steven in the past.

"The look on her face when she thought she'd hooked your husband." She stopped and we both recalled that moment. I suddenly had a strong longing for some tea, although I'd shared a pot with Alicia less than half an hour ago. I mastered the desire.

"So I decided not to go back there. I want more of a say over my own fate."

I nodded. If she hadn't been his daughter, would Richard have been tempted? "Very wise. But I hope you realise that I can't have you too close."

She smiled and nodded, sagacious for sixteen. "I know. I don't want to be a lady's maid, at everybody's beck and call, so I thought I would like to take up your other choice." My heart sank. I'd hoped she'd choose the option she had just rejected. "I would like an establishment of my own, please and a maid and a footman and some fine clothes so that I can attract the best quality of gentleman. The rest I can manage on my own."

"And the other part of the bargain?"

"That should be no problem. The other lady has been talking to me, telling me about this organisation, though she wouldn't tell me what its name was. It's obviously one of the larger registry offices, Thompson's or Black's, for instance but it would mean I could still call on you if I needed help. It's nice to know you're not completely alone in the world, isn't it?"

That last remark made me realise how alone Susan was, how far away from anyone who loved her. I hoped we could find her brother, one day. I wouldn't tell her we were looking for him, I decided, not until we found something. She would be alone on the course she had chosen and she might need someone to talk to. "I'll give you all the help I can," I promised. "And I wish you all the luck in the world."

She smiled and got off the bed. She was much more attractive now and I wondered how much of her sulky look had been due to misery or fear. She was pretty and I was happy that she would do well in her chosen career, although I still wished she had chosen the respectable course. I found myself liking her but then I realised I was bound to. She was so like Richard in her attitudes, her delicacy and her natural elegance. "If you don't mind staying here for a day or two, everything can be arranged," I told her.

She held out her hand and we shook on the bargain just as Richard had shaken Greene's hand earlier.

Still holding her hand, I said, "We found out who killed your mother. It was Greene."

"I thought so," she replied without any discernible emotion. "She drove him to distraction." As I left, she went back to the bed and picked up her book. I didn't turn the key in the lock behind me.

Downstairs I told Richard and Alicia what Susan had decided. Richard looked resigned. Here, amongst friends, there was no need for him to school his features. "I was afraid she might. She's been bred to it, by her mother and by Julia Drury."

"Will you try to stop her?" I asked.

He shrugged. "What right have I? I fathered her but I wasn't her father. She must decide her own way and I'll protect her as much as I can."

"I've been talking to her," Alicia said in her matter-of-fact way. "She's a bright girl and she should do well. I don't think she would be good at taking orders, she seems too impatient for that and it would be some years before she could be a full-fledged lady's maid. For what it's worth, I think she's making the right choice."

When we reached home, Richard sent me to bed for an hour. My tiredness must have been obvious and so I didn't argue with him; I was only too glad to go. I sank into the dreamless sleep of the exhausted and felt much better when Nichols woke me to dress for dinner.

In the carriage on the way to Hareton House, Richard told me that he'd dismissed Brangwyn. "He said he was Steven Drury's cousin and he had gone to Thompson's because he knew of the connection with us. The references he gave us were genuine. I haven't dismissed him without a character but I couldn't give him the one he would ordinarily deserve. He says he wants to go into politics. He seems well suited for that, if Drury decides to back him."

"Steven's cousin?" I echoed, fixing on that point.

He shrugged. "I suppose he had to have some. It wasn't pleasant, he denied it right up to the end but I got him there eventually." He stared out of the window and I covered his hand with mine. He turned back to me and smiled. "I really have a lot to be thankful for, don't I?"

When we reached Hareton House, Martha was passing through the hall on her way upstairs, so we went up with her. Going into the drawing room, seeing all those familiar faces, even the Terrys, made me realise one thing with a shock.

I was no longer one of them. I had entered a new world, one they were welcome in but not a part of. As well as making a new life inside me, I was making one for myself, almost without knowing. The transition, so frightening at first, had now happened and I was ready to go forward and see what it held.

