



THE SCANDALOUS SEASON

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Chapter 1

The slight, blond young woman in the faded muslin dress stood hesitantly in the portrait gallery of the huge old house. She was still trying to get her bearings. So much had happened in the last few days. Tears rose to her eyes at the thought, but Rebecca sniffed them back. She was a married woman now and couldn't be going around like a crybaby.

She gazed in awe at the life-size portraits of the previous Burlingames. All dark-eyed and dark-haired, they were. Just like that frightening and exasperating man who only yesterday had become her husband. Rebecca stifled a giggle. Imagine her becoming a marchioness!

Her eyes moved to a painting of a beautiful, fiery woman. Even in the portrait the love and passion in those wild, dark eyes was obvious. Rebecca shivered. This must be Constancia, the beautiful Constancia, whose wraith, astride the ghost of her famed black stallion, was reputed by villagers to haunt the countryside.

Examining the sultry face, Rebecca sighed. She herself felt like a wishy-washy thing, just a schoolroom miss, a mere dab of a girl. As *he* had announced, she was nothing but a chit.

"Regretting our hasty marriage already, my little bride?" said a deep voice behind her.

Rebecca jumped, startled to find Burlingame so near. "Indeed," my lord," she replied, forcing her voice into a semblance of calm, "it seems a little early yet to make a judgment on our marriage."

"Yes, I suppose it does." Robert, Marquess of Burlingame, stepped from the shadows and stopped before the painting of the woman who had been his ancestress. It was easy to see the family resemblance, the same dark gleaming hair, the same golden skin, and most of all, the same dark eyes full of passion and fire.

Rebecca suppressed a little shiver. And this man was her husband!

He was dressed immaculately. His light breeches above high boots that gleamed even in the gloom of the gallery fitted so close that not a wrinkle was apparent. His square-cut coat of blue superfine cloth stretched taut over his broad shoulders, and his snowy-white cravat was carelessly yet elegantly tied.

Rebecca studied him with something akin to terror. Even his dress inspired respect for his authority.

He swung on her abruptly. "Do you believe in love?" he demanded, his dark eyes gleaming sardonically.

"Of course." The words seemed to have left her mouth of their own volition. But though she had never much considered the matter before, she knew that she had spoken the truth. She did believe in love.

"I might have supposed it." His voice rose cynically. "Country misses usually do."

Rebecca stiffened at his tone. "I am *not* a country miss." She didn't exactly know what he was talking about, but the expression conjured up a buxom, apple-cheeked village girl. It was a picture she did not like, though she could not say precisely why.

"Well," Burlingame drawled softly, "you certainly appear to be one to me. Were you educated in a young ladies' school?"

Rebecca felt the tears threateningly close. "Of course not. You know that." He was terribly irritating, this handsome stranger she had wed. And he was also frightening.

Burlingame gave an exaggerated sigh. "How lamentable. You are worse than a country miss. You have no learning in needlework or water-colors or the pianoforte, I suppose?"

Rebecca shook her head. Now anger was replacing fear. "Of course I haven't. You know that. Papa—" her voice threatened to break but her anger carried her through. "Papa told you all that. before—before we married."

"Yes, he did." Burlingame's voice had grown surprisingly gentle, but Rebecca was not aware of it.

"I'm sorry that Papa asked you to marry me," Rebecca stammered. "I—I know I'm not g-good enough to be a Burlingame." She blinked rapidly. She would *not* cry before this man.

"Rebecca!"

The word seemed to snap her head erect and her eyes were caught by his. "Stop this nonsense immediately. You are a Burlingame now. If you have social deficiencies, they will be remedied. Though why you should need to sew or paint or play the pianoforte is beyond me. At any rate your breeding is good and you will learn whatever is necessary."

Rebecca's cheeks flushed scarlet as those gleaming dark eyes held hers, but she was still angry. "I married you because it was Papa's dying wish," she said evenly, while the color slowly faded, leaving her cheeks even paler than usual. "I do not intend that you be ashamed of me. But it is not my fault that I am what you call a country miss. You knew my father's financial condition. You knew how little we had." Absently she fingered her faded gown. "It is unfair for you to taunt me with what I cannot help."

Because her eyes were filled with unshed tears she did not catch the expression of consternation that swept momentarily across his face. "I appreciate your straightforwardness," he said dryly. "As I told you yesterday, your new clothes should arrive within a day or two. They'll be more than sufficient for our life here. Just remember one thing. A Burlingame does not whine."

"Yes, my lord." Rebecca's back was ramrod straight, and with great effort she kept the tears from sliding down her cheeks. "I have forgotten something

In my room," she said stiffly.

Burlingame appeared not to recognize the flimsiness of this excuse. "Dinner will be ready within the hour," he replied. "I'll expect you to be on time."

"Of course, my lord." Rebecca managed to get the words out before she turned and made her way back along the gallery to the room that was hers.

Hers alone, she thought, as the heavy door swung shut behind her. He had kept his word about that, at least.

Rebecca threw herself on the huge four-poster bed and let the tears flow. If only her father hadn't sickened and died. Of course, in having her marry Burlingame he meant the best for her. But Robert was so different from that bluff, kindly man.

She had never known the mother who died giving her birth, but she had been her father's constant companion. She knew how to hunt and shoot and ride as well as any man. She could read and write and cipher. But she knew nothing of the skills of being a wife, of being a woman.

She thought back to the day, such a short time before, when she had first met Burlingame. She'd been out taking care of the horses and had returned to find a tall, dark stranger seated by her father's bed. His dark eyes gleamed and his mouth twisted in a cynical smile as he surveyed her.

Rebecca, clad in the boy's breeches and shirt that she habitually wore to ride, had returned his look with one of contempt. She was not afraid of such a man. But when her father spoke, when he had said in his weak, quiet voice, "This is Lord Burlingame. He will be your husband," she had cried out in protest. "Papa, no! I don't want a husband."

"Rebecca, you must. You must have someone to care for you." The old man had reached out to touch her with his frail hand.

Looking across the sick bed at the stranger's dark, sardonic face, Rebecca felt a little shiver of fear—and of something else foreign and unnameable. This was the Burlingame they whispered about in the village.

"Obviously this has been a big shock to your daughter," his lordship said. "Perhaps if I might speak to her privately I might allay some of her fears."

"Of course. Go with him, Rebecca."

Faced with the pleading in her father's tired eyes, Rebecca could do nothing but follow the stranger into an adjoining room. Even in her distress she noticed with what ease and power he moved. She knew instinctively that he would be a fine horseman.

He turned to face her and she found herself trembling. "Please sit down, Miss Stratford. I assure you, I am not an ogre come to gobble you up."

"I am not afraid of you," she asserted. Nevertheless she sank into a convenient chair, thankful for its support.

"Of course not." His smile denied the words, but he did not pursue the matter. He pulled a chair close and faced her. "I came to your father on another matter. I wish to purchase a piece of his property that adjoins mine. He offered me you and his estate."

Rebecca flushed, but he did not seem to notice.

"Your father is dying." Rebecca did not flinch. She had faced that truth some time ago. "His concern is for your future. A young girl alone—"

"I—I can manage." But even as she said the words Rebecca knew that she could not.

"You cannot manage," he said sternly. "And only an idiot would suppose differently. Your father is trying to make provision for your future—and wisely so."

"Yes, but you—" Rebecca stopped. How could she tell this tall dark stranger that he wasn't fit to be a husband? Even as secluded as she and her father had been, she had heard rumors of unscrupulous men of fashion who played with the affections of innocent young girls. It was said that Burlingame was such a rake, and that Roedown House was often without its lord because he preferred the delights of London.

His bushy black brows drew together momentarily. "I see. My reputation has preceded me."

The flush that rose to Rebecca's cheeks made protest useless.

"I want those lands," Burlingame said. "They are important to me."

"But—but you don't want a wife."

Burlingame shrugged, broad shoulders stretching his coat taut. "I'm thirty years old. I shall have to acquire a wife eventually. Why not one whose lands are useful to me?"

Rebecca dug her nails into her palms. "But— but—"

"I assure you, Miss Stratford, that you shall be my wife in name only, if that is what is troubling you. I shall spend most of my time in London, leaving Roedown House to you."

Her flaming cheeks told him that he had guessed rightly. "I shall provide for you." He glanced around the chill, shabby room. "Much better than your father has been able to. I realize that you are still only a child and therefore easily frightened. But I assure you—I am a responsible member of society. And I am a Burlingame. A Burlingame never goes back on his word."

He regarded her quizzically. "Well, Rebecca, will you make your father's last days happy ones and become my wife?"

Rebecca tried to think calmly. Her father's wishes were certainly important to her. And she did need a secure future. And for some odd reason there was something about this darkly handsome man that made her know instinctively that he would keep his word.

She took a deep breath and met his eyes. "Yes, I will be your wife," she replied as steadily as she could.

From that moment on she had had no control over anything. The banns had been posted, the papers were drawn up, her future all provided for. And when the last paper had been signed, when there was nothing left for her father to do for her, he had quietly closed his eyes for the last time.

Rebecca rose from the bed hung with blue-and-white tapestries and wandered restlessly around the room. Yesterday, when Burlingame had brought her here, he had said, "This is your room. Mine is on the other side of that door. You will notice that the key to that door is on this side."

He had left her rather abruptly with a "Sleep well." Exhaustion had claimed her then, the events of the past few weeks taking their toll, and she had fallen into a deep sleep that had been broken only by a tap on the door and Sanders bearing tea and breakfast muffins.

Rebecca moved toward the flowered pitcher and basin that bore the fine cracks of great age. She splashed water on her face and shivered. Even in the spring these old houses were chilly. Then she moved toward the blue-and-white draperies that masked the windows.

The room was a corner one. From one window she looked out on stables and orchards. From another she could see, off in the distance beyond the cliffs, the shimmering blue of the sea. Rebecca sighed, wishing for the feel of a horse between her legs and a swift gallop across a green meadow or along the sandy shores.

With a last, wistful look she turned away. There was dinner to be faced. And then the arrival of Burlingame's younger brother, Jamie. There would be no time for a wild, free gallop today.

She was standing hesitantly at the top of the stairs when Burlingame appeared beside her. "You're just in time," he said.

As his fingers closed over her elbow Rebecca felt a shiver go through her. Then he was guiding her down the great curving staircase to the huge dining hall where their places had been laid in state at opposite ends of the long table.

"Must—must I sit so far away?" Rebecca faltered, standing behind a massive chair.

Burlingame raised an eyebrow. He seemed to be debating with himself and then, as Sanders appeared in the doorway, he said, "Move her ladyship's place up here near mine. This is not a state occasion."

"Yes, m'lord." The portly Sanders's lips were set in a firm, prim line, but Rebecca could see the friendly twinkle in her eye and her own heart seemed lighter somehow.

Finally Rebecca was settled in a chair on Burlingame's right. She found she was famished. The scent of pigeon pie that Evans, the butler, set before her was rising to make her mouth water and her stomach rumble. She picked up her fork and turned to Burlingame.

He gave her a strange smile. "Dig in, girl. You look like you haven't eaten in days."

Rebecca wanted to take exception to his remark, but the food smelled so good. They could argue later. She forked up pigeon pie and savored its rich taste. "Hmmmmmm. Sanders is an excellent cook."

Burlingame chuckled, and Rebecca looked up at him in surprise. For some reason she had never thought of Burlingame chuckling. "Sanders is the housekeeper. The cook's name is Collins. I suppose now that I'm a married man I shall have to have Sanders engage a few serving girls and some more footmen. After all," his lips curved in that sardonic smile, "a marchioness must be properly fed and looked after."

Rebecca flushed. She was still uneasy at being a titled lady. "So your brother is coming today?"

"Yes." Burlingame nodded. "Jamie will be along any time now. You'll like Jamie. He's a good lad."

He chewed thoughtfully. "But be careful around him. He limps, and he gets upset about it—a bad fall from a horse. And he's in love with a girl named Amelia Stapleton whose brother won't permit the banns. At times the lad descends into a fit of the dyspepsias. When he does that, we need to jolly him out of it."

Rebecca nodded. "What will he think of our marriage of—of convenience?"

"He won't think anything of it." Burlingame's voice was stern. "Because he won't know. No one will know but you and I."

Rebecca raised wide green eyes to his. "But why?"

Burlingame quirked a cynical eyebrow. "My reputation is not exactly lily white," he remarked dryly. "But I see no reason to have it bruited about that I have married for land. There will be talk enough in London. There are quite a few mamas who have been trying to lure me with their daughters for these many years. They will not be

pleased to know that I have taken a wife."

Rebecca digested that thoughtfully. "You have never desired to marry?" she asked, aware of a sinking sensation in her stomach.

Burlingame scowled. "There was a woman

once—"

Rebecca found that she was holding her breath. "What—what happened?"

"I discovered that she was not worth marrying."

"You must have loved her very much," Rebecca faltered.

"I did not love her at all. Love is for lads in short coats—and schoolroom misses. I, at least, shall never be caught in its toils. Now, as to your future." His dark eyes regarded her dryly. "Our marriage will certainly be the talk of the Season. But, my chit, you will not be an encumbrance to me. You will be here at Roedown House, you see. And I shall resume my previous haunts in London."

At her sudden look, he added, "Oh, discreetly, of course. As a gentleman should. The Burlingames have always been discreet—where women are concerned."

Rebecca felt herself biting back an angry reply. He was so irritating, with his arrogant assurance that he knew everything about the world—and her.

"At any rate, I don't want Jamie to know the reason for our marriage. He's a romantic type—still believes in love and all that. My defection would pain him.

"You're very quiet," Burlingame continued. "Not brewing rebellion, are you, little wife?"

Rebecca, fighting the sudden lurching in her stomach at his use of the phrase "little wife," raised her head and met his gaze calmly. "No, m'lord," she replied evenly, but her sparkling green eyes defied him. "I would never do that."

Burlingame eyed her curiously, then burst into laughter. "You're a game little thing, I'll say that for you, chit. Will you keep our secret?"

Rebecca considered for a moment. "Yes, m'lord, I will. I have no wish to hurt your brother—or you."

"Good girl." Burlingame's eyes held hers for one brief moment, and Rebecca felt a warm glow spread over her. Then there was the sound of carriage wheels in the drive.

Burlingame clapped her on the shoulder. "He's here," he said. "Jamie's here."

And then he was gone, striding happily toward the front hall, his joy at his brother's arrival written across his face.

Rebecca, staring down at half-eaten pigeon pie, was vaguely aware of a longing within herself, a longing to have Burlingame look upon *her* with such joy. She sighed and put down her fork.

Chapter 2

A few moments later Rebecca rose from the table and moved toward the door. She supposed Robert intended for her to follow him. *What will this brother he loves so well look like?* she wondered. Then all thoughts of brothers left her mind.

The sound of a female voice raised in silvery laughter met her ears. "Burlingame, you rascal. What Jamie tells me can't be true."

Rebecca found herself hating the owner of that voice even before she heard Burlingame's smooth reply. "And what did Jamie tell you, Lady Catherine?"

The laughter pealed out again. "A love match! Burlingame, how droll. You in a love match. I simply can't believe it. And since I was driving by—my carriage is just outside—I had to stop and see for myself."

Rebecca forced herself to move toward the front hall. This Lady Catherine would have to be faced, and she might as well do it at once. She did wish, though, that she had something more stately in which to greet her than a muslin dress that was faded and far too tight. Then she straightened her shoulders. He wanted the world to believe it a love match, and she would help him. She took the final step that brought them into her sight.

"Robert, has your brother arrived? I do so want to meet him," she said as she moved toward them.

The three of them turned. Rebecca had a quick glimpse of a younger edition of Robert, but her eyes went first to the tall woman who leaned so close to Burlingame. Her red hair was piled high in back and fell over her forehead in artfully arranged disorder. Her petticoat appeared to be almost as thin as her gown, for it clung provocatively to the curves of her body. And Rebecca was almost certain that no stays, nor even a chemise, intervened between her abundant breasts and the thin, low bodice of the gown.

Even as Rebecca's eyes traveled over the newcomer her heart fell. Lady Catherine, with her hand so nonchalantly on Robert's arm, obviously knew him very well, had perhaps been—

"Ah, there you are, my love." Burlingame beckoned to her. "Here is Jamie."

Rebecca turned to meet Burlingame's brother. Jamie was tall, though not so tall as his brother, and had the same dark skin and deep black eyes. His frame was somewhat slighter, and his smile as he extended his hand was warm and friendly.

"Rebecca, I've always wanted a sister. Dashed lonely with only old Rob to bully me around."

"If you're thinking of bullying Rebecca around," Burlingame interrupted dryly, "I'd advise against it. She's got a temper to fit the Burlingame name."