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About the Author

Lynne Connolly has been in love with the Georgian age since the age of nine, when she did a project about coffee and tea at school. One look at the engraving of the Georgian coffeehouse, and she was a goner. It's the longest love affair of her life.

She stopped looking around old houses and visiting museums long enough to go to work, fall in love for a second time, marry and have a family, but they have to share her with her obsession, which they do with good grace and much humor.

To learn more about Lynne Connolly, please visit www.lynneconnolly.com. Send an email to lynneconnollyuk@yahoo.co.uk or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers! groups.yahoo.com/group/lynneconnolly. She can also be found at MySpace, Facebook and the Samhain Café.

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Blinded—she by nature, he by loyalty.

Out of the Dark

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As a blind woman seen as a flawed commodity, Lady Lynnet is used to the idea that she's unlovable. But her parents' plan to force her into a loveless marriage is too much. Wandering, upset and lost in the cellars of the King's castle, the darkness doesn't frighten her, but the murder plot she overhears chills her to the bone. Worse, no one believes her, and the only one she can turn to is a Norman sheriff whose voice sounds disturbingly like one of the conspirators.

Basil, Sheriff of Ipswich, is battle-hardened, fiercely loyal—and torn apart. He's falling in love with the Saxon beauty, and he longs to show her she is worthy of love despite her physical limitation.

But the very corruption she is helping him root out may implicate his own half brother. How can he turn his back on family—for an Anglo-Saxon woman?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Out of the Dark:

"The sheriff might be a part of this."

"I can't believe that," Geoff said, his voice getting louder as he made his point. "I've known Basil for at least five years. He's honorable."

Lynnet turned towards Geoff. He was leaning against a tapestried wall near the fireplace. Even the vague outline of his lithe, powerful body seemed ready to spring into action.

"He came along immediately afterward," she said. "He sounded angry that he'd missed those men."

"I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation."

"You must ask Basil for protection." Matilda waved her arms while making her point. "Those men are trying to kill you."

"I don't know for sure today was connected to yesterday in the cellars. The men today were ruffians. They may have wanted ransom."

"It's more likely the two are connected," Geoff said.

"At least you believe me. My parents think I'm hearing things. Since I lost my sight, strange things sometimes happen."

Lynnet touched her crystal where it nestled under her blue woolen bodice.

Matilda gave Lynnet a hug before plopping down in a chair opposite the fireplace.

"Of course, we believe you."

Geoff moved away from the wall and approached Lynnet.

"If there's the slightest chance of trouble brewing, the sheriff needs to know. The crown must be protected."

"That's right," Matilda said.

"Basil has the king's trust," Geoff added.

"You should give him yours," Matilda insisted.

Lynnet's head was a whirl. Bewildered, she started sputtering.

"But ... but ... his voice..."

"Many guests from northern shires stay at the king's residences during winter court," Matilda cautioned her, "including Basil's father. They could easily sound alike."

Lynnet felt immediately relieved.

Basil's appearance in the cellar could have been pure coincidence.

"Do you think the earl could be the conspirator?" Lynnet asked.

Geoff shook his head in a shadowy movement.

"The earl would never turn against his king. But there are others from Chester who would."

The heaviness surrounding Lynnet's heart since yesterday lifted. The bond she'd immediately felt with Basil hadn't been misplaced. Her heart had known him innocent even while her mind thought him guilty.

"You must tell Basil. If the king is in danger, there must be no delay." Geoff was adamant. His certainty was like the tide. It could not be fought.

"I'll talk with the sheriff."

"You must tell your parents, also."

Lynnet turned in the direction of Matilda.

"Must I?"

Her stomach knotted at the thought of it.

"It'll be worse if you don't."

"But they told me not to get involved in politics."

"They have no choice. The king must be protected."

"You're right, of course." Lynnet was resigned.

"We'll go with you."

"From now on," Geoff said, "don't go anywhere by yourself. It's too dangerous."