Jamie continued to smile and hold her hand, and Rebecca felt a warm comfort. *Jamie is nice*, she thought, feeling already that they would be good friends.

"And here is Lady Catherine Carrington, a neighbor of ours," Burlingame drawled. "Really, my dear Catherine, the story is true." He moved to put his arm around Rebecca. She felt the heat of him through her thin gown and couldn't help coloring up and casting him a little glance from under lowered lashes.

Then she ordered her suddenly thudding heart to quiet down and extended her hand, the one with the wedding ring on it, in what she hoped was a gracious fashion. "Good evening, Lady Catherine. I quite understand your wonder at our marriage. We've kept our love such a secret."

She turned her head and smiled sweetly up at Burlingame, leaning her head for a moment against his shoulder. She caught the flicker of approval mixed with amusement in his eyes, and then she returned her gaze to Lady Catherine.

That Lady Catherine was suspicious was quite apparent. She stared at Rebecca's unfashionable gown and disheveled hair.

"I'm afraid that in our haste we didn't provide Rebecca with much of a wardrobe. It will be coming soon," Burlingame observed in a bored tone. "Well also have to engage a village girl to wait on her."

A sudden strange smile crept over Lady Catherine's face. In spite of Burlingame's protective arm, Rebecca felt a chill deep in her bones. "Whatever your game, Burlingame," Lady Catherine purred, "this is *not* a love match. There's certainly more to this than meets the eye. You'd never be fool enough to marry a schoolroom miss like this. Not that it isn't obvious that the chit has a *tendre* for you."

Rebecca, biting back a sharp retort, was surprised as Burlingame's tone changed. "Rebecca is the Marchioness of Burlingame now," he said, his voice holding more than a hint of steel. "And who's to say? Perhaps a schoolroom miss has charms that a more experienced woman has long lost."

Lady Catherine colored, bit her lip once, and then, turning on her heel in a way that revealed her charms even more amply, sent a parting thrust over her shoulder. "I should never have thought it of you, Burlingame. Seducing a schoolroom infant."

The door slammed behind her, and Rebecca found herself thrust away from Burlingame so sharply she almost fell. His face, when she looked up, was thunderous. She swallowed over the lump in her throat and stood trembling.

Just as swiftly as Robert had abandoned her, Jamie came to her side, his arm going around her comfortingly. "By God, Rob," he said good-naturedly. "Don't glare so. Rebecca will think you're out of sorts with *her*."

For a moment Burlingame continued to stand glaring, his eyebrows drawn into one ferocious line. Then slowly his features relaxed, and he reached out to rumple his brother's hair. "Right you are, Jamie. Hardly proper behavior for the bridegroom. Though I dare say Rebecca is not afraid of me, no matter how I scowl. Are you, dear?"

As he drew her arm through his, she was again conscious of his nearness and of the wild beating of her heart. But she mastered herself and managed to say in a light voice, "Indeed not, Robert, dear. Though I wish you will not scowl so fiercely, since it does somewhat damage your good looks."

Both Robert and Jamie broke into laughter at this, and Rebecca felt the tension dissipate.

Burlingame moved toward the dining room. "Come, Jamie. Sanders will have kept the food hot for you, I'm sure. And we were not fairly through eating ourselves."

Later, after roast beef and other things had followed the pigeon pie, they left the table and moved toward the library. Burlingame again drew her arm through his. She knew it was all for Jamie's sake, and yet she couldn't help it that her heart fluttered at his touch.

As he settled her in a chair and went to pour them each a glass of wine, Burlingame asked, "What's been going on in London these days, Jamie?"

As Jamie smiled Rebecca thought how much he resembled his brother, except that his dark eyes, though they held pain, held no cynicism. Jamie was a warmer, friendlier person than the fierce scowling man she had married, she thought with regret.

"It was a good enough mill, I suppose," Jamie was saying. "No one first rate, of course, but they fought fairly well. It's just . . ." He sighed and Rebecca's heart went out to him. "I guess I've lost my feel for mills." He looked down at his crippled leg.

"Well," Robert said brusquely, "we all tire of things sooner or later."

The sadness did not leave Jamie's face, and Rebecca saw his brother's face darken too. It seemed as if some giant hand was squeezing her heart. How could they get Jamie out of his fit of the dismals?

And then she had an idea. "Jamie, please, could you tell me . . . I've been just dying to know."

Jamie looked up in surprise. "Tell you what, Rebecca?"

Rebecca flushed. "What . . . what are the ladies wearing in London?" She cast Burlingame a quick glance and saw him smile. "I've no notion what they wear in the city."

She dropped her voice again, as though in embarrassment. "They say . . . they say the women go about na—unclothed."

Relief flooded her heart as Jamie grinned. "Well, not quite."

"Tell me, oh do tell me," Rebecca implored, one glance at Burlingame telling her he approved of what she was doing.

"Tell her," Burlingame said. "And enlighten me, too. Are the ladies still damping their petticoats?"

Rebecca, looking from one man to the other, realized that she was truly ignorant of fashion in London. "Damping?" she faltered. "Why should they damp their petticoats?"

Jamie flushed a little. "Rob, do you think—" he began.

But Burlingame laughed. "Jamie, you've been listening too much to this talk of sensibility. Rebecca's a country girl. She won't have the vapors on us. Will you, girl?"

"Over a petticoat?" she asked with such bewilderment that both men burst into whoops of laughter.

"Well, if Jamie won't tell, I will. When I left London, some ladies," his tone gave the word a questionable meaning, "some ladies were sprinkling their petticoats with perfumed water to make them cling to their figures."

"Oh!" Rebecca felt her face go red. Then, thinking of Lady Catherine, she added without thinking, "and they wear no stays."

Burlingame nodded. "Quite right. Most ladies have given those up, young ones at any rate. You, however, will not sprinkle your petticoats." His eyebrows contracted fiercely.

"Yes, Robert." Rebecca wondered what had made him so suddenly fierce. She had no desire to array herself for the eyes of other men, if that could possibly be what he was thinking of. She found a nice warm feeling stealing over her at the idea, but then she had to turn her attention to Jamie.

"Well, the gowns are mostly white, you know. Thin stuff, maybe with a little design on it. And they're high-waisted. The sleeves are puffy, sometimes there's a long one under a short one." He faltered. "They look rather like the one you've got on."

Burlingame chuckled. "I'm afraid Rebecca will have to wait till she gets to London, Jamie. You're not much good at conveying fashion."

Rebecca made a small face. "I wish I may have something else to wear soon. I'll be glad when my dresses arrive."

Burlingame nodded. "They should arrive soon. It's a shame the condition your father left you in. Riding about in a boy's breeches and shirt." His dark eyes gleamed at her.

Rebecca swallowed hastily. This discussion was reawakening memories of hunger and hard times, memories of her father in his sick bed that she would rather leave dormant.

She drew herself rigidly erect. "I wish we may not discuss my past," she said with great dignity. "For I find it very distressing to remember." The last words, unfortunately, destroyed the impression of dignity, for they caught on something in her throat and came out rather like a sob, and the treacherous tears started to spill from her eyes.

"Here, now, Rob. That's the outside of enough," Jamie declared. "You've gone and made her cry."

He struggled to get up from his chair and comfort her, but his brother was there first.

Rebecca found herself enveloped in a pair of strong arms, her cheek against a warm waistcoat. Suddenly all the strength went out of her backbone, and she collapsed against him.

"Go ahead, little one," he said, his voice strangely tender. "Get it out of your system. You're safe now. I'll take care of you."

Sobbing in his arms, Rebecca found her desire to cry soon overcome by a very different one. The comfort she had found was soon displaced by a strange yearning to throw her arms around his neck. And that she must not do, she told herself firmly.

And so perhaps she cried a little longer than was strictly necessary and took a great deal of time to dab at her face and eyes with the large white handkerchief that he thrust into her hands.

"There. All better now?"

Rebecca nodded. "Yes, thank you." Just as she had feared, the comforting arms were withdrawn, and he left her, to stride toward the fire.

Suddenly he turned toward Jamie. "My new pistols," he said. "In all this turmoil I forgot about them. Did you bring them?"

"Of course." Jamie smiled. "They're in my trunk. Two of the prettiest Mantons I've ever seen. Real beauties. I like those blue barrels and the checkered grips. No silver, though."

Burlingame frowned. "No silver is what I ordered, Jamie. Silver catches the light. These are weapons, not toys."

Jamie nodded. "I reckoned as much."

Rebecca felt a tremor of fear. "Surely, now that you've got a wife—you'll—you'll not be dueling."

Burlingame noticed her white face and trembling fingers. "Calm yourself," he said cheerfully. "Dueling is illegal anyhow. And besides, Jamie here would take care of you. Right lad?"

As Jamie's bright eyes rested on her face, Rebecca knew she had made a real friend. But what good would Jamie be, what good would *anyone* be, if Robert lay dead?

The sudden rattle of a branch against the window disturbed the silence that had fallen over the room.

"Sounds like a stormy night is coming up," Burlingame said, moving to her side. "Time enough to look at the pistols tomorrow. I believe my bride and I will retire. We'll see you in the morning."

Jamie's cast-down eyes brought a flush to her cheeks and Burlingame's hand on hers a thudding to her heart. She rose unsteadily to her feet.

Behind them she heard Jamie's footsteps. "I'm rather tired," he said, a chuckle in his voice. "I believe I'll sleep, too."

As Burlingame stopped outside the door to her room, Rebecca felt a strange excitement. She knew he would keep his word, but if he didn't? The heavy door swung shut behind them, and she turned fearfully to face him. Across his face flashed an unfathomable look. Surprised, she took a timid step toward him. "Robert?"

His eyes raked her face angrily, causing her heart to pound now with sheer terror.

"Robert," the word was a mere whisper. "What's wrong? What have I done?"

He didn't answer her. He simply stood there, his great dark eyes boring into her, his hands clenched into two fists at his sides. For a long, fearful moment they stood thus, suspended in time. A sob escaped her throat.

His scowl, if anything, grew even more ferocious; then, muttering a curse, he turned on his heel and without a word stalked through the connecting door to his room.

For a moment after the door closed behind him Rebecca could only stand there staring. The man who had been so charming and so debonair downstairs in the presence of his brother had become a fierce, brooding stranger in the confines of her room. And he had flung himself away from her. He not only did not desire her, for some unfathomable reason he hated her!

For a moment Rebecca wanted to sink to the floor, to give way to the fierce storm of emotions battling within her. But she was a woman now, she told herself sternly, not a child.

Slowly and carefully she drew on the old-fashioned nightdress that Sanders had left for her across the foot of the bed. Slowly and carefully she blew out the lamp and crawled between the covers. Only then, in the comforting darkness, with her face pressed into the pillow to muffle her cries, did she allow the heartbroken child within her to sob in disappointment and fear. Only then did she admit to herself that if he were always to look at her in that strange, ferocious way, always to turn away from her when every fiber of her being yearned to have him smile at her, she would quite certainly wish to die.

Later, when she seemed to have no tears left, Rebecca lay staring into the darkness. Outside, the wind was rising, howling and beating against the huge old house and the oaks surrounding it, intent on destroying everything in its path. One moment the moon filled the room with light, the next it had disappeared behind a cloud and plunged everything into darkness.

Rebecca crept from the bed and moved toward the window. From it she could see the cliffs and, beyond them, when the moon was right, part of the

sea itself. Rebecca caught her breath, for the sea was churning in great angry waves that seemed to rise quite high in the air. A sudden crack of lightning made her jump, and then she gasped aloud. There, on the cliffs, surely that was a figure on horseback! Constancia, she said to herself. Could Constancia really be haunting this place?

A cold shiver ran over her. Rebecca turned suddenly and raced for the comfort of the big bed, where she drew the covers high up over her head and lay trembling. Finally the trembling passed, and gradually her tired limbs relaxed into sleep.

Chapter 3

In the morning there was no sign of the storm except for the freshness of trees and grass. Rebecca pulled on the faded muslin dress again, wishing that the dressmaker might hurry.

She sighed. How would Robert act this morning? If Jamie was with them, he would in all likelihood tuck her arm through his and speak to her lovingly. And if Jamie was not? The sigh grew deeper. Robert would probably scowl at her fiercely.

Well, she could hardly stay cooped up in this room all day. She ran the silver-backed brush on the dressing table through her curls and hurried down the stairs to the huge hall.

The two heads drawn close together made her heart lurch for a moment. How much they cared for each other, these two dark brothers. Then they heard her footsteps, and both looked up to greet her.

"Good morning, Rebecca." Jamie's eyes were cast down, but there was a chuckle in his voice as he asked, "Did you rest well?"

She saw the scowl on Burlingame's face and hastened to say demurely, "Quite well, brother Jamie. Thank you." Then some imp made her add, "I was a little frightened by the storm. But your brother . . ." She let the sentence hang delicately in the air and was rewarded by a flicker of amusement, perhaps even admiration, that raced over Burlingame's face.

Robert motioned to her cheerfully. "Sanders will have your breakfast in a moment. Sit down."

Suppressing a sigh of gratitude, Rebecca advanced to the chair beside him. A few moments later Sanders appeared, her eyes twinkling, and set before her enough breakfast for three people.

"Robert, I can't—" she protested as he heaped her plate with grilled kidneys and bacon, ham, and hot buttered muffins. Sanders set down a big mug of hot tea.

"Well have to feed you up, my dear," Burlingame said. He was looking directly at her yet somehow avoiding her eyes. "Sanders has the right idea. Naught but skin and bones, heh, Sanders?"

"Yes, your Lordship, that's my thinking entirely."

Rebecca flushed, but she had to admit to herself that her mouth was fairly watering from the delicious smells. She dug in with a will, and much earlier than she had expected found herself staring down at a clean plate.

She looked up to meet Jamie's admiring eyes. "My word, Rob, but she's a trencherwoman, all right."

Burlingame's face smiled, but his eyes did not. Rebecca saw for sure now that something was still wrong. How could he expect her to carry off this masquerade, she thought bitterly, if he was going to be so bird-witted about it himself?

She forced herself to smile at both of them. "I'm afraid I was horribly hungry. In the excitement of Jamie's arrival I'm afraid I forgot to eat much. And then, of course, there was last night."

She lowered her eyes demurely, but not before she saw the expression in Burlingame's. Jamie grinned and clapped his brother on the back. "Rob, my boy, I've got to hand it to you. She's perfect, just perfect."

Burlingame obviously did not think so, Rebecca decided, wondering what further wrong she had done. He looked as though he could cheerfully strangle her. *But why?* she wondered. He wanted Jamie to think they had made a love match. Why should he be so angered when she made it appear that it was?

"Let's tell her now, Rob." The happy note in Jamie's voice caused her to raise her eyes.

"Tell me what?"

"It's a surprise." Burlingame's voice was curt. "You'll just have to wait. Come along."

Rebecca was not used to being half-dragged along. "Where are we going?" she panted as she hurried beside him.

"Out to the stables," Jamie answered, and received a glowering look from Burlingame for his pains.

When finally they slowed to a halt, Rebecca was gasping for breath.

"Bring her out," Burlingame ordered the stable-boy, a young lad whose large eyes seemed glued to Rebecca's flushed face.

In a few minutes the boy returned leading a bay with white stockings and a white star on her forehead. Rebecca drew in her breath. What a beautiful mare!

"Did you just buy her?" she asked, stepping away from Burlingame's arm to rub the soft velvet nose.

"Yes. This morning." There was a strange tone in Burlingame's voice, one she could not identify.

"What's her name?"

"That's up to you."

"To me?" She looked up in surprise to see Jamie grinning and Burlingame surveying her with a cool look. "Why me?"

"She's yours." Jamie's grin reflected his obvious pleasure.

She swung unbelieving eyes to Robert. "Is Jamie right?" She wished her lips would not tremble in such a ridiculous way.

He nodded. "Of course. The horse is yours. If you want her."

"Oh, Robert, I do. She's so beautiful, just perfect."

In spite of the coolness of his eyes his lips softened into a smile at her obvious delight. And somehow, before she had become aware of her own intentions, she had thrown herself into his arms and reached up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, Robert. Oh, thank you!"

His arms tightened around her momentarily in the way she ached so to feel and then suddenly went rigid. And his lips, so close, whispered coolly for her ears alone, "Enough playacting. You've already convinced the boy."

Rebecca whirled from his arms and turned back to the mare. "I shall call her Starfire," she said over the lump in her throat, hoping that Jamie, if he saw the tears glistening in her eyes, would think them tears of delight.

"May I go for a ride now?" she asked, keeping her face turned away from Burlingame.

"I have some business to attend to," Burlingame said. Rebecca almost flinched at the coolness of his tone. Oh, how could Jamie hear him and not realize the truth?

"Oh, come on, Rob. I'll go with her. I can still ride, even with my bad leg."

Burlingame was obviously not pleased at the suggestion, but then he shrugged. "All right. I suppose you'll come to no harm. Just be careful."

He turned on his heel and was gone toward the house.

It wasn't until the stableboy had both horses saddled that Rebecca looked in dismay at her muslin dress. "Oh dear, I can't go riding like this!"

She felt herself close to tears at this fresh disappointment, and then her eyes lit on the stableboy. He was just the right size, and his clothes looked clean. She beckoned him aside, and at her words his eyes grew even larger.

"I shall be ready in a minute, Jamie," she called as she followed the boy into the stable, "only be patient."

When she returned in a few minutes, wearing the stableboy's breeches and shirt, his boots somewhat wobbly on her feet, Jamie stared in amazement.

"Rebecca, you can't go out in that rig."

"Oh yes, I can. And I will." And she swung herself up on Starfire and cantered off, the clatter of hoofs behind her telling her that Jamie followed.

It was a little strange riding sidesaddle in breeches and a shirt. But the poor lad had been so noddled that she hadn't wanted to bother him with changing saddles. Besides, it hardly mattered. Sidesaddle or astride, it was all one with her.

She felt the sea wind in her hair and the smell of it in her nostrils and she gave herself up entirely to the joyous rhythm of the ride.

After a while she was conscious of Jamie beside her, signaling to her to slow down. At first she only smiled, but then, as she saw the cliffs ahead, she nodded and slowed Starfire to a walk.

Admiration shown in Jamie's eyes. "You ride like a man, even with a sidesaddle," he grinned.

Rebecca smiled. "I've ridden since before I could walk," she replied.

They were approaching the edge of the cliffs and she cried out at the beauty of the sea beyond and the wide expanse of bright sand beside it.

She turned glowing eyes to Jamie. "It's beautiful, so beautiful."

Jamie nodded. "I'm rather fond of the sea myself."

"Oh, Jamie, how can I get down there? I must, I simply must!"

Jamie looked slightly perturbed, but then, as if remembering her skill on horseback, he nodded. "The path's this way. It's steep, so be careful."

Minutes later they were at the bottom of the cliffs. Rebecca caught her breath in surprise when she saw from below the steepness of the path they had just descended. And then she was lost in the beauty before her—the sand shimmering in the sun and the sparkling blue-green of the sea, now lapping peacefully, like the merest little brook, against the golden shore.

Forgotten was all her puzzlement over Burlingame and his strange ways. Forgotten was everything but the beauty of this lovely place.

Rebecca felt the sidesaddle had become an annoying impediment. Sliding from the mare's back, she uncinched it and laid it to one side, high up on a rock, out of the sand. Then, laughing in the joy of the golden day, she threw herself bareback on the mare and raced along the edge of the sea.

Happiness seemed to be rising to choke her, the wonderful beauty of this place making her whole body glow.

Rebecca turned the horse and galloped back the way she had come. "Oh, Jamie," she cried, pulling the mare to a slithering halt in the sand. "It's

absolutely beautiful. The most beautiful place I've ever seen."

The sound of pebbles on the path made her look up, and then her heart seemed stuck in her throat. It was Burlingame, urging his dark stallion down the path toward them. He wasn't close enough yet for her to see his eyes, but the set of his shoulders told her quite plainly that he was very angry.

She felt her knees trembling, and then she scolded herself severely. She was not a schoolroom miss. She must make him see that. She realized rather belatedly that in the stableboy's clothes she cut a rather undignified figure. Still, she stiffened her lip and waited patiently.

"Well." Burlingame's word fell into the silence like a millstone in a pond. "A pretty picture indeed. The Marchioness of Burlingame." His eyes traveled over her as he spoke, and she had all she could do to keep from flinching. "In a stableboy's clothes. Trying to break her foolish neck."

She had been vanquished by those sardonic eyes and ready to admit she had forgotten her position in her desire to ride, but his last words were more than she could stomach. He had no right, no right at all, to cast aspersion on her riding ability.

"You are being unfair, Robert," she said stiffly. "I am quite as good a rider as you."

His cool eyes bored into hers. "I doubt that. At any rate, you'll not be riding again for a long time, not after an escapade like this!"

"You're horrible! Hateful!" she cried, forgetting all expediency, forgetting that she was entirely dependent on this man. "I *can* ride as well as you."

And with that she whirled and galloped away, kicking her heels into the mare's flanks. *Let him see*, she thought indignantly. Let him see just how well she *could* ride. She leaned forward, urging the mare on. Perhaps she could outrun him and he would give up. But she knew immediately that it was no use. She heard the hoofbeats behind her drawing closer and closer.

And then, when she thought he would reach out and grab the bridle, she found his arm around her waist, lifting her from the mare's back onto the saddle in front of him. The reins were pulled from her hands in the process, and out of terror or frustration or some strange emotion she could not name, she attacked him with her fists.

Now the stallion, dismayed at the battle being staged on his back in mid-gallop, whinnied in terror and reared, throwing them both in the sand.

The breath was knocked out of Rebecca by the fall, but before she had fully regained it, Burlingame was dragging her erect. The world tilted dangerously, but she absolutely refused to faint at his feet.

"Let me go," she cried, struggling to free herself from the strong brown hands that gripped her shoulders. But there was no release, and as his eyes bored into hers, his lips only inches from her own, she found the breath removed from her body much more effectively than the fall from the horse had done.

For a long moment he stared at her, and it seemed as though he leaned slightly toward her. Then he cursed again and dragged her after him toward a big rock.

It wasn't until he had seated himself and bent her over his knee that she realized his intent. By then it was too late. Her first "Robert, no!" was interrupted by the sound of his hand connecting with the stableboy's breeches. Her bottom stung as his hand connected again and again. Rebecca stifled a sob. He was so unfair. What was wrong with riding on the beach?

She bit her bottom lip as his hand connected again. But the tears could not be held back. Why, when she wanted nothing more in this world than to please him, why, oh why, did he have to treat her like this?

She would hate him, she decided passionately, yes, hate him. But when at last he set her on her feet and she looked at him through tear-blurred eyes, she knew that she could not do that either.

But she would not give in like a coward. She stood her ground, defiantly giving back stare for stare.

"You are an obnoxious brat," he declared sternly. "Not at all fit to be a lady."

"I didn't *ask* to be a lady," she flung at him out of her humiliation. "That was your idea."

"And a sorry one it was, too."

The harsh words were worse than a blow. She quivered under them and hung her head.

"Look at me!"

Slowly she raised her eyes. "You are never to ride Starfire on this beach again without me. Do you understand?"

"But—"

"If you do, I shall have you locked in your room." "Robert!"

"I mean it."

She saw that he did. He would treat her that ignobly, let the servants laugh at her. And Jamie! She looked around quickly.

"I sent Jamie back to the house before I set out after you. You needn't worry about him witnessing your humiliation."

"I thought it was strange he would let you treat me in so ungentlemanly a fashion," she cried.

Burlingame looked at her sternly and shook his head. "You're nothing but trouble. Already you've been nothing but trouble."

"I wish you will remember that *you* brought me to Roedown House," she said angrily. "It was not my idea."

"That's quite true. On the other hand, if I had not, where would you be now?"

"I—I don't know." His eyes took cool note of her shiver of fear, and she dropped her own eyes in embarrassment.

"Rebecca, come with me. Now!"

She stared at him suspiciously, but when he turned his back on her and went for the horses she followed him gingerly.

In a matter of minutes he had resaddled the mare. He turned and offered her his hand. "I can mount myself, thank you," Rebecca said, with what she knew was a pout.

But Burlingame was brooking no resistance. He grasped her firmly around the waist and set her on the mare's back. "That may well be," he said grimly. "But when I am by, my wife will not mount by herself."

"Don't you think you should tell Jamie the truth?" The words were out before she could stop them, bitter, acid words.

He had just swung up on the great stallion's back, and it reared in obvious bewilderment at the tightening of his hands on the reins. He soothed it and then turned to her. "The truth about what?" he asked with deceptive calm.

"About us! How long do you think you can deceive Jamie about ours being a love match?"

"As long as I wish to."

"You're a fool, a cabbage-head!" She flung the words at him. "You won't deceive him another day at the rate you're going. Glaring at me as you do. It doesn't take much to see that you hate me."

She stopped suddenly, unable to go on because of the huge lump in her throat.

"Rebecca."

For a moment she thought there must be someone else there. His voice was so strange, so different.

"Rebecca, you're quite right. Jamie must be sent back to London—and soon, before he suspects something wrong between us. Will you keep up the show as you did today?"

She wanted to answer him coolly, but the words stuck in her throat. "I can't if you keep looking at me so!"

"I will temper my glares," he said ruefully. "At least, I'll try." He moved the stallion closer to the mare and reached for her fingers. "Rebecca, I don't hate you. That much you must believe. And I have reasons, very good reasons, for forbidding you to ride on this beach."

She stared at him in amazement. This was a new Robert, a man whose serious face and somber eyes bespoke great sincerity.

"Do you believe me?" he asked seriously, his hand still imprisoning hers.

And Rebecca nodded. She would have believed anything he told her; she knew that. But the words that sang most in her mind were, "I don't hate you."

"Promise me, Rebecca. Promise me that you won't ride on this beach without me." His eyes held hers.

Rebecca sighed. She could refuse him nothing when he looked at her in that way. "Yes, Robert. I promise."

"Good."

The smile he gave her then was almost human, she thought as she followed him back up the path and across the green fields toward the great house set in its grove of oak.

Outside the stable, Rebecca thought of the poor stableboy. "Robert! The stableboy?"

"I gave Jed quite a dressing down, but he'll survive. He'll never abet you in such a ridiculous stunt again, though."

"Is he . . . all right?"

Burlingame looked at her in surprise. "Of course, he's all right. I don't beat my servants." He stopped suddenly, and dryly added, "I only beat my wife."

She thought she saw a flicker of something in his eyes, but when he turned his head it was gone.

Rebecca hastened into the stable and retrieved her own clothes. She was looking around for a safe place to change into them when Burlingame appeared in the door.

Unconsciously she clasped the clothes to her. He laughed sardonically. "Go ahead, change." The words were an order. "I'll stand guard."

She could hardly tell him that it was his eyes above all others that she sought to avoid. "Turn . . . turn your back," she pleaded.

His eyebrows went up quizzically. "When my wife is dressing?"

"I . . . I am not your wife," she reminded him. "At least, not really. As you've told me repeatedly I'm only a schoolroom miss."

His face hardened suddenly. "As usual, Rebecca, you're quite right." And he turned his back, leaving her feeling even more distressed than she had been, so that her fingers became all thumbs and would not obey her wishes.

But finally she was finished. "You . . . you may turn around now," she said. She didn't really want to have his eyes on her. For there was sand in her hair and probably tearstains on her face. "Oh, I wish my new clothes will arrive soon," she said, her voice breaking in the middle as he pulled her arm through his.

"You're trembling, Rebecca. Come now, I won't hurt you."

She hung her head. She couldn't tell him that she wasn't afraid of him in that sense. Even the spanking, though her bottom had smarted at the time, had been more humiliating than painful.

No, it was fear of another kind that made her tremble. Fear of something she didn't know how to define, something vague and indefinite, yet rather terrifying in an exciting way.

Fortunately she was spared answering him. "Come," he said. "We'll go find Jamie. And if you promise to be good no one will know any more about this."

Her eyes misty, she glanced up at him. Would he always see her as a brat, an uppity schoolroom miss? Would he never realize that she was a woman, a woman who might want to be his wife?

They entered the house through a back door, and Burlingame was leading her toward the back stairs when they heard the sound of loud voices in the front hall. He dropped her arm and strode off quickly. Rebecca, unsure what to do, trailed after him to the doorway that led to the hall. There, just out of sight, she stopped.

"What's going on here?" At the sound of Burlingame's voice, silence fell.

"Well, your lordship . . ." The babble of voices rose again. Rebecca could distinguish those of Jamie and Evans, the butler. There were other voices, too, ones she didn't know.

"Jamie, would you kindly inform me as to the grounds for this miniature riot in my front hall?" Burlingame's voice was lazy, but there was something in it that demanded silence from the rest of them.

"Well, Rob, Burton caught this fellow poaching and brought him here to you."

"Poaching, is it! What have you to say for yourself?" Burlingame demanded sternly.

Rebecca moved silently so she could see the little tableau near the front door. The wretched man, she saw, was crumpled to his knees before the marquess. The others, Jamie, Evans, and a tall, ruddy man who must be the gamekeeper, Burton, stood there, glaring down at him.

Rebecca felt the misery rising in her own throat. Hunger she had known, hunger that gnawed at the insides. But somehow she and her father had always managed, at least the game on the land had been theirs. Her skill at shooting had many times fed them.

She watched in sympathy as the man twisted his cap painfully between work-worn fingers. Couldn't Burlingame see that this was no ordinary poacher, that this man was a hard worker? The man spoke. "I knew I hadn't ought to, m'lord," he said, through trembling lips. "But, but . . ."

"Go on!" The words whipped through the silence, and Rebecca flinched as though they had struck her.

"M'old woman, she's laid up and there's naught to feed her. And me girl. And the wee ones crying." The man hung his head as though he knew his case was hopeless. "It were only a rabbit, m'lord. Just one rabbit."

"The law is the law," Burlingame barked.

"Yes, m'lord." The words were almost too low to hear.

Burlingame turned to his gamekeeper. "Burton, take this man to the justice of the peace. He will know how to deal with him." Across the man's bowed head something significant passed between Burlingame and his gamekeeper. She saw the keeper nod his head knowingly.

Rebecca's heart gave a great leap. The poor man's fate was already decided, and from the harsh look on Burlingame's face it would be a painful one.

Her husband was a brute, not just to her but to others, she thought sadly. How blind she had been, how stupid. He had no heart, this stone man who, having just sent a poor wretch to a terrible fate, turned and clapped his brother cheerfully on the back, saying, "Let's have a drink, Jamie. Dry business, justice."

Rebecca, her eyes clouding with tears, turned from the doorway and made her way upstairs. "I have married a brute," she told herself dismally. "A cold unfeeling brute. I shall hate him. Oh, I shall hate him passionately."

She stripped off the dress and threw herself across the huge bed. "He's hateful, hateful," she stormed into the pillow.

And yet her shoulders could still feel the grip of his hands. Her eyes could see every line of his face.

"Why?" she cried angrily, jumping from the bed and striding to the window to look out over the treetops at the distant sea that now, too, was denied her. "Why, oh why?" she cried. But there was no answer.

Chapter 4

Jamie returned to London after dinner that day. A knowing smile wreathed his face as he made his farewells, and Rebecca could easily imagine what he was thinking.

Her own feelings were torn. She wanted Jamie to go. He must never know the real reason for her marriage to Burlingame, particularly now that they seemed unable to be even civil to each other.

Yes, she wanted him to go. And yet, as she saw his carriage pull smartly away, her heart fell. He was a friend, and without him Burlingame would not even pretend to care for her.

"I don't hate you, Rebecca." She recalled his words. How her heart had sung when he said them. But now she saw that they were meaningless. Of course, he didn't hate her. Hate took time and energy. What he felt for her, except when she was a trouble to him, was mere indifference.

As if to prove her point, his arm fell away from her as the carriage turned down the lane and out of sight. "Do you think he suspected?" Burlingame asked, moving back into the great hall.

Carefully Rebecca avoided his eyes. "I think not. I think he believes . . ." Her tongue stumbled over the words. "That we want to be alone."

"And that's the last thing you wish, isn't it, Rebecca?" The harshness of his tone so surprised her that she raised her eyes to his. What she saw made a shiver run through her. So much power, raw, arrogant power.

She moistened her lips and refused to back away. "Your company when we're alone isn't—"

"Isn't very pleasant." He finished the sentence for her, one eyebrow cocked quizzically.

"Yes," she returned, struggling against an insane desire to reach out and touch him.

"Well, don't fuss about that," he said brusquely. "You won't be seeing much of me. I'm going to London myself in a week or two. And there's a great deal to be done here before then. So you'll be left to your own devices. No riding, though. I haven't time to go with you."

"I don't need a nursemaid," she said acidly. "And I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself on horseback."

His face darkened, and his hands reached out to grasp her shoulders. She gasped at the tightness of his grip, but he didn't loosen it. "You will not ride anywhere. I have given orders."

"But—"

He shook her, cutting off her words. "I've no time to listen to your prattlings, chit. I've work to do. There'll be no riding for you. And that's that. You do understand?"

He glared at her until the words forced their way from between her stiff lips. "I understand."

Suddenly he seemed to realize that he was holding her shoulders, and his hands fell away quickly. "I shall see you at supper. Behave yourself." He strode swiftly away.