Lynnet agreed. Her world was definitely no longer safe.

Basil bent over the large oak table in an anteroom of the Treasury on the storeroom level of the Tower, going over the figures the scribe had written down and double-checking the tally. A pen and ink map of the cellars cross-referenced to lists of supplies in each storeroom was spread out on the table. The scribe and the retainers who had helped take the inventory were seated nearby.

When the Treasury door crashed open, Basil turned towards it, exasperated at an interruption. Only minutes before, according to a two-hour rotation schedule, the guards assigned to the vault changed with much stamping of feet and shouting of orders. Basil had just refocused on the inventory figures when here was another interruption. He turned towards the intruder, frowning. His frown changed to a smile when he saw who it was.

"Lord Geoffrey, good to see you." He shoved his wooden chair backward, scraping it across the stone floor, and rose to greet his friend with a bear hug and much slapping of backs.

"And I, you. It's been awhile."

Basil offered him a chair, but Geoff chose to stand.

"What brings you to the bowels of the Tower?"

"Lady Lynnet of Osfrith."

Basil's stomach turned queasy.

"What does she want?"

"It's a confidential matter of some urgency. I'll take you to her."

"You rich people don't care what important work you interrupt, do you?"

Geoff chuckled.

"We like to keep you poor bastards downtrodden."

Basil shook his head wearily, resigned to not completing the verification of the inventory. At the same time, his heart beat faster as he wondered how the Saxon beauty would treat him today.

Basil waved a hand towards the cluttered table.

"Give me a moment to finish up here."

He addressed the scribe and the retainers. "Lock the map and lists in the trunk. Give the guard the key. Meet me here tomorrow at dawn so we can finish the tally."

He stuck his short sword into its sheath on his belt and turned back to Geoff.

"Lead on, Baron," Basil said. "Let's find out why the lady raised this hue and cry."

Basil sympathized with Lynnet as she stumbled over her tongue while relating the events of yesterday and this morning. Her she-devil mother butted in, criticizing and belittling.

He was also incensed.

She should have told me this yesterday. I need to report this to the king immediately.

They were assembled in her parents' chamber. It was one of the more elegantly furnished chambers in the Tower with heavy velvet bed draperies, brightly colored tapestries and leather chairs. The large fireplace was well-stocked with logs against the chill of a bleak November day.

Lord Geoffrey and he leaned against the wall beneath the shuttered window. Lady Matilda and Lady Lynnet sat on chairs. Lady Durwyn sat primly on the edge of the bed, her feet on a stepping stool. The position put her higher than the other women. Her husband had pulled a cushioned stool towards the bed and sat like a whipped cur at his wife's feet.

Lady Lynnet had just finished relating this morning's abduction when her mother broke in.

"You must forgive my daughter, Sheriff. She's given to flights of fancy."

Lady Durwyn rose and faced him. She took a deep breath and pulled herself up to her full height.

"It's difficult for me to divulge this, but for the longest time our daughter told us she could see the ghost of my deceased mother-in-law."

"But, Mother," Lynnet said, wringing her hands, a deep frown creasing her forehead. "Lord Geoffrey found the rug they wrapped me in."

"I don't deny you were kidnapped, Daughter," her mother said in a tone that clearly said 'do not interrupt'. "The bruising on your face is serious, not to speak of unsightly."

Lynnet visibly winced.

"I just say you were taken for ransom, not conspiracy. After all, the wool trade made my lands prosperous. I'm quite wealthy. Any fool knows those ruffians were after our money."

Lynnet blushed, looking embarrassed. Basil was about to come to her defense when her father spoke up.

"My dear, we need to keep an open mind."

Lord Wilfgive's high-pitched, tenor voice seemed excessively conciliatory. In size, Lynnet's father was only a couple of inches taller than his daughter. His wife towered over both. Despite his well-known reputation as a scholar, on the short-legged stool he seemed insignificant. The exception was the quality of his clothing. That was designed to impress.

"We should hear what the sheriff has to say," Lord Geoffrey said.

Everyone's attention focused on Basil. When Lady Lynnet turned towards where he stood, his heart speeded up despite his intention to be disinterested. He cleared his throat.

"I'm investigating a series of robberies from the Tower."

His bass voice reverberated against the stone walls, making him self-conscious. This was the aspect of his occupation he liked the least. A man of action, words were a second choice.

"It's possible this abduction had nothing to do with yesterday. Perhaps the thieves saw your daughter as an easy prey for kidnapping and a ransom."

Geoff pushed himself abruptly away from the wall, seeming to startle Lynnet. He ran his fingers through his hair as if agitated.

"But she heard someone speak of chaos in the kingdom. We can't take lightly anything that touches on the king."

Before Basil could assure Geoff that action would be taken, her father spoke up.

"You haven't known us long, Baron. Our daughter hears voices that no others hear. It started after illness caused her blindness."

Basil watched Lynnet's face flush beet-red.

"Father, I'm blind, not deaf. My hearing is better than yours. Most times, what I hear can be explained."

"But there are other times, Daughter. This may be one of them."

Basil's stomach gave a twist as if he was the one under attack. Lynnet was being made to look foolish in front of her friends and him. He cleared his throat.

"I'll look into both your daughter's kidnapping and the conspiracy," he assured them.

Geoff leaned back against the wall as if satisfied.

Lady Durwyn started pacing, something a noble woman never did in company. The train of her purple woolen kirtle dragged against the flagstones. It demonstrated the intensity of her distress as she spoke.

"I don't want to be embroiled in lengthy investigations."

"I'll do my best to shield you during my inquiries."

The husband calmed his wife, his voice soothing.

"See, my dear, the sheriff will handle everything. We don't have to be involved."

Not involved? Your own daughter's life is at stake.

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To capture love, sometimes you have to grab it by the horns...

The Legend of the Werestag

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If a woman could die of humiliation, Cecily Hale would have perished three hours ago. Luke Trenton had finally returned to Swinford Manor, only to cruelly spurn her long-held love. But she couldn't conveniently die of shame on the spot—oh, no. Instead she joined her friends on this ridiculous search for a legendary man-beast. Now she'll die here—alone in the woods, at the tusks of a snarling boar.

Luke left for war a dashing youth and returned a man—just not the same man Cecily fell in love with. His passion for her is stronger than ever, but the ravages of battle changed him in ways she wouldn't understand. Pushing her away was supposed to save her, not throw her into the path of another inhuman creature ... or into the arms of another man.

For it is a man who rescues Cecily, just as the boar attacks. A mysterious, silent man who disappears into the woods, leaving her with just a glimpse—of a fleeing white deer. Could her rescuer be the man-beast of local lore?

A dangerous myth has captured Cecily's imagination, putting Luke on the horns of a dilemma. Unless he summons the passion and tenderness to win her back, he could lose her forever ... to the Werestag.

Warning: This is a humorous, passionate historical romance, not a paranormal shifter story. However, it does feature a harrowing encounter with a wild beast, a tortured hero who feels half-human, and the unleashing of animal urges. In other words: explicit sex, mild language.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Legend of the Werestag:

At last, Cecily had him cornered.

The party had dispersed to prepare for their impromptu hunting excursion. Brooke and Denny had gone to see about footmen and torches. Cecily was supposed to be fetching a cloak and sturdier boots from her chambers, as Portia had done, but she'd tarried purposely until the three of them had left. Until she was alone with Luke. It was time to end this ... this foolish dream she'd been living for years.

She cleared her throat. "Will you come with us, out to the woods?"

"Are you going to marry Denny?" He spoke in an easy, conversational tone. As though his answer depended on hers.

She briefly considered chastising his impudence, refusing to answer. But why not give an honest reply? He'd already made her humiliation complete, by virtue of his perfect indifference. She could sink no lower by revealing it. "There is no formal understanding between us. But everyone assumes I will marry him, yes."

"Because you are so madly in love?"