Rebecca, blinking back tears, told herself repeatedly that she hated him, that he was a brute, a bully, but the words were merely words. She still longed to be with him, to have his smile of approval directed at her.

"You are a fool," Rebecca told herself crossly as she dragged herself upstairs. "An addlepatated fool."

Two hours later she had explored every nook and cranny of the huge house. It was still in very good condition, though many of the rooms were closed up, their ancient furniture swathed in holland covers. She loved it. In spite of its overbearing master, the old house had a quiet charm.

As she stood on the upper gallery studying the old portraits, Rebecca mused over the lives of the many men and women who had inhabited the old house. All the male Burlingames seemed to be dark and sardonic, she thought, eyeing their portraits with some misgiving. And they had all been partial to golden-skinned, dark-haired women. At least as far as wives were concerned, she amended quickly, a vision of Lady Catherine's auburn tresses flashing across her mind.

Rebecca paused before the painting of the fiery Constancia. The dark, passion-filled eyes of the painting seemed to regard her disdainfully. "I don't know why you look at me like that," Rebecca murmured. "I can love just as madly as you did."

She sighed deeply. Would she ever know love, love as Constancia had known it?

There was a light step on the stair below and Sanders spoke. "She's the most beautiful of the lot of 'em, that one."

"She's . . . she's Constancia, isn't she?"

"Aye, that's her." Sanders came to a halt beside her mistress. "Have you heard the story, miss?"

"Just a little, what they say in the village." Rebecca's eyes grew wide, and she forgot her dignity as a marchioness. "Do you know it?"

"Aye. I'll tell it to you." Sanders's voice took on a sober tone. "She was a Spanish lass, they say, with the hot blood of the Moors in her veins. The first Burlingame took her off a Spanish vessel in a sea battle."

"She must have been very, very beautiful."

"Aye," Sanders nodded solemnly. "She had black hair, jet black, clear to her waist. And black eyes and red lips. A waist a man could span with his two hands. There was gypsy blood in her, too, I don't doubt. They say she raged and cursed and vowed to kill him."

Rebecca suppressed a smile. She could quite understand that. "Go on."

"In your room he took her on their wedding night. Wedded her proper, he did. They say you could hear her screams and curses at the other end of the house. In the morning the lord had great scratches on his face. And her ladyship ate standing up. But there was no more curses from that room."

Rebecca flushed. These were not things for maiden ears. And yet, she told herself firmly, she was not a maiden, at least not to Sanders.

"They had a babe, two babes," Sanders went on. "His lordship kept to the seas. When he was gone, she used to ride on the cliffs and even along the sea, watching for him. They say she rode astride." Sanders's voice held awe. "Like a man, her skirts and her long hair, black as the stallion beneath her, streaming out in the wind."

"She must have been very beautiful like that."

Sanders nodded. "When the babes were almost grown to manhood, his lordship was lost at sea in a storm. They say she shed nary a tear at the news. But the next time a storm raged she disappeared—her and that stallion. They found them next day, dead, the both of them. Her hand was still tangled in his mane."

"An accident?" Rebecca asked, sudden tears filling her eyes.

Sanders shook her head. "No, indeed. She was wearing his lordship's favorite dress. And they all expected she'd gone to meet him in the next world."

"She must have loved him very much," Rebecca said over the lump in her throat, a sudden vision of Burlingame's face coming before her eyes.

"Aye. The Burlingame men do have that quality, so they say. Their women's all mad about 'em. As you know," Sanders continued, "there's those hearabouts that says they've seen her a'riding that horse along the shore as the tide comes in. And there's those that swears they've heard the hoofs of her stallion pounding against the rocks in a summer storm."

Standing in front of the painting, Rebecca sighed aloud. "I—" and then she stopped. Perhaps she had seen a rider the night before, at least she thought she had. But she was a marchioness now, and Burlingame would not care to have his lady gabbling about superstitions.

Rebecca spoke with dignity. "Thank you, Sanders. It's a beautiful story."

Sanders chuckled, but her face seemed a little white. "Aye, m'lady, that it is. A beautiful story."

A sudden bustle in the hall below caught their attention, and Rebecca turned to hurry down. "It's the dresses for m'lady," said Peters, as he and Evans watched the hall fill up with boxes. "Shall I take them to your ladyship's room?"

"Yes, Peters. Oh, yes!"

At last, at long last, she thought, racing back up the stairs in an entirely unmarchionesslike fashion, she had something decent to wear.

An hour later the clothes were unpacked, everything put neatly away: gowns of sprigged and checked and spotted muslin, petticoats and chemises, poke bonnets and straw ones, kid slippers and riding boots, pelisses and spencers. And best of all, to Rebecca's eyes, a forest-green velvet habit trimmed military style with black braid. Rebecca heaved a sigh of contentment. Now she could at least look like a lady.

She would wash and dress very carefully for supper, she told herself. And she would be polite and helpful. Perhaps then Burlingame would soften toward her.

But her hopes were doomed to failure. Burlingame strode to the table, filled his plate quickly, and just as quickly emptied it. Then with a curt "Sleep well" he was gone.

Not a word about her dress or what she'd been doing. Not a word about anything, she thought dismally.

Was life always to be like this, she wondered as she made her way up the wide staircase to her room, the hours stretching away dully into the future, lightened only by those moments of dubious delight she spent in his company?

She looked toward the sea, but the dusk obscured the view. Where was he going this time of night? It was too late to be seeing to anything on the estate.

Rebecca jumped as though she'd been scalded. Lady Catherine! Could he have gone to Lady Catherine?

She made a determined effort to cast the idea out of her mind, but it stuck there.

He disliked Lady Catherine, she told herself firmly. Why else that bored, drawling tone? Why else his firm demonstration of regard for his wife?

But he had specifically said—she drew in a deep breath as though to ease the sudden constriction around her heart—that he intended to return to his old haunts.

A distressing picture rose before Rebecca's eyes, and she bit back a cry of dismay. As clearly as though they stood before her she saw the two of them, Lady Catherine's soft white hand laid so possessively on Burlingame's arm, her full lips smiling up at him, her bosom practically bared.

Rebecca found herself gritting her teeth. *That must be it*, she thought angrily, pacing from one side of the room to the other. He had gone to Lady

Catherine. She had been his . . . "

Back and forth, back and forth, Rebecca paced, seeing that flaming red head so close to his dark one, seeing his arm encircle that waist, seeing his mouth descend on those full pouting lips.

Was he kissing Lady Catherine? He who had never kissed his wife, except for that little peck after their wedding?

Rebecca found suddenly that she had bitten her bottom lip till she drew blood. He couldn't, he couldn't be doing that. If he was, she would die.

Back and forth, Rebecca paced, till the dusk became night and the rising moon shone high in the sky. And still he didn't return.

How long, she thought numbly, how long must he remain in Lady Catherine's arms?

And then, sometime after midnight, she paused in her pacing. Someone was coming down the hall. She caught her breath as the footsteps passed and she heard the closing of his door.

He was home. Home at last!

Barely able to move from the combined effects of fatigue and relief she made her way to the bed, drew off her clothes, and fell between the covers, sleep overcoming her senses the moment her head touched the pillow.

When Rebecca awoke next morning the sun was high in the sky. With a start she jumped from the bed and hurried to dress in one of her new gowns.

But she was too late. Burlingame had long gone about the affairs of the estate. She forced down a small part of the breakfast that Sanders put before her, then wandered disconsolately around the huge old house.

Burlingame had left word that he would not be back till dusk, and the day, long and endless without him, stretched before her. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't sit still. If only he hadn't forbidden her the use of Starfire. He had specifically said, "I forbid you to ride on this beach without me." *I forbid you to ride*. The words echoed and reechoed in her head. *Forbid you to ride*.

Suddenly she drew in her breath. Forbidden to ride, but not to walk! In a flurry of excitement she rushed upstairs, put on her walking shoes, gathered up a shawl and her new straw bonnet with the scarf to tie it.

Then she paused for a moment to steady herself before she went downstairs to seek out Sanders. "I'm going for a walk," she said, idly swinging her straw bonnet from one hand. "Since I've breakfasted late I may not be back till almost supper."

"Yes, m'lady." Sanders was absorbed in the cupboard she was cleaning and so spared no more than a glance.

Happily, her boredom and depression vanishing in the warm greenery, she made her way demurely through the great oaks and out into the meadow across which she had galloped so happily the day before.

The sun was warm, but a cool breeze from the sea relieved any discomfort she might have felt. Here in the beautiful outdoors it was impossible to remain unhappy for long.

Rebecca was a good walker, used to covering long distances on foot, and before the sun was more than a little past its highest point she stood at the edge of the great cliffs and looked out over the blue-green sea.

For long moments she stood staring out into its intriguing expanse. Then suddenly she turned and began to seek the pathway. If a horse could make it down that path, surely she could.

Before long she stood at the bottom of the cliffs. Perspiration beaded on her forehead, and there was a small rip in the hem of her gown, but these were minor things.

The sea! The sea was what was important, stretched out before her in all its glorious beauty.

Impulsively she knelt to remove her shoes and stockings. She set them prudently on a rock, well up out of the reach of the gently lapping waves, and piled her shawl and bonnet on top. Then, bare toes digging in the warm sand, she looked around.

Lifting her skirt and carefully avoiding the rock where he had sat to spank her, she moved to the water's edge. The sea felt delightful on bare toes. Rebecca shivered and stepped into the water up to her ankles.

The afternoon seemed to fly by. She played with the sand, piling it high into huge castles and then destroying them with a single well-placed foot. She ran singing along the water's edge, skirt held high. She examined the rocks and boulders that littered the beach.

The sun was low in the sky when Rebecca paused to look up. Before long, she thought, she would have to head back to Roedown House. But before she did she would rest a little. She was more tired than she had realized. And there was exactly the right place, back up in that circle of rocks that made a private little beach.

As she stretched herself out in the shade made by a big boulder, Rebecca sighed. It had been a perfectly beautiful afternoon. Of course, her dress was ripped and sand clung to her. But there should be ample time to change before Burlingame returned for supper.

She smiled slightly. She didn't want him to know where she had been. After all, she had not disobeyed him, she had not *ridden* on the beach without him.

It was just that this was such a beautiful place. She wanted to come here often. She closed her eyes and sighed in contentment. In just a few minutes she would start home.

When Rebecca opened her eyes again, the sky was dark. Great brooding storm clouds hung low on the horizon. She sat up quickly. Her dress stuck suddenly to her bare legs. As Rebecca looked around the sky darkened even further. Huge drops of rain came pelting down on her, stinging her bare arms with their violence.

The path, she thought frantically, she must find the path. But the sky had darkened so, and her mind was so confused by sleep that she didn't know where the path lay. She didn't even know how to find her way out of the circle of rocks.

Her heart began to pound in panic. What was she to do? Then she took herself severely in hand. She must simply find shelter behind some boulder and wait there till the storm had passed. She had been rained on before, she told herself firmly. There was nothing so terrible about that, except that this time she would probably have to face Burlingame's anger at her for being late for supper.

With a start she realized that the water, which had been lapping about her ankles, was now nearing her knees. A tremendous clap of thunder jerked her head upright. Then another and another. And by the illumination of the accompanying lightning she glimpsed the sea.

A scream rose in her throat and died unheard in the roaring wind that surrounded her. The sea that a short time ago had been so tranquil and lovely, with gently playful waves, had become a raging monster.

Rebecca stared in horror as bolt after bolt of lightning revealed gigantic waves rearing and plunging like great-maned horses.

By now the water was reaching above her knees. With a cry Rebecca turned and moved toward the back of the circle of rocks. There was no use trying to make her way out around the rocks that enclosed the little beach. The water raging and pounding there would soon knock her from her feet.

As she pulled herself along from rock to rock Rebecca thought grimly and with a queer little flutter of pain that perhaps she would never have to bear Robert's displeasure again. Perhaps this storm would leave another Burlingame woman lying drowned in the sand.

The waves pounded and tore at her gown as she pulled herself up onto a large boulder, out of their reach for a moment. The gown was holding her back, she thought, and with an almost hysterical giggle she remembered the stylish ladies and their damped petticoats.

With a grim smile she grabbed the flimsy material and ripped off a great deal of her petticoat skirt. There, that should make climbing somewhat easier.

What would Burlingame feel, she caught herself wondering as she climbed painfully up onto yet another boulder, when they found her in the morning? She hoped she would be beautiful in death, like Constancia, or at least not bloated and ugly.

"You're not going to die, you silly creature," she told herself firmly as she set herself to wait for a flash of lightning that would enable her to scramble to the next ledge of rock.

But before long she had reached the limits of her strength, and now, there was nowhere further to go. The narrow ledge of rock on which she crouched, panting, stretched in both directions into the gloom. Above and beyond it there was nothing but solid, bare cliffs.

Rebecca gave way to tears as she lay pressed against the rock wall. She had done all she could do, all there was to do, and so tears could hinder nothing. And then she thought of Burlingame, harsh, proud, brooding Burlingame. "Robert," she said, whispering his name over and over as the pelting rain gradually blotted out every sight, as the waves hissed and pounded against the rocks below her. "Oh, Robert. If only you had loved me."

She had no idea how long she had crouched there, her eyes closed, hugging to herself the memory of his face, and the touch of his hands, when she thought she heard above the churning of the waves the sound of a voice calling her name.

I must be dying, she thought, but dying people were thought to feel warm and comfortable as they went. Yet she was still cold and shivering, her teeth chattering, though the rain seemed to have stopped and the darkness to have lightened a little.

Then it came again. "Rebecca, Rebecca!"

It was Robert's voice. But it couldn't be! Could she be suffering from delirium, Rebecca wondered, from a fever? But she was shivering, not burning up.

Then, as the words echoed again, she knew this must be reality. Somehow Burlingame was nearby. She raised her face from the damp rock and shouted, "Here. I am here."

"Keep shouting," came the reply.

And she did, repeating, "Here, I am here," until she thought no more words would ever issue from her strained throat.

Suddenly he was there, towering over her. She saw that he wore nothing but his breeches. His bare feet were planted solidly astride her. In one hand he held a flaring torch, and in the other he gripped the rope that went around his body.

Her eyes traveled up across his bare chest to his face. And she gasped. In all the times she had seen him angered, and certainly there had been enough, she had never seen him so baleful.

"Little fool," he muttered, as he wedged the torch into a cleft in the rock. "Stand up."

She wanted to obey him, indeed she tried to, but even with the help of his steadying hand her legs would not hold her.

With an exasperated oath he pulled her up against him. She felt the wet hair of his chest against her cheek, the warmth of his arms around her, and consciousness began to fade.

"Rebecca!" He shook her roughly. "Stop this foolishness. You can't swoon now. I can't climb these rocks with an unconscious female in my arms. We'd both be killed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Robert." It was that last that brought her back to life. Never, never, would she do anything to harm him.

"Good. Listen carefully. I'm going to tie you to me." As he spoke he passed the rope around their bodies, between their legs and across their shoulders, making of them one creature. She found herself pressed against his chest, her arms clutching him tightly.

"Now listen," he said as he pulled the knots tight. "You must keep conscious. I have to climb the rocks. Peters is above, watching the rope. But there are places where we must swing across and others where I may slip. If I do slip, the rope will break the fall. But if we are turned around you may be bruised on the rocks. You must use your arms and legs to keep me away from the rocks, and I will watch out for you."

"Yes, Robert." She tasted the salt sea in the hair of his chest and found herself smiling foolishly.

"Don't be afraid," he said suddenly, one arm squeezing her for a moment. "I've climbed these rocks many times."

"I'm not afraid, Robert, really I'm not. Not when you're with me," she said, and thought it strange that his heart should skip a beat right then.

The journey upward into the darkness held no terror for her. The hissing of the sea fell away below them to be replaced by the laboring of his heart under her ear. It appeared to her that sometimes rocks wholly surrounded them, that they were in some sort of vertical tunnel. And then there was another torch and the cheerful voice of Peters. "Well done, m'lord. Oh, well done! I knew we'd find her. I told you she'd know what to do. Game as a pebble that one is."

Rebecca heard his voice, felt them hauled to solid ground, and then the ropes that bound her to Burlingame fell away. And with them she, too, sank to the ground.

"Here, here, chit." She heard the exasperation in his voice, but she couldn't respond to it. Her eyes simply would not open. She could feel when he wrapped her in something warm, his cloak perhaps. She knew when he shifted her to Peters's arms, but before she could summon the strength to protest she heard the creak of saddle leather and his voice saying, "I'll take her now."

She felt the warmth of him through the cloak, the strength of his arms around her, and she knew she was safe. They were both safe, she thought happily as she surrendered to the welcoming darkness that rose up to claim her. They were both safe, and she loved him so very much.