Cecily gave a despairing sniff. "Please. Because we are cousins of some vague sort, and we can reunite the ancestral fortune." She stared up at the gilt ceiling trim. "What else

would people assume? For what other earthly reason would I have remained unmarried through four seasons? Certainly not because I've been clinging to a ridiculous infatuation all this time. Certainly not because I've wasted the best years of my youth and spurned innumerable suitors, pining after a man who had long forgotten me. No, no one would ever credit that reasoning. They could never think me such a ninny as *that*."

That cold, empty silence again. A sob caught in her throat.

"Was there anything in it?" she asked, not bothering to wipe the tear tracing the rim of her nose. "Our summer here, all those long walks and even longer conversations? When you kissed me that night, did it mean anything to you?"

When he did not answer, she took three paces in his direction. "I know how proud you must be of those enigmatic silences, but I believe I deserve an answer." She stood between his icy silence and the heated aura of the fire. Scorched on one side, bitterly cold on the other—like a slice of toast someone had forgotten to turn.

"What sort of answer would you like to hear?"

"An honest one."

"Are you certain? It's my experience that young ladies vastly prefer fictions. Little stories, like Portia's gothic novel."

"I am as fond of a good tale as anyone," she replied, "but in this instance, I wish to know the truth."

"So you say. Let us try an experiment, shall we?" He rose from his chair and sauntered toward her, his expression one of jaded languor. His every movement a negotiation between aristocratic grace and sheer brute strength.

Power. He radiated power in every form—physical, intellectual, sensual—and he knew it. He knew that she sensed it.

The fire was unbearably warm now. Blistering, really. Sweat beaded at her hairline, but Cecily would not retreat.

"I could tell you," he said darkly, seductively, "that I kissed you that night because I was desperate with love for you, overcome with passion, and that the color of my ardor has only deepened with time and separation. And that when I lay on a battlefield bleeding my guts out, surrounded by meaningless death and destruction, I remembered that kiss and was able to believe that there was something of innocence and beauty in this world, and it was you." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. Almost. Warm breath caressed her fingertips. "Do you like that answer?"

She gave a breathless nod. She was a fool; she couldn't help it.

"You see?" He kissed her fingers. "Young ladies prefer fictions."

"You are a cad." Cecily wrenched her hand away and balled it into a fist. "An arrogant, insufferable cad."

"Yes, yes. Now we come to the truth. Shall I give you an honest answer, then? That I kissed you that night for no other reason than that you looked uncommonly pretty and fresh, and though I doubted my ability to vanquish Napoleon, it was some balm to my pride to conquer you, to feel you tremble under my touch? And that now I return from war, to find everything changed, myself most of all. I scarcely recognize my surroundings, except..." He cupped her chin in his hand

and lightly framed her jaw between his thumb and forefinger. "Except Cecily Hale still looks at me with stars in her eyes, the same as she ever did. And when I touch her, she still trembles."

Oh. She *was* trembling. He swept his thumb across her cheek, and even her hair shivered.

"And suddenly..." His voice cracked. Some unrehearsed emotion pitched his dispassionate drawl into a warm, expressive whisper. "Suddenly, I find myself determined to keep this one thing constant in my universe. Forever."

She swallowed hard. "Do you intend to propose to me?"

"I don't think so, no." He caressed her cheek again. "I've no reason to."

"No reason?" Had she thought her humiliation complete? No, it seemed to be only beginning.

"I'll get my wish, Cecy, whether I propose to you or not. You can marry Denny, and I'll still catch you stealing those starry looks at me across drawing rooms, ten years from now. You can share a bed with him, but I'll still haunt your dreams. Perhaps once a year on your birthday—or perhaps on mine—I'll contrive to brush a single fingertip oh-so-lightly between your shoulder blades, just to savor that delicious tremor." He demonstrated, and she hated her body for responding just as he'd predicted.

An ironic smile crooked his lips. "You see? You can marry anyone or no one. But you'll always be mine."

"I will not," she choked out, pulling away. "I will put you out of my mind forever. You are not so very handsome, you know, for all that."

"No, I'm not," he said, chuckling. "And there's the wonder of it. It's nothing to do with me, and everything to do with you. I know you, Cecily. You may try to put me out of your mind. You may even succeed. But you've built a home for me in your heart, and you're too generous a soul to cast me out now."

She shook her head. "I—"

"Don't." With a sudden, powerful movement, he grasped her waist and brought her to him, holding her tight against his chest. "Don't cast me out."

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To survive, she'll have to trust him with all her secrets.

Seductive Secrets

© 2008 Lynne Connolly

The Secrets Trilogy, Book 1

Nick is back.

After eight years of facing public scandal and private humiliation with her head held high, Isobel's courage fails when the man she never stopped loving returns and asks her to marry him. Once he discovers her secret, he won't visit her bed more than once. And she can't bear his rejection.

Nicholas, Marquis of Cardington, is confident he can cope with the baggage Isobel carries from her first marriage. It doesn't matter that the beautiful widow once left him to elope with another man. After all, he was partly to blame for that disaster. All that matters is he has always loved her, and now she's free to accept his proposal.

Only on their wedding night does Nick learn the terrible secret Isobel has harbored for eight long years. To win his wife's trust will take every ounce of tenderness he possesses—when what he really wants is to show her the passion he saved for her and her alone.

But just as Isobel begins to believe her heart is safe with Nick, the blackmailers who drove her first husband to suicide reappear. And they want their pound of flesh.

Isobel must finally trust Nick will *all* her secrets—and her life—or their enemies will destroy them both.

Warning: Keep a man handy for judicious use during the graphic sensual sex scenes. A fire extinguisher might be useful, too.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Seductive Secrets:

Nick felt his anticipation increase as he prepared for bed. He could almost taste it. He meant to savour every moment of the night ahead, help his new wife to do the same. He hoped the fear he'd felt in her when he kissed her earlier was natural reticence. She'd been a widow for over a year—time to get used to her own company at nights. Now it was time to accustom herself to something else.

Handing his waistcoat to his valet, he studied the embroidered flowers rioting over it as though he'd never seen them before. The frivolous design reflected the joy he felt today; finally making the woman he'd always wanted his wife. There were shadows but his optimistic mood made him sure he'd overcome them. He'd have to be careful, that was all.

He stripped, washed, shaved and allowed his valet to help him into a long, enveloping robe. Too hot for an evening as balmy as this but he didn't want to alarm Isobel by an excessive show of masculine nakedness. He planned to take it as slowly as she needed.

He passed through the sitting room that stood between the bedrooms and grunted in satisfaction when he saw everything was in order. He didn't stop but knocked softly on the door to her room.

When he heard her quiet, "Come," he turned the knob and went in.

Isobel was standing by the open window, looking down into the garden. Her dark gold hair streamed over her shoulders, her loose bed robe showed her figure, slim but beautifully rounded in all the right places. He caught his breath, and had to concentrate to hear her words. "There are people still there," she said. "Gardeners, at this hour."

His anticipation rose several degrees. He took his time, steadying himself, but the sight of her like this intoxicated all his senses. "It's quite early, really." He crossed the room to join her and stood close but didn't touch her. They watched the gardeners attending to the plants in the soft dusk. Some gardening jobs were better done out of the heat of the day and nurturing tender plants was a constant job.

All that passed through Nick's mind but his concentration was on something else. He felt Isobel flinch when he put his arm around her, careful not to trap her glorious hair. He kept his hold light. She needed relaxing and softening before he'd go any further. After all, she was his wife, not a mistress or a passing fancy and he hoped to spend many years with her. It might take more than one night, though he hoped not. He ached for her.

"Come with me." He led her faltering footsteps away from the bed, towards the inner door to the sitting room.

Isobel turned to him, a question in her eyes. "What is this?"

"You ate nothing during the wedding breakfast. I want to see you eat something now."