Chapter 5

When Rebecca opened her eyes again, she was in her own bed, warm as toast, and Sanders was saying, "Drink this, child."

She drank and the darkness descended again.

The next time she woke it was afternoon, and Sanders was sitting patiently beside her. The housekeeper's homely face broke into a great grin as Rebecca opened her eyes. "I knew it," Sanders beamed. "You'll be right as anything. Just needed sleep. I told him so."

As everything came rushing back, Rebecca struggled to sit up. "Robert, where is Robert?"

Sanders pushed her gently back onto the pillows. "That scamp's fine. Don't you worry your head none about him. That's not the first time his lordship's climbed them cliffs in a storm. Nor the last neither, if I make my guess."

Rebecca sighed. She still felt rather tired. But then she summoned all her strength. "I shall get up now."

Sanders shook her head. "Oh no. He said you was to be kept abed. Told me to lock you in should I have to leave you."

Rebecca flinched. He intended to keep his threat then, to lock her in her room because she had disobeyed him. Images rushed through her head—the beautiful afternoon, her joy in the sea, the horror of the savage storm, her fear of dying, Burlingame's face as he stood astride her on the ledge of rock. She flushed at the memory of his arms around her, her face pressed against his naked chest.

Sanders put a hand to her forehead. "Here now, I hope you won't be going feverish on me."

"I'm all right. Just tired."

"I'll fetch you a cup of tea and some broth then."

Rebecca nodded. She heard the click of the key as Sanders locked the door behind her. How humiliating, she thought, to be treated like a disobedient child, to be kept a prisoner in her own room.

But then, as she looked down at the ring on her finger, something inside her replied that it really didn't matter. She was his prisoner in a much deeper sense. For she never wanted to escape him, never wanted to be without him.

Sanders returned soon with broth and tea, and Rebecca felt much better after drinking it. "Tell me," she said. "How did they find me?"

Sanders pulled up a chair, obviously eager to recount what she knew. "His lordship come in from the fields early cause he saw the storm a'brewing. 'Tweren't nothing to the storm he raised when he found you wasn't here. I never heard such cursing afore, even from him. Then Jed, the stableboy, said you was walking toward the sea. And his lordship goes flying out, muttering more curses, with Peters right behind him."

Rebecca shuddered. "I was so frightened."

"Aye." Sanders nodded wisely. "And rightly so. When it storms the waves come high. Anyway, by the time they reached the sea the storm had already started. His lordship spied your white dress, and in the lightning they managed to keep some track of you. Then when you couldn't go no farther his lordship offs with his boots and coat and such and climbs down after you."

"I thought I was going to die. It was like a miracle to see him there."

Sanders smiled. "The Burlingame men takes care of their women."

Rebecca suddenly remembered Burlingame's face. "Oh, he's so angry with me."

Sanders patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't you worry none, your ladyship. When he's wanting in your bed he'll forgive you soon enough. The Burlingame men, though they got bad tempers, is always manageable by their wives."

Rebecca longed to put her head on Sanders's comfortable shoulder and burst into tears. He would always be angry with her, and he would never come to her bed. She knew that. She was a Burlingame wife in name only. And it looked like she would always be so.

A great weariness stole over her. "I believe I'd better rest some more," she murmured and Sanders hastened to help her lie down again.

The housekeeper smoothed the hair from her forehead. "You just rest now. His lordship will be seeing you later."

Rebecca closed her eyes obediently, and though she hadn't really meant to sleep—how could she, with so many thoughts whirling through her head—slumber soon overtook her.

The sound of whispering voices roused her, and she opened her eyes to find that it was evening and the lamp was lit. Burlingame was standing beside the bed, looking down on her as Sanders said, "She's quite well, m'lord. Just tired, that's all. Poor lamb's been through a lot."

Burlingame, seeing that she was awake, said, "That's all for tonight, Sanders. I'll see that her ladyship drinks this broth."

"Yes, m'lord. I'll be seeing your ladyship in the morning." Sanders's twinkling eyes revealed to Rebecca that the housekeeper fully expected Burlingame to be soon in his wife's bed, all anger forgotten. But Rebecca knew better.

She braced herself for what she knew was coming. "I'm sorry for having caused you so much trouble," she said to his broad back as he moved a chair closer to the bed.

"You should be! What an idiotic thing to do."

Rebecca felt a surge of anger and struggled erect among the pillows. "I didn't get into trouble on purpose. I don't deliberately set out to anger you."

"Perhaps not." The corner of his mouth twitched. "But you manage it anyway."

His face changed suddenly as his eyes moved downward and, realizing with a start that she was wearing only a thin nightdress, she clutched the covers to her. Burlingame's face hardened, but he said nothing.

"Didn't I forbid that beach to you?"

"You forbade me to ride there," she said, flushing at the childishness of her reasoning. "Not to walk there."

The corner of his mouth twitched again. "All right. So that there may be no mistake, no mistake at all, I forbid you to go on that beach at all without me. Is that perfectly understandable?"

His eyes bored into hers. "Yes, Robert. I understand you."

There was a long silence in the room while he seemed to be staring at something in the air over her head.

"It was very good of you to risk your life for me. You could have just left me there. You might even have got rid of me." She had started to add the last in jest, but her words faltered as his face darkened.

"The Burlingames do not murder their wives. Or leave them to die."

"But—" The words burst from her against her will. "The Burlingames usually love their wives. And you do not."

Something imperceptible passed over his face, but the sudden tears in her eyes prevented her from seeing it plainly.

"Are you trying to anger me again?" he asked, in the drawling tone she so disliked.

"N-no, Robert."

"Good. Then drink up your broth."

She sipped it obediently. "You—you had me locked in."

"I told you I should. Didn't I?"

She nodded.

"The Burlingames always keep their word. Remember that."

She swallowed hastily and bit back what had risen to her tongue unbidden. This one, at least, did not keep his marriage vows. Was that perhaps because he had already given his love? To Lady Catherine?

Rebecca forced the thought from her head. "You needn't lock the door. I won't disobey you, Robert." She felt a sudden wild yearning to win his approval, any way she could.

"Sorry. You might just think of some other little thing I forgot. You'll have to learn your lesson."

"But, Robert!" She paused as his brows came together in a fierce scowl. "Yes, Robert."

He lowered his eyes for a few moments, then raised them again. "How long?" she asked.

His face relaxed, but he didn't smile. "I'll decide later. When I think you've been punished sufficiently."

Her temper raged again. "I am not a child!"

"Then do not behave like one." His eyes mocked her, and finally she could bear their gaze no longer.

How arrogant he is, she thought angrily, but she kept silent.

"Drink up your broth." He chuckled suddenly. "Don't fuss yourself. Perhaps I can think of something to do that will keep you busy and under my eyes until we go to London."

"We go to London?" Her heart rose up in her throat at the thought.

"Yes. I see plainly that you can't be left here. You'd be in the briars before I was well on my way."

"B-but London!"

"There's nothing wrong with your understanding, Rebecca. You can hold your own with any of the ladies there."

"Y—you said I should stay here."

He scowled, "Yes, I did, but that's plainly impossible now. With Lady Catherine whispering her suspicions around town no one would believe it a love

match if I left you to rusticate here in the country. And as I said, you've too much affinity for trouble. So you're going along—when the time comes."

"Yes, Robert."

Rebecca, conscious of the thudding of her heart, tried to keep her joy from showing on her face. She should be terrified of London and its angry mamas—and she was. But she was overjoyed at the knowledge that she would be with Burlingame. With her newfound love for him hidden in her heart, the prospect of being near him outweighed everything else.

"You are still feverish," Burlingame said. "Time to settle in for the night. I think perhaps the experience really unnerved you. I do believe I'll get some rest too."

As he took the empty cup from her hand she slid down among the pillows. She was aware, through the intensity of the relief that washed over her, that she had feared he would again seek out Lady Catherine.

But he was not going out. Tonight he would be right there, in the next room. She closed her eyes contentedly. "Goodnight, Robert."

"Goodnight, Rebecca. Sleep well."

For a moment she thought she felt the touch of a hand in her curls, but when she opened her eyes his back was toward her and he was moving to the connecting door.

It was much later that the sound of pounding gradually permeated her consciousness. The ghost stallion—it was the pounding hoofs of the ghost stallion. But as she opened her eyes Rebecca gradually realized that no stallion was making those sounds.

She raised herself on one elbow to listen. Yes, there it was again. She climbed out of the huge bed and crept on bare feet to the connecting door. She pressed her ear against it, but still the sounds were not distinguishable. What could he be doing?

Her heart fluttered in her throat as she stood there, uncertain what to do. There was the sound of breaking glass. Stifling a scream, she turned and whirled for the outer door. Something was very wrong in Robert's room, and she must get help.

But the heavy carved door into the hall would not open under her hands, and she realized with dismay that it was locked. There was another resounding crash, then silence. Without further thought she sped across the room. The key was still in the lock of the connecting door. Quickly she turned it and tugged the door open.

"Robert!" she cried out unawares. He was standing in a blue silk dressing gown, his back to her, his hands gripping the stone mantelpiece. Shattered glass lay in the fireplace and by one of the large casement windows.

"Robert! Are you ill? Have you hurt yourself?" Unheeding of the broken glass, she ran to his side.

Only when he raised his head heavily and surveyed her with glazed eyes was she aware that she wore only a thin nightdress.

For long seconds his eyes held hers. "Even in my cups," he said slowly. "Even in my cups you plague me."

She stared at him, unable to move. He'd been drinking, drinking heavily, she saw with dismay.

His eyes moved slowly down her thinly clad form, and he smiled cynically. "Come to tempt me with your charms. Well, my girl. This is the outside of enough."

"Robert, no!" The look in his eyes drove terror into her heart.

She turned to evade him but his hand closed around her waist in an iron grip.

"Robert, please, Robert. Let me go!"

She beat against him with her free hand, but to no avail. His eyes devoured her, then he crushed her against his chest. She was vaguely aware of the silk of his dressing gown, the heavy fumes of brandy, the wisps of curling hair that escaped his gown. She tried to hide her face, but his other hand found her chin and forced it inexorably upward.

And then his mouth claimed hers. His lips bruised hers, savage and demanding. He tore her very soul from her body and left her limp in his arms.

"Lightskirts," he muttered against her throat. "All the same."

Suddenly the joy that had come singing into her blood with his kiss vanished. She was only a lightskirt to him. He needed a woman. That was obvious, even to her. And any woman would do.

She wrenched herself free of his hold and raced across the room. His outstretched hand entangled the nightdress, and with a sickening sound of rip ping cloth she left part of it in his grasp.

Then she was through the connecting door and pushing it shut behind her. Her heart pounded in her throat as she twisted the key in the lock.

For long, long minutes she stood there, pressed against the door, her breath coming in great gasps. But nothing happened; there was only silence from the next room.

Finally, her pounding heart calmed down, she crept softly back into the big bed and curled up under the covers. She was shivering with more than the cold. She thought with terror of Robert—Robert looking at her so strangely, Robert ripping her nightdress.

What was it, Rebecca wondered, that had driven him to the brandy? It must be something important, for Robert was not a man to succumb to his liquor.

For many long hours Rebecca lay shivering in the huge bed, her heart with the man in the next room. Once the thought struck her that it might be because of Lady Catherine that he drank. But she managed to defeat that specter. Lady Catherine would not refuse him—no more than Rebecca herself, were she given that golden opportunity.

No, it couldn't be Lady Catherine. Rebecca remembered his words about lightskirts. Perhaps one of them had refused him. Or perhaps he was thinking of the woman he had planned to marry, the one who had betrayed him—and hurt him so.

All through the long night she was tormented by the memory of savage lips claiming hers, of strong arms holding her close. She sighed. If he hadn't been so savage, if he hadn't murmured those awful words about lightskirts, she might not have fled. He might have gone beyond those burning kisses, beyond them—and made her his wife, really his wife.

Rebecca's eyes brimmed at thoughts of what might have been. But she consoled herself with the knowledge that he had been far gone in his cups. And if he had taken her then—when he was foxed—she would never know if he meant what he had done. Indeed, she had heard of men who had no memory next morning of what they had done the night before.

She did not want it to be like that. She would just be patient and wait. Something had to happen, it just had to, to make Robert see her as the woman she was. Holding to that thought, she finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 6

When Rebecca awoke the next morning, it was with a curious feeling of misery. For a moment she could not remember why, then the realization hit her.

Last night Burlingame had been in his cups, and he had taken her again into his arms. She shivered, wondering what would have happened if his outstretched hand had grasped some part of her other than her nightdress. Would he have—?

Rebecca wrenched her mind from that kind of thinking and sat up in the huge bed. The early morning sun was bright, and the polished old bedstead gleamed. She glanced around the room with a little smile. Already it felt like home to her.

She had removed the ripped gown and was struggling into her chemise when a brisk knock sounded on the connecting door. Hurriedly she grabbed up her gown and held it in front of her. "Y-yes."

"If you want to ride with me this morning, put on your new habit. We leave right after breakfast."

"Yes, Robert." Her fingers trembled as she slipped into her green-velvet habit and pulled on her riding boots. Did he remember what had happened the night before? Did he recall how brutally he had claimed her lips, how defenseless she had been in his arms?

There was no way to tell from his voice. It had sounded just as usual, no hint of anything in it. Could it be possible that he did not remember?

Rebecca swallowed over a sudden lump in her throat. That was probably the case. She brushed feverishly at her tousled hair. He hadn't said how long he would wait for her. If he left without her, it would be terrible, she told herself.

Hastily dropping the brush on the table, she smoothed her skirt, picked up the perky little black hat and her gloves, and turned toward the door.

As she reached for the knob she wondered if the door was still locked, but it opened easily in her hand. He is a strange man, she thought as she hurried down the staircase, a man of many moods. He could be so devastatingly charming. It must be that side of him that the ladies of London—and the lightskirts—saw, the Robert who had played the loving husband.

But there were also other sides, the demanding, the arrogant—a tyrant, she told herself with a grim smile. The man who was an English lord and knew it. With dismay she remembered that poor wretch on his knees in the great hall while Robert exchanged fateful glances with the gamekeeper.

As she hastened into the dining room Robert looked up from his plate. "I see you're not one to keep a man waiting. Eat hearty. We'll be riding long."

"Yes, Robert." Rebecca knew that her bottom lip was trembling as she scrutinized his face. Did he remember? She simply couldn't tell.

She forced herself to pick up the fork. Ham, eggs, roast beef, muffins. Mindful of Burlingame's eyes upon her, she forced down the food. Finally the plate was empty. "I've finished," she said in a small voice.

"Good. Then there'll be no moaning and puling about an empty stomach or an attack of the vapors while we're riding."

Anger made her momentarily forget her dread of him. "I've never moaned or puled about being hungry," she protested stoutly. "And the vapors are for—for old ladies!"

There was no laughter in his eyes or voice as he replied. "That's fine. I'm glad to see that you are not a fashionable young lady with fine sensibilities. Let's go."

As usual Burlingame did nothing to match his stride to hers, so that by the time they reached the stables she was sadly out of breath. As Jed led Starfire out he cast a quick look at her habit and gave her a little smile.

Rebecca could not forbear grinning at him in return, even though she was well aware that a marchioness did not grin at stableboys. Fortunately, Burlingame was occupied by Midnight. The great black beast stood chomping at the bit, lifting his heels nervously.

Rebecca admired how Burlingame soothed him with murmured words and a hand on his great muscled neck. Starfire poked her soft muzzle into Rebecca's hand, and she chuckled softly as she stroked it. "You mustn't be jealous, my girl," she whispered for Starfire's ears alone. "You get more attention from him than I do."

Then Burlingame turned and extended his hands to help her into the saddle. As she put her booted foot into his clasped palms, she smiled demurely. "Thank you, Robert."

There was no answering smile as he replied, "You're welcome."

She might as well have remained locked in her room, Rebecca thought bitterly, if he was going to be so gloomy.

But that morning the hedgerows were all abloom with tiny white flowers, and the meadows were golden with buttercups. Rebecca lifted her face to the sun. "What a beautiful day!" she exclaimed, momentarily forgetting the grave man beside her.

"I want you to stay close. No crazy gallops. Understand?"

Rebecca was stung by his words. "You needn't be such a spoil sport," she said, her chin jutting out stubbornly. "I dare say I can ride as well as you."

He seemed about to smile at this childish boasting, but then his brows met in the fierce, dark line that foreboded his anger. "Perhaps you can. Nevertheless, you will stay close to me today. Do you understand?"

"I understand." She couldn't quite keep the defiance out of her voice, but fortunately he didn't seem to notice it.

"Good. Now, this stallion is dying for a good gallop. Keep behind me and pull up when I do. And for heaven's sake, don't take a tumble."

"I never—"

He clapped heels to the horse and took off before she could finish. Pausing only to jam the perky little hat tighter on her curls, Rebecca set out after him.

The wind from the sea brought color to her cheeks and tousled her hair. She loved the gallop, the speed of it, and the rhythm of the horse under her. And the sense of danger made her blood tingle and her heart sing.

She gave Starfire her head, but the brave little mare couldn't match Midnight. So Rebecca had the opportunity to watch Burlingame as his long, lean body moved easily, almost a part of the animal beneath him.

How well he sits the saddle, she thought. Her father would have approved of that. And how easily he controlled the mettlesome stallion.

Then he pulled Midnight up, and obediently she slowed Starfire into a walk beside him. The severity of his expression seemed to have lightened, and he looked younger and more relaxed. Perhaps it was this that emboldened her. "Take a tumble!" she said scornfully. "Not me. Why, I've been riding since before I could walk."

"And astride, I suppose," he observed dryly.

Rebecca flushed. "You can hardly expect a baby to manage a sidesaddle."

"I fancy you rode astride up until the time of your father's—until we married."

"Yes, I did. And you needn't take such a care about me. I know my Papa's dead."

His eyes surveyed her critically, and except for the tremble of her lower lip she managed to keep the sadness that was sweeping over her from appearing on her face.

"Your father, so you gave me to understand, rather neglected your maidenly instruction. What *did* he teach you to do?"

"To ride, to hunt, to shoot, to care for the horses."

"Don't tell me I've married a stableboy! Fine choice for a marchioness."

"Burlingame." Rebecca's voice was stiff with anger. "I wish you will remember that the choice was *yours*, not mine."

"I will also remember that you gave your consent. Tell me, did the old man teach you to read and write? Or is my marchioness illiterate?"

Riding beside him, she failed to notice the glint of merriment in his eye. "Of course he taught me to read and write. Papa had a large library. I read there."

"But, I believe you told me, no needlework."

Rebecca flushed. "I hate needlework. I tried to learn it."

"And the results?"

"I kept pricking my finger."

The muscle twitched at the corner of his mouth, but he didn't laugh. "And watercolors and the pianoforte?"

She shook her head. "Papa thought those were silly. So did I." She saw the telltale twitching again. *He must not laugh at me*, she thought angrily, *he simply must not*.

"Where are we going this morning?" As she hoped, the simple question served to distract him.

"To the village. I want to see how several families are faring. And we should engage a maid for you."

"I don't need—"

"You might begin to pay some consideration to your station in life," he said crisply. "It's not a question of what you need. There are any number of girls in the village who would love to live at Roedown House or have the chance to go to London. You have responsibilities as well as advantages," he said, as though any fool would know as much. "It will be a great help to the girl's family to have one less mouth to feed, and so will the additional income."

He was right, of course, Rebecca could see immediately. Still, how arrogant and overbearing he was, this man who was her husband. And how her heart fluttered when her eyes met his.

They rode in silence for some distance, finally coming out of a large stand of trees and into the village. Rebecca looked around her with some trepidation. What would these people think of her, knowing that she had aligned herself with Burlingame, their lord?

She tried to recall exactly what had been whispered about him in those innocent days when she had come to the village. But the lord of Roedown had been of little concern to her then. Indeed, the only reason she had remembered the furtive words about London rakes was because of the round-eyed, excited faces of the girls telling the tales.

The village looked neat and orderly, the cottages snug and newly thatched. Burlingame's people lived well, Rebecca told herself. Only those who defied him suffered. She frowned, remembering again the poor wretch who had been caught poaching. How harsh and severe Burlingame had been that day. She suppressed a sigh. What had happened to the sick wife and little ones for whom that man had broken the harsh laws against poaching? Without their man how could they survive?

She should hate the arrogant lord beside her who used his power so cruelly, Rebecca thought with a pang. But somehow she could not. Casting a look at him from under lowered lashes, she trembled. He was so strong, so hard and lean. If only once again she could lay her cheek against the dark hair that curled on his chest, feel those strong arms binding her close to him.

They approached the outskirts of the village, where an old cottage was being rethatched. Burlingame pulled up the stallion and watched the proceedings with careful interest, the men on the roof still unaware of his presence.

Rebecca turned her attention to a couple of children, hardly more than toddlers, tumbling together in the little patch of green by the cottage door. Their clothes were worn and mended, but their faces were scrubbed clean. A bright-eyed bit of a girl popped out of the half-open door and stopped suddenly in surprise. Then her hands flew to her cheeks. "Oh, my goodness! If it ain't his lordship, hisself," she murmured before she scurried back inside.

There was a commotion within the cottage, than a frail, thin woman, supported by the girl, appeared in the doorway. Rebecca watched as the woman gazed reverently on Burlingame. "'Tis him as saved our very lives. Where's your Pa? Call him quick."

The girl turned and raised her voice. "Pa, his lordship's here!"

There was a sudden quiet, then the sound of rustling straw as a man slid down to the edge of the roof and dropped lightly to the ground to stand smiling before Burlingame.

"'Tis a good cottage, your lordship. Not like that ruin that young Stapleton was for driving us from. Just a bit of fixing to the roof and 'tis snug and warm we'll be. The wife's better now, too." His arm stole around the woman's waist.

Rebecca stared. Stapleton! He was the brother of Jamie's Amelia! His lands were at the opposite end of Burlingame's estate from where her father's had been, down beyond the stretch of beach that she was now forbidden. The old Lord Stapleton had not been a bad lord, but evidently his son was a moneygrabber, pushing his tenants to the brink of starvation.

Rebecca sighed. There was something familiar about this villager standing straight and proud, his woman leaning against him. "There's m'girl. And the wee ones. They're no hungry anymore."

Suddenly Rebecca gasped. This man couldn't be the humble wretch who had knelt so abjectly at Burlingame's feet because of one poached rabbit. But he was!

"You've had no trouble with Stapleton, have you, Bevans?"

The man shook his head. "No, m'lord. But I believes it's because yer man settled my debt with him. I thanks ye, m'lord."

Burlingame did not smile. "It's not thanks I'm after but a good worker. And it's plain to me that you *are* a good worker. A man's a fool who doesn't care for his people." The last was said absently, as though to himself.

"Still, yer a good man, m'lord," Bevans said beaming. "Surely God will bless ye!"

"He has already," said the bit of a girl, looking boldly up at Rebecca. "Just be looking at her ladyship."

Rebecca's heart jumped strangely. If only Burlingame would regard her as a blessing instead of a bother. How happy that would make her. She cast a quick glance at him and found him eyeing her strangely. She flushed.

"Ain't she beautiful, Ma?" the girl said, and Rebecca felt her cheeks grow even more scarlet. "His lordship's sure a lucky man."

Covered with confusion, Rebecca dropped her eyes and wished for a hole in which to hide. And then to her amazement Burlingame spoke. "Yes," he said, his voice deep and sober. "He is a very lucky man."

Rebecca raised her eyes quickly, expecting to see the light of sarcasm in his, but there was no mockery on his features, and his eyes, though they gleamed darkly at her, revealed no feelings, no emotions.

"We've come," Burlingame said, "to see how you're faring."

"Fine, m'lord, just fine," Bevans replied and the woman nodded in agreement.

Rebecca, stealing a look at Burlingame's face, saw it soften as the two little ones by the door stopped their tussling and came scampering over to peep at him from behind their mother's skirts.

"Your children are no longer hungry?"

"No, m'lord. Thanks to you their bellies are full."

"Good."

Rebecca could not help staring. This was a Burlingame she had never seen. And she had thought him a brute!

"We've also come to see if you can spare your girl. Meg, I believe you call her."

The woman nodded.

Burlingame's eyes rested momentarily on Rebecca's face. "Her ladyship is in need of a maid, and I thought perhaps if you could spare Meg—"

Rebecca watched as the girl clapped her hands in joy. "Me? Oh, Ma, me! A lady's maid."

Mrs. Bevans smiled. "Sure, m'lord. We'd be pleased to have her serve your ladyship."

"Good."

Rebecca did not see the amount of money that Burlingame pressed into the man's hand, but she heard his gasp of surprise. "'Tis too much, m'lord. She's only a child."

"I fancy her ladyship favors the girl."

Burlingame's eyes met hers, and Rebecca hastened to stammer her agreement "Oh yes, she's perfect."

"I expect you'll want to help your mother finish settling in," Burlingame continued. "Come up to Roedown House tomorrow afternoon. And there's no need to bring clothes. Those will be furnished."

With studied ease Burlingame swung back up onto the stallion. "I'm well pleased with the work you've done," he said to the grateful family. "You'll be an asset to the village."

As he swung the horse away and Rebecca turned to follow him, she saw Meg grab up the smallest toddler and dance around her parents with glee. Rebecca's eyes stung with unshed tears, but they were tears of joy. Burlingame, her Burlingame, was not the hard, unyielding man she had thought him. He had a heart, and her own sang at the thought.

Chapter 7

The next few days were busy ones for Rebecca. Meg arrived, her bright eyes gleaming, and was provided with some new dresses that made her smile from ear to ear. Then there was the packing to do. All Rebecca's new finery and Meg's dresses, too, must be packed for the trip to London.

The days were so busy that Rebecca only saw Burlingame at meals. But through the days Meg's bright presence kept her spirits up. It was the nights, the long, lonely nights, that dragged. When Meg had finished making her mistress beautiful for a husband who did not want her, and had retired to her own little room upstairs, Rebecca, full of vague yearnings for Burlingame's smile and haunting memories of those brief moments in his arms, was left to toss and turn through an endless night.

And then the special morning arrived. She and Meg, both as excited as little children, were dressed early, their trunks and boxes ready for Peters and Evans to carry to the carriage. This was the day, the day they would go to London.

Rebecca felt a little strange, but driven by thoughts of her position as marchioness, she strove hard to be dignified and to act as though a trip to London was an everyday occurrence.

Meg, unhampered by such thoughts of dignity, gave free rein to her delight—and her terror. "Oh, m'lady, 'tis a fearful big place, London, so they say." Meg's bright eyes grew round with excitement. "Shan't we get lost there?"

"Nonsense, Meg, don't be a cabbage-head." Rebecca forced her tones into ladylike calmness. "His lordship will take care of us."

This seemed to have some effect on Meg, whose face plainly revealed her adoration of his lordship, but it did little to help Rebecca herself. She did not fear getting lost, not at all. It was meeting all those mamas that Robert had spoken of, and their noses-in-the-air daughters, that she feared. And even more, she admitted to herself, she feared having Burlingame in London. Back in his "old haunts," would he not return to whatever lightskirt had been his current fancy when he left? Or perhaps he would seek out a new one. And, of course, Lady Catherine would be there.

How could she expect anything else, Rebecca told herself as she drew her shawl about her shoulders and settled her bonnet on her curls? Robert was a man, with a man's needs. He had made it clear that he would not satisfy those needs with her, his wife in name only, that she was only a child in his eyes. And so naturally he would find what he needed in the arms of some other woman. If only the thought didn't hurt her so!

"Well, all ready?"

With a start Rebecca looked up to find his dark eyes on her. "Yes, m'lord." She met them only briefly, then lowered her own. Why did his eyes seem to mock her? He never had a smile for her anymore—nothing but a brief nod when they passed each other somewhere in the big house.

Then Peters announced, "Everything's loaded, m'lord."

"Good." He turned to Rebecca. "Shall we go?"

Moments later Rebecca found herself seated in the carriage, an excited Meg bouncing on the squabs across from her, and Burlingame mounting Midnight.

Rebecca fought to hold back the tears. Not until that moment had she realized how much she had been looking forward to having him in the carriage with her. And now she was not even to have that. No, he hated her so much he couldn't even bear to share her carriage!

In spite of her efforts a tear spilled over and slid down her cheek. The quick-eyed Meg noticed it at once. "M'lady? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing, Meg. I believe I've got something in my eye." She dabbed at it with her handkerchief. "There, whatever it was, it's gone."

In London, Rebecca told herself firmly, in her new home, Jamie would be there. Perhaps Robert would pay her more attention then. She hugged the thought to her, taking from it what comfort she could.

Some hours later when they entered London, Rebecca was forced to come out of her reverie and participate to some degree in Meg's round-eyed wonder. And it was true. London was an immense city, one in which a country miss—Rebecca flushed as she recognized the truth of the phrase as it applied to her—could easily get lost.

After a long drive through narrow, winding streets, they arrived at a broad thoroughfare and pulled up in front of a mansion of mellowed red brick.

"Oh, oh, look, m'lady, look."

Rebecca could not help but smile at Meg's state of excitement. And the house was awe-inspiring. It seemed nearly as large as Roedown. The front door opened, and a little old woman, her wrinkled face beaming beneath her white cap, scurried out to stand on the step. Behind her Rebecca saw the butler, who in spite of his dignified bearing seemed very pleased to see Burlingame.

"Master Robert," the old woman squealed. "'Tis good to have you home."

Burlingame swung down from Midnight. "It's good to be home, Spence. Fairley." His nod included the butler. "Have you the rooms ready as I ordered?"

"Of course, m'lord. Of course." The little old woman fairly bounced with excitement. "But where is she? Don't be teasing me now. Where's the new Lady Burlingame? 'Tis dying to see her I've been."

A brief smile forced its way to Burlingame's lips. "Why, she's in the carriage, of course. I'll just help her out."

The carriage door opened, and Robert extended his hand to her. Rebecca did not dare to meet his eyes. *How he must hate this terrible charade*, she thought as she climbed out of the carriage.

Her feet touched the cobblestones, and she found herself being led up the walk to the steps. The little old woman that Burlingame had addressed as Spence stood shifting from one foot to the other as her bright eyes took in every detail of Rebecca's face and form. Rebecca felt herself redden under those sharp eyes, and a disturbing thought crossed her mind. How would they keep up the charade under the eyes of this one?

Suddenly Spence clapped her wrinkled hands together in childish glee. "You've done it, Master Robert," she said, beaming. "You've really brought home a Lady Burlingame. At long last!"

An amused smile lit Burlingame's laconic features. "Yes, Spence. I've done it. At last you've got your wish. Well, does she pass muster?"

The words were casually, jokingly spoken, yet Rebecca felt her heart contract *If only Robert really cared about me*, she thought *If only I could let my love for him show*

"Oh, Master Robert," Spence replied. "She's worth waiting for, she is." The bright eyes sparkled. "Needs a little flesh on her bones, mayhap. But we'll feed her up. She'll give you a fine brood of young ones."

Rebecca bit her lip as Burlingame's eyebrows drew together fiercely. "She's too young to be talking of broods," he said sourly. "Now, Spence, are we to stand around out here all day, or may we proceed to our rooms?"

"Of course, of course. Master Robert. Everything's ready. Just as you ordered it." Spence waved one fluttering hand toward the house. The other reached out to squeeze Rebecca's arm, and Rebecca knew instinctively she had gained another friend.

The next hours passed in the hustle and scurry of carrying boxes and trunks and getting everything unpacked and put in its proper place. Meg, of course, did most of the work, but all her exclamations of pleasure and wonder must be attended to, and she must be given some kind of direction, so Rebecca had little time to think about Burlingame's scowl. Even so, the reason for it seemed obvious to her.

Robert was sorry, very sorry, that he had married her, a girl he disliked so much that he could not bear to treat her as a wife. But—the thought would persist, though the hope it gave was so scant as to be more like torment—he *had* said, "She's too young." Might there come a wonderful day when she would no longer be too young, when Robert would take her in his arms and make her truly his wife?

The putting away had been finished, and Rebecca had bathed and changed into a new green gown, its bodice decorated with pale yellow buttercups, when a round little maid appeared in the doorway, her eyes wide with curiosity. "There'll be dinner in a quarter-hour, your ladyship," she said.

"Please tell his lordship I'll be down directly," Rebecca replied, hoping that the painful thudding of her heart wasn't audible across the room. She knew that Burlingame expected his marchioness to behave properly, especially in front of the servants.

Meg finished fastening a matching green ribbon in the curls she had drawn into a pile on top of Rebecca's head. She stood back to survey her handiwork and nodded. "Ah yes. 'Tis a beauty you are."

Rebecca flushed, "Hush, Meg."

Meg turned surprised eyes on her mistress. "'Tis God's truth, m'lady. Now why shouldn't I be saying it? Me mother always says the truth is best."

Meg took a turn around the room, considering her own gown. "Sure an' I'm not such a bad looker meself!"

Rebecca burst into laughter and clasped Meg to her in a girlish hug. "Meg, Meg." Then, gathering up her shawl, she moved quickly down the broad staircase toward the front hall. For just a moment panic assailed her. This place was so grand, even grander than Roedown, it seemed.

As she reached the front hall the butler, Fairley, came through another doorway. "The master will see you in the library. This way, your ladyship."

As she followed Fairley down a richly decorated hallway to the heavy oaken door of the library, Rebecca found herself wishing fervently that she knew what she had done to make Burlingame so angry with her, so cold and distant. Surely he was not still upset about her riding on the beach?

Then Fairley swung open the library door, and all thoughts left her. The room was large and richly paneled in dark oak. Every wall was covered with shelves of books, books that had been used and cherished, Rebecca saw, though she could not quite imagine the active Burlingame spending long hours here.

Across the room Burlingame stood before the fireplace fender, his back to them, the coat stretched taut across his broad shoulders. He seemed intent on the flames.

"Her ladyship," Peters said. As Burlingame turned, Rebecca's glance went first to his eyebrows. Their drawing together always foretold a coming storm. But for the moment, at least, they were even.

"Come in, Rebecca."

Gathering the shawl around her as though it might give her protection, Rebecca moved across the room to take the chair his brown hand indicated, a chair near the little fire.

"I trust that your room is acceptable."

"Yes, m'lord, it's a lovely room." A little rich for her own tastes, Rebecca thought, all done in red and gold as it was, a room more fitting for a dark-eyed, dark-haired temptress, but she would not tell *him* so.

"Since we are man and wife," his drawling voice interrupted her thoughts, "perhaps you should become accustomed to calling me Robert."

His dark eyes probed hers, as though looking for some secret knowledge.

Rebecca felt her blood rising. She hated this supercilious way of his, his treating her like she was an infant without sufficient sense. And didn't he realize that she *did* call him Robert when he wasn't all upset about something? "Yes—Robert Though you must admit that under the circumstances it's rather difficult for me."

Burlingame did not smile. In fact, he raised an eyebrow. "You will soon learn that I need not *admit* to anything," he said dryly. "Besides, I don't see such difficulty in the matter. I could well be your brother. Think of me in that regard."

If he noticed the way she flinched at those last words, he made no comment on it. "Now," he continued, settling himself in a chair across from hers and parallel to the fire, "We shall have dinner and then we shall meet an old friend of my mother's, Lady Melbourne. She will tell you what you need to know and how to behave so that you commit no social *faux pas* to bring scandal on our name."

Rebecca felt herself begin to bristle. "I am not a complete idiot, m'lord," she said sharply.

Burlingame glanced at her in some surprise. "Surely that is not what I said. You yourself have admitted to little such knowledge. These arrangements are for your benefit. Society can be quite cruel."

"Yes, Robert, I see. And, of course, it would not do for you to have an ignorant wife." Rebecca was not above injecting a little dryness into her own tone.

Burlingame chuckled. One eyebrow shooting up. "Touchy, little one. You see the case quite clearly, as I should have known you would. The Burlingame name belongs to both of us now." His eyes held hers intently. "And so we both have a stake in its reputation. You do see that, don't you?"

"Yes, Robert." Oh God, she thought, what if he could read in the depths of her eyes her terrible desire to throw herself into his arms? She took a deep breath and pushed the thought away. "What shall I wear for this visit?"

"Your riding habit. We'll meet Lady Melbourne in Hyde Park on horseback."

Rebecca's bewilderment was reflected on her face.

"Everyone rides in Hyde Park at five," he said gently. "That's the fashion."

Rebecca nodded. For the hundredth time since her wedding she wished she did not feel quite so small and ignorant.

They moved toward the dining room, Burlingame's hand on her elbow sending strange feelings through her. "Eat well," he said. "We'll have tea after we return, but we won't supper till late."

"Yes, Robert," Rebecca was saying dutifully, when she was interrupted by the sound of hurrying footsteps.

"Rob! Rebecca! I say, how glad I am you came."

Rebecca felt herself enclosed and lifted in a big bear hug, and she returned it happily. Life would be easier with Jamie in the house, she could be sure of that.

She smiled as he set her once more on her feet and eyed her critically. "She looks a little peaked, Rob. You ought to feed her up."

Rebecca began to laugh. "Goodness, Jamie," she said, "if I eat as much as everyone wants me to I shall soon be big as a cow."

Jamie's eyes slid over her appreciatively. "Not much chance of that I should say."

Then, chatting happily, the three of them made their way to the dining room, where they found a dinner that made Rebecca wonder momentarily if a dozen more people had been invited.

The meal passed pleasantly and quickly. Jamie's presence seemed to make even his somber brother cheerful and happy. Rebecca's only problem was to keep from looking too much at Burlingame. Inevitably her eyes seemed drawn to his stern features, softened now by his love for Jamie. Her whole spirit warmed to Burlingame's smile. She felt wonderful and miserable at the same time. It was agony being with him, loving him as she did and not having that love returned. But it was sweet agony. Such sweet agony. And she would not have willingly lost a moment of it.

When the roast duck and all the other dishes had been removed, and she felt as though she would never again want to think of food, Burlingame turned to her with a smile. It was not the same warm smile that he bestowed on Jamie, but it was a smile, and she basked in it.

"Best get yourself upstairs and have Meg change you into your habit. The horses will be around soon."

"Yes, Robert." Rebecca turned her gaze on Jamie. "Will you be riding with us too?" she asked, knowing that if he did the ride would be more enjoyable.

Jamie shook his dark head. "Not today, Rebecca. I'm just back from a mill, and my bay's tired." He smiled wearily. "And so am I. And besides," a sad sort of smile curved his mouth briefly, "I've got a letter to write."

He must be going to write to his Amelia, Rebecca mused as she made her way thoughtfully up the broad, curved staircase. Something should be done to help Jamie win the girl he loved. She would have to give it some thought.

Chapter 8

Hyde Park seemed immense and overflowing with people as some time later Rebecca and Burlingame walked their horses through its greenness. Both the horses were feeling their mettle, the slow passage of the carriage into London having done nothing to alleviate their desire to run. For the hundredth time Rebecca admired the way Burlingame sat the great black stallion, the calm, nonchalant way he controlled the beast.

Beside her, Burlingame said softly, "We're going to be seeing a lot of society, the *haut ton*. And they will be seeing us. Remember, this is a love match."

Rebecca turned sparkling green eyes on him, eyes that held a hint of mischief. "I shall remember, Robert, dear. But shall you?"

For one brief moment those dark eyes bored into hers. *Dear God*, Rebecca found herself praying, *please don't let him see. Don't let him see that I love him*.

Burlingame smiled in dry amusement. "You've quite a sense of humor, Rebecca," he said, one strong hand reaching out to enfold hers.

Without thinking she felt herself draw back. If he had touched her surely her eyes would give her away. But his hand had reached hers and held it fast, and he was whispering, "Smile, some of my friends are approaching." And the smile he gave her then was so dazzling that she felt drowned in it. *So that was it*, she thought dreamily, still basking in its warmth, that was how he charmed those lightskirts. With a smile that melted their bones.

And then his friends were at their side, and Robert, his hand still keeping hers captive, was introducing her to them. She smiled and nodded, knowing that none of the names would stick in her mind. The only thing registering there at the moment was the feel of his strong, warm hand on hers and the memory of his dazzling smile. No one in that crowd of admiring males would ever suspect that she did not belong heart and soul to the man on whom she looked with such adoring eyes. It was easy to convince them, Rebecca thought, with a tremor in her bottom lip. She had only to let her real feelings show.

And then his friends were gone, and women seemed to come from everywhere; elderly dowagers with plain daughters in tow, and younger prettier women in pairs, and women who must somewhere have husbands they would just as soon forget. Rebecca observed how all of them looked at Robert with yearning in their eyes, even the older ones. Of course, she told herself, she didn't need the approval of other women to show her what a fine husband she had. But still, she admitted with an inward giggle, it was gratifying.

But then she ceased to think of giggling. For the eyes of the women turned on her. And all of them, without exception, registered distaste. Some went further and showed anger, and some an almost violent hatred that made her want to shiver. She was glad then of Robert's hand holding hers tight, of the reassuring pressure of his fingers.

For his sake she smiled and chatted and looked for all the world like a woman without a single care, while inside she was trembling with fright at such a barrage of hateful feelings.

And then, riding across the park on a handsome gray, came a striking older woman, wearing a deep-red velvet habit that set off her dark beauty. Her sharp eyes held admiration, Rebecca saw as she drew nearer. Then a friendly voice was saying, "And so, Robert, you have finally succumbed. Leg shackled like any other man."

Beside her Burlingame laughed, a deep, warm sound that made her fingers tighten involuntarily around his. "Yes, Lady Melbourne. I have finally made that fatal trip to the altar. And this is my lady, Rebecca."

Rebecca reached out for the hand that was extended to her. "I'm very glad to meet you. Lady Melbourne," and she was not at all surprised to find very real feeling in her voice. If she were to take her place in a social world in which all the women disliked her, an ally like Lady Melbourne would be priceless.

Lady Melbourne's eyes held hers frankly. "Robert has not brought you into a very pleasant atmosphere, I'm afraid. No one thought he'd go off like that. Not after all these years of remaining unscathed. I'm afraid most of the misses you've seen this afternoon harbored the hope of being eventually in your shoes."

She laughed up into Burlingame's face, and Rebecca was aware that Lady Melbourne, though older, was still a very attractive woman—and knew it. "Robert, here, has been the catch of the town for many long Seasons. Every girl with any sense and most without have been dangling after him. They're not going to be too fond of the one who's finally trapped him."

"With you at her side," Robert said smoothly, "they'll eventually come round."

Lady Melbourne laughed. "He always did have a way with the ladies, this one," she commented gaily, putting a gloved hand on Burlingame's arm. "Don't worry, Robert. I'll take Rebecca under my wing, such as it is."

"It seems a very good wing to me," Rebecca blurted out, thinking only of her gratitude that such a lady should bother to be her friend.

Lady Melbourne laughed again. "Thank you, my dear. I'll be around to see you soon. And I must say," she observed, giving Rebecca a swift smile, "that I thoroughly approve of your choice. Yes, indeed, Robert, she's just the thing for you."

With another smile Lady Melbourne was gone, and Rebecca was left with a foolish heart that wanted to sing. Perhaps if Burlingame valued Lady Melbourne's opinion, he would begin to think of his wife in another way. But her hopes

were dashed immediately when he turned to her and, in that cynical tone that she so disliked, drawled, "You should have been an actress, little one. Lady Melbourne has sharp eyes, and you convinced even her."

Rebecca bit back the words of truth that rose to her lips and managed a small, conspiratorial smile. If he didn't dislike her so much, probably even Robert himself could tell that her feelings were real. But, she reassured herself, there was little danger of that. His dislike of her was so great that the thought probably never entered his mind.

As they continued to ride through the park Rebecca noticed the glances of other young ladies, ladies who never approached them for an introduction but who eyed Robert with covert gaze. They were well dressed and beautiful, Rebecca saw, their light dresses clinging to shapely figures as they drove in their little carriages two by two, or sauntered along chatting together.

Among them was one particularly vivacious woman. Bright auburn curls cascaded from under her fashionable bonnet, and her tiny waist and hands made her seem very fragile. But her laughing, mischievous eyes and the crowd of horsemen beside her carriage—a carriage lined in blue satin, Rebecca saw—obviously marked her as someone important.

"Robert," Rebecca asked, "who are those ladies? Especially that one? Why don't they come to be introduced to me?"

Burlingame turned toward her, scowling. "We have passed no *ladies*," he said angrily. "And if I so much as catch you speaking to one of those, especially Harriette Wilson, I'll have you locked in your room again. Understand?"

Rebecca did not understand at all. But she forced herself to nod and to swallow over the lump in her throat. And then to her horror, she heard herself saying abjectly, "I'm sorry, Robert." And she was immediately angry with herself. How could she be sorry when she didn't even know what she'd done?

Surely those lovely ladies, like flocks of beautiful birds against the green of the grass, would not hurt her. But wait . . . her mind replayed his words. "We have passed no *ladies*," Burlingame had said, with that strange emphasis on the word *ladies*. Suddenly Rebecca stifled a gasp. They were not ladies, those beautiful creatures, they were—lightskirts. Fashionable Impures, Meg had told her such women were called.

Her face wrinkled in a frown. Somehow she had imagined that lightskirts stayed off somewhere by themselves—out of sight. But evidently that wasn't so. Here they were, walking and driving quite happily in Hyde Park. Somehow, too, she had imagined that their calling left some tangible mark on them, but these, except for their fine clothes, could have been carefree, happy country girls on holiday.

There were so many questions Rebecca longed to ask Burlingame, for the bright-eyed, beautiful girls had caught her fancy. If you knew their names, she thought, you might even see face to face the woman who was your husband's inamorata. The thought sent her spirits plummeting. How many of these girls had been with Robert? Which was his latest?

Rebecca was startled out of her reverie by a silvery peal of laughter. *Oh, no*, she thought, *it can't be*. But coming toward them across the grass, in a gown so thin that the setting sun behind her outlined the shape of her body, was Lady Catherine Carrington. The deep red hair cascaded from beneath an enormous dark green bonnet. Her dress was a vivid, intense green that managed somehow to make her hair even more brilliant.

"Robert, dear," Lady Catherine said, pausing in front of Midnight, a position, Rebecca was quick to note with annoyance, that gave Burlingame a very good view of her charms. "So you have come back to civilization. I'm so glad. The Season would hardly be the same without you."

Burlingame smiled urbanely. "I imagine that London could survive without my distinguished presence, for one Season at least," he drawled. "But of course, I wanted to introduce Rebecca to the *haut ton*."

Lady Catherine's eyes slid over Rebecca with obvious distaste. "Of course," she agreed. "I suppose a man must attend to the amenities. Still, whatever your reasons, I'm glad to see you back in town." The smile she flashed at Burlingame then was one of openly avowed intimacy.

Starfire began to fidget, and Rebecca found that her hands had tightened on the reins. She soothed the little mare, patting the satin neck.

"I hope to see you *soon*, Robert." Lady Catherine smiled and moved away, her cashmere shawl, Rebecca noticed, covering very little of what her low-cut gown left exposed.

Rebecca tried to remember what she had heard of Lady Catherine in the days when she had listened to the village girls gossip. She thought she remembered vague whisperings and sly remarks about the number of handsome young men who came so often to visit old Lord Carrington. And now his beautiful young wife had been left a rich young widow.

The woman is no better than a lightskirt, Rebecca thought angrily. Worse perhaps, since they at least did not pretend to be what they were not. And probably they had had to find some way to make a living. But Lady Catherine had plenty of money. She would steal another woman's husband just for the fun of it. It didn't take much to see that Lady Catherine was very taken with Burlingame—and would give him anything he wanted. In fact, she probably already had.

Rebecca jumped suddenly as Burlingame's hand closed over hers. "Whatever are you frowning so about?" he asked dryly. "Come, smile. Remember our agreement." He chuckled. "We don't want people to think that I beat my lovely young wife."

Rebecca flushed at the memory of that painful spanking on the beach, but then the rest of his sentence registered, and the blush of shame became one of joy. Lovely! He had said she was lovely.

"All right," she murmured, summoning a smile. Another thought occurred to Rebecca, her feelings being at the moment very much entangled in thoughts of love. "Robert, what chance has Jamie of winning his Amelia?"

Robert frowned. "Very little, I expect. Stapleton is adamant."

"It's so terribly unfair. You can see he really loves her."

"Love has little to do with most marriages. And rightly so. Love can be a very painful business, so I'm told."

Rebecca decided to ignore this. "Is there no way they can be together?" she asked.

"I suppose he could make off to Gretna Green with her," Burlingame said dryly.

"And then what would happen?"

"Stapleton would raise the hue and cry and Jamie would be in disfavor with the *ton*. He might even be called out by Stapleton. And of course, there would be the scandal."

"But if Stapleton didn't catch them?"

"Oh, the marriage would stand, I suppose. But they'd have to face the censure of the *ton*—and that's not easy, little one."

Rebecca, recalling the gimlet-eyed mamas and poker-faced daughters she had recently faced, was forced to agree. Still, she told herself defiantly, if she loved a man—as she loved Robert—she would do anything to be with him, including facing the wrath of a bunch of nasty women. Wisely, however, she chose to keep such rebellious thoughts to herself. She was well aware that Robert found the whole idea ridiculous—love was something to be snorted at in his dryly cynical way, something a gentleman would never stoop to.

"I believe well head back toward the house," he said. "We've served our purpose by meeting Lady Melbourne. And we've given the *haut ton* a chance to observe my new bride." His dark eyes moved swiftly over her, making her heart leap. "I must say that you've held up admirably under the

Strain."

"Thank you, Robert," she murmured, lowering her lashes demurely, as she had seen young ladies do in the park. But he did not seem to notice.

And then they were riding out of the park and back through the cobbled streets toward the redbrick mansion on Grosvenor Square, Rebecca kept turning her head to observe the fashionable shops and people they passed.

Suddenly she drew back on Starfire's reins. A small boy, so blackened by soot that the color of his hair was indistinguishable from that of his clothes, was being dragged along the street by a burly man. The child was trying unsuccessfully to hold back his tears, and the burly ruffian was cursing audibly and swatting the young offender with a switch.

"Oh, Robert, look! We must stop him!"

Before Burlingame could say anything she had guided Starfire through the crowd to where the boy was being hauled along. "Stop that this instant!" Rebecca's voice rang out imperiously.

The ruffian stopped in surprise and looked up, the hand holding the switch suspended in midair. The boy clumsily wiped at his eyes with grimy fists.

"Be you talking to me, ma'am?" the ruffian asked.

"Indeed I am. How dare you treat this child so?" Rebecca was conscious now that Burlingame had reached her side, and the thought gave her further confidence.

"Who? This 'un?" The man snorted. "Sure, I can beat him all I please, this rascal. Name of Clem, he is. Keeps running away. I'm his master, I am. Got the papers to prove it."

"Please, miss," the boy appealed to Rebecca, "it's the chimneys, miss. I'm getting too big for 'em. I gets stuck. Sometimes they lights—" A cuff from a big dirty fist sent the boy sprawling into the gutter.

"Robert! Do something. You must stop this man." Rebecca turned an anxious face to where Burlingame sat nonchalantly on the stallion. If this cruel treatment of the child bothered him, he gave no sign of it.

"You must forgive my wife, mister . . ." His tone was polite—and nothing more.

"Hawkins, it is, sir. Hawkins. Just an honest man doing me business. After all, I can't have me apprentices skipping out on me, now can I, sir? How would we get the chimneys clean, eh, sir?"

"Quite right, Mr. Hawkins," Burlingame replied urbanely.

Rebecca, only vaguely conscious of the appreciative crowd gathered around them, glared at her husband in surprise. Surely Robert would help this poor boy.

"Come, my dear. We are keeping Mr. Hawkins from his work. We're sorry to have bothered you. Good day."

"But Robert—"

"We are going home, Rebecca. Now!" The words were spoken softly but forcefully. And even had she found the courage to argue against his fierce scowl she could not have resisted the iron hand that clamped over hers and expertly guided both horses away through the crowd. Rebecca cast one despairing look backward at the urchin, who was once again firmly in the grasp of the burly Hawkins. Then she kept her eyes resolutely on Starfire's ears, blinking back the tears that ill-befitted a marchioness.

Once home at the house on Grosvenor Square, Burlingame released her wrist only long enough to help her dismount. Then he was guiding her past Fairley, whose eyes held sympathy but whose face remained impassive, into the privacy of the library.

As the door shut behind them, he swung Rebecca around to face him. But before he could speak, the anger that had been building in her boiled over. She wrenched her wrist free of his grasp and stood, a small figure with blazing green eyes. "Why?" she demanded angrily. "Why didn't you help him?" Without giving her husband time to answer, she glared at him, small fists clenched. "But no, you couldn't help him. The great Burlingame couldn't stoop to soil his hands with a dirty street urchin. After all, what difference does it make to a great lord if a little boy gets stuck in chimneys."

"Rebecca!" he roared, but still she stood, small body tautly erect, defiant even in the face of his overpowering anger. As she glared into the fiercely

scowling face, Rebecca wondered briefly at her own temerity.

"The Burlingames do not haggle on street corners with ruffians," Burlingame said icily.

Rebecca was not daunted. "You could have helped him, taken him away from that horrible brute."

"The man has his papers. The boy belongs to him legally." In spite of his scowl, his voice was calm and level.

Tears of hot fury rose to Rebecca's eyes, blinding her. How could he be so impossibly hard, so uncaring? Suddenly she had to lash out at him. The memory of the small boy's pleading face, her agonizing love for Burlingame, her rage at being unable to help, all combined to force her into a state bordering on hysteria.

"I hate you," she blurted, her fists rising to strike futilely at his waistcoated chest. "I hate you. You're cold, arrogant, unfeeling. Not *fit* to be a lord!"

Even half-blinded by tears she saw the pain that showed momentarily on his face, and she knew she had said the most damaging thing possible. She had assaulted his honor. Pain wrenched through her own heart; her anger suddenly vanished. She had hurt him—irremediably, she feared.

But before she could do or say anything else, Burlingame's hands were on her shoulders, shaking her. "You are hysterical," he said coldly. "Stop this immediately."

Her fury gone, Rebecca found herself trembling uncontrollably. She felt like a rag doll as he suddenly gathered her against his chest. "Come now, little one. It will be all right. If you had only waited for me to finish my explanation, all of this furor would have been unnecessary."

Against his waistcoat Rebecca listened with unbelieving ears. "I don't understand," she murmured through her tears. Even less did she understand why he should shake her so angrily and then comfort her.

"The child belongs legally to his master. Therefore the simple way to acquire him is to buy him."

"But you didn't!"

"If I had made Hawkins an offer then, he would have asked a great deal for the child. After all, he knew you wanted him." The pressure of his hand on her back forestalled her next words. "This way I'll send an intermediary. Clem's freedom will cost us a lot less. We will not be bothered with hordes of beggars wanting to sell us their hapless children."

Rebecca felt the warm blood rise to her cheeks. She had misjudged him again! She hid her face against his waistcoat. He seemed so different when he held her like this, so kind, not at all the Burlingame who could be so angry and withdrawn, so cold and cutting. "I—I'm sorry," she mumbled, wondering abjectly if she would spend the rest of her life apologizing to him.

The apology seemed to remind him that he was holding her in his arms. Abruptly he put her from him. From his pocket he took a clean white handkerchief and wiped gently at her tear-stained face. "Now," he said, "be a good child. Run to your room and clean up for tea. I will see what can be done to rescue your Clem."

"Yes, Robert." She managed the smallest of smiles.

At the huge oaken door she turned back to face him for a moment. "Robert?"

"Yes?"

For an instant she wondered about the meaning of the strange look that had been on his face when she turned, a look that had disappeared suddenly. Then she thought perhaps she had imagined it. For he was looking at her in his usual calm and dignified way. "Thank you," she murmured. "Thank you, Robert." Then she turned and fled up the broad staircase to the comparative comfort of her room and Meg's understanding and undemanding presence.

Chapter 9

By the next morning Rebecca felt somewhat better. True, she had burst into tears when finally she reached the sanctuary of her little sitting room. But then, conscious of her position as marchioness, she had splashed cold water on her face.

When Meg had arrived later to help her change her dress, she had been able to present a normal face to the world. She had managed to get through a tea made more bearable by Jamie's cheerful presence. And then she had pleaded the headache and lack of appetite and gone early to the big red-and-gold bed, where most thankfully she had slept.

Rebecca rubbed at her temple and stifled a sigh. She could face Burlingame now, she thought as she bent over the piece of hateful needlework she was striving to master. After all, anyone might have made such a mistake. Except, of course, she shouldn't have misjudged Robert in that terrible way. She knew what he had done for Meg and her family, and she might have known he would do something for that poor boy without her raging at him.

She felt a blush rising at the thought, and then to her dismay the needle found its way into her finger rather than into the fabric. She stifled an exclamation and sighed again. She loathed needlework. But still she wanted to be able to do it. She wanted to prove to Burlingame that in that area, at least, she was quite capable as a wife. Glancing ruefully at the specimen in her hand, she frowned. Even under Meg's excellent tutelage she had not made much progress.

Meg burst suddenly into the room like a beam of sunlight. "Oh, your ladyship, it's shopping we're going—to all the shops in Bond Street and Piccadilly. Oh, 'twill be splendid."

Rebecca put down the needlework. "Who says we're going shopping?" she asked, aware of an ache in her throat.

"Peters told me." Meg's eyes grew round. "He said his lordship expects to take us as soon as he returns from his business."

"His lordship is going with us?" The ache seemed to have suddenly been transformed into a bubble of joy.

"Oh, yes. In the afternoon no lady's safe without an escort. 'Tis only in the morning that ladies go out just with their maids."

Rebecca, whose heart had been thrown in joyful confusion by the prospect of an afternoon in Burlingame's company, strove to be calm. "You've certainly learned a lot about London already, Meg," she said. "Much more than I know."

"I've got me a friend among the maids—Amy, she's called." Meg's expression grew wistful. "And Peters, he tells me things. Did you know, melady, he fought with Nelson, he did, at Trafalgar in '05?"

"Peters did that?" Rebecca was suddenly seeing Burlingame's man in a new light.

"Aye. 'Twas just horrible, he says. And 'tis dead he'd be if it wasn't for his lordship."

"Robert—his lordship was there?" Rebecca found her heart pounding in terror at the thought of Burlingame in battle, amid flashing sabers and thundering pistols.

Meg nodded. "Just a young man he was. No more than one and twenty. Peters was wounded. And his lordship kept them awful Frenchies from killing him. He saw Nelson, Peters did. A great man, he was. And his lordship!" Meg's eyes were bright with adoration. "His lordship was a regular hero. And when he had to come back—to take care of his estate and all after the old lord died in '06, he brought Peters with him, cause Peters begged him he should."

"How soon are we to be ready?" Rebecca asked, trying to push the idea of battle from her mind.

"Soon, Peters says. Oh, what will your ladyship wear?"

Rebecca sighed. "You choose me something, Meg. I don't see why we need to go shopping. I've so much already."

Meg's gay laughter bubbled over. "Oh, but Amy says that great ladies have scores of dresses—and the lightskirts do, too. Why, she tells me they go often to the same dressmaker—a man's wife and his lightskirt." Meg frowned. "Sure, an' if I was a fine lady I'd not be letting my man have aught to do with suchlikes."

Rebecca, turning quickly to look out the window, hoped that her blush escaped Meg's notice. Meg was young and naive. She had no idea what little power a lady really had. At least, Rebecca amended silently, a lady like herself.

She stifled a sigh. There was little use in moaning and puling, even to herself. She was what she was—and surely Robert was good to her in his own overbearing fashion. And there was Jamie—and Meg and Spence—to make life in the huge house more bearable.

With a start Rebecca saw that Meg had finally chosen a dress of muslin flowered in yellow and, to go with it, a cashmere shawl and a large straw bonnet with a yellow scarf. "'Tis a real beauty, you are," Meg said with satisfaction as some moments later she surveyed her finished handiwork.

Rebecca was not at all sure of that. But she did look presentable, and there was an undeniable sparkle in her green eyes, she thought as she surveyed herself in the mirror. Swinging the straw bonnet from one hand, she moved again toward the window that looked out on the square.

For a moment her heart seemed to stand still. Burlingame was approaching, sitting Midnight's saddle as though it were a part of him. Rebecca squinted against the sun, trying to see his face and its expression. But the glare of the sun was too bright, and then he was so close that she was looking down on the top of his dark head.

"He's here, Meg. He's home." Rebecca was unaware of how much joy rang in her voice, but the little maidservant was not. Her quick eyes took in Rebecca's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Yes, it was plain to Meg that her ladyship was very much in love with her handsome husband.

A quick rap on the door sent Meg, scurrying to open it. The round-faced maid, Amy, stood there. "His lordship says he's ready for the shopping whenever you are."

"Tell his lordship we'll be right down." The maid bobbed a curtsy and left.

At the bottom of the large staircase Burlingame stood waiting. His well-tailored coat was stretched taut over his shoulders. His snowy cravat was impeccably tied in the Mathematical. His trousers fit a leg that no man's could surpass. In his hands he held his curly-brimmed beaver and his gloves. Rebecca's heart sang. This wonderful-looking man was her husband. And he had decided to take her shopping. He had chosen to spend the afternoon with her!

With his hand on her elbow Burlingame guided her outside to where the barouche stood. As Burlingame extended his hand to help her into it, her eyes met those of a young boy waiting nearby, and she stopped suddenly. She knew this lad.

Suddenly he broke into a grin. "It's no more chimneys fer me, thanks to yer kind heart. 'Tis an angel, y'are, yer ladyship. A real live angel." The boy's voice broke, and he wiped furtively at a tear. But then his smile returned. "Y'es'm. No more chimneys. It's horses fer me now. And I'm to learn the care of your own Starfire." The dark eyes in the pinched little face gleamed with gratitude. "She'll be having the best care in the world, she will. I'll see to that."

Rebecca found herself choked up, but with Burlingame's eyes on her she couldn't burst into tears. "I'm glad, Clem," she managed to get the words out, "I'm so very glad."

Then Burlingame was helping her into the barouche and settling beside her. With Meg happily ensconced across from them, they set off.

Rebecca fought with the lump in her throat Robert was so good to her. She managed to raise her eyes to his. "Thank you, Robert. Oh, thank you."

Burlingame smiled lazily. "He's only one small boy. And hell be useful in the stables. He needs to be fed up a little, though. He's almost as peaked as you were when you came to me."

Something inside Rebecca fluttered softly. How pleasant those words sounded—"when you came to me." Why, they sounded almost like words of love. She smiled a little at the thought.

And then she was busy observing the sights. Soon they arrived at the section of town where shops abounded. Rebecca felt confused. "Robert, how do you know which shop to go to?"

He smiled. "Each of us has our favorites. Many men trade with the Beau's tailor. For myself, I prefer the man who sewed for my father.

"Well stop here," he told the groom. Rebecca looked toward a small house, and then looked-inquiringly toward Burlingame. "A very good dressmaker has this shop," he said. "I want to get you some new gowns, particularly something to wear to Carlton House."

Rebecca felt her heart flutter. She did not want to meet the Prince Regent, the man they called Prinny. She had heard too many tales of him.

"I wish we could have just stayed at Roedown House," she sighed.

Burlingame raised a quizzical eyebrow. "What? And deprive the *ton* of the chance to observe my beautiful wife?"

Rebecca flushed. Why must he tease her so, especially in front of Meg? She knew he did not think her beautiful.

Then they were inside the shop, and a small brown woman scurried forward to meet them. "Ah, your lordship. How good to see you again."

Rebecca flinched inwardly at the words. So this woman knew him. Robert probably brought his lightskirts here, perhaps even Lady Catherine. She stiffened her backbone; no one should know that it mattered to her.

"And this, this is your new lady. How lovely she is. I have just the thing for her. A new French muslin. Right this way."

With aching heart Rebecca followed the woman Burlingame called Madame Dowd. None of the new materials, she was sure, would be becoming to her. How could Burlingame, remembering the beautiful Lady Catherine in these same surroundings, find any beauty in a pale schoolroom miss? She wished fervently that they had remained home.

However, as the afternoon wore on and she saw with what care Burlingame was choosing for her, her heart lightened. Of course he was only spending so much time on her to prevent the *ton* from talking—and because of the Burlingame pride. Still, it grew to be rather fun, having Madame Dowd hold up this or that length of material and seeing Robert consider it with such gravity.

Once, as he stood seriously surveying a blue-sprigged muslin, a giggle broke unexpectedly from her throat. Burlingame's eyes were warm and amused as they met hers. "What is it, you little minx?"

"It's only that you look so terribly solemn." For a moment she felt as though their marriage was real, as though she had the right to tease and laugh with him. "Almost as if you were considering something really serious—such as adding a new hunter to the stables."

Burlingame chuckled. "Enough of this frivolity. I assure you, my love, that fashion is of even greater import than the acquisition of a new pair of grays. Is that not true, Madame Dowd?"

"Oh, indeed, my lord. Very true." The small woman fluttering around her reminded Rebecca of a little sparrow. "But none will be so beautiful as your lady. None."

Rebecca flushed, conscious of Burlingame's eyes upon her, conscious of those jesting words, "my love," but he did not seem to notice.

"Yes, she is beautiful," he said nonchalantly, while Rebecca's heart pounded. "But she needs fattening up."

"My lord!" Madame Dowd was plainly aghast. "The lady is perfectly proportioned. Perfectly. You will see when the gowns arrive. But now I will show you the *pièce de résistance*." And she pulled out a bolt of fine white muslin shot with gold threads. Rebecca gasped at its beauty.

"The short sleeves. The bodice embroidered with seed pearls and gold. A similar band around the hem. You envision it, my lord? A gown fit for a princess."

Burlingame nodded, reaching out with strong brown fingers to touch the fragile stuff, "Yes, I see it." His brows drew together. "But she must be well-petticoated underneath. You understand?"

"Of course, m'lord. Of course." Madame Dowd kept her face sober, but Rebecca, stealing a glance at Meg, surprised her maidservant in the middle of a giggle. It wasn't until then that Rebecca