He took her to one of the two chairs set before the table and drew it back for her. "I'm really not hungry," she protested but she sat down.

"Nevertheless, please try to eat something."

He lifted the lid of the nearest serving dish and she gasped. "Scotch collops!" She reached forward and lifted another lid. "Lemon cream!" Her lovely eyes lifted to his in surprise. "How did you know they were my favourites?"

Smiling, Nick lifted another lid to show her the fresh salad, delicately sprinkled with her favourite dressing. "I asked." Just her smile made the trouble worthwhile. "When we went into the ballroom I stopped and sent for your maid. She told me what you liked and I sent to the kitchens for them. I doubt I'm a favourite there, with the wedding breakfast to arrange and then this."

She laughed. "I must make sure it's made up to them. They deserve my thanks." She helped herself to some of the meat and salad. "Perhaps I am a little hungry."

He poured wine for them both and took a little salad, just enough to keep her company. Unlike Isobel, he'd partaken of the banquet set before them earlier and he needed nothing more.

It was pleasant to watch her, knowing with lazy certainty that he could do it for years to come. He marked it in his mind as their first time, and decided that intimate suppers would make a delightful addition to their life together.

She ate, and he was glad. Watching her at the ball, he'd thought her mood was low, and knew it must be partly from lack of food. Not wholly, though. There was something else,

something he couldn't work out. It might be simple nervousness but he sensed more than that in her troubled demeanour. "Did you enjoy the day?" he said, looking for a way in, to begin to release the tension pulsing from her.

"Yes. It was perfect."

She didn't mean it. He knew by the way she avoided his eyes, and blinked quickly to get rid of what might be tears. Nick would expect this from a new bride, untried, young and virginal but he'd married a widow who must have experienced some of the joys of the marriage bed before matters went wrong between her and Harry.

Isobel finished her lemon cream and pushed the dish away with a satisfied sigh. "You're right. I do feel better for that."

He refilled their glasses. "I thought you would. And I thought it would give you time to—" he broke off when he saw her look at him innocently and made him laugh, "—get used to seeing me like this."

She laughed too. "It's not too much of a shock."

"I'm glad you think so."

They took some time finishing their wine, chatting about the day, until he put his glass down and stood up, holding out his hand in a gentle but definite command. "Come, wife. Let's go to bed."

All the fear he thought dispelled came rushing back to her face. Her eyes widened, her smile disappeared and her mouth opened slightly, before she remembered to shut it again. He saw it but she said nothing and put her hand in his. "Of course."

He hadn't wanted it like this; he still didn't. Silently cursing the late Harry Thoroughgood, for what he wasn't yet sure, he led her through to her bedroom. He closed the door and leaned against it, drawing his wife into his arms and settling her for a series of kisses he hoped would end somewhere in the vicinity of the bed.

At first, he was gentle, allowing Isobel to accustom herself to the closeness. Only a few layers of thin fabric lay between them, and he felt her soft, warm body against his, heating his desire. She returned his kisses. He feathered light caresses with his mouth along her jaw, and her forehead before he took her mouth again, deeper this time, touching her lips with his tongue, insinuating it inside her mouth.

She responded so well Nick almost lost control but he remembered in time to keep his caresses light, his hands to soothing, easy strokes. He kept his mind off the thought of touching her bare skin, kissing her body, because he needed to gentle her into this. If he frightened her, he'd find it hard to forgive himself.

She drew away a little, so she could speak. "This is nice."

Relief surged through him, mingling with the hot desire he'd been feeling all day. "Good. Perhaps we should...?" He left the decision up to her.

She nodded, lowering her head so he couldn't see her face, and moved away towards the bed. Nick watched, his gaze softened by desire and love for her as she loosened her bed robe, revealing a thin muslin night rail that did little to hide the curves beneath. The inevitable happened and his cock rose to meet the gorgeous sight before him. His mouth

watered and he watched her, waiting for her invitation for him to join her. Giving her this space hurt him, but he couldn't rush her.

What she did next was the stuff of nightmares.

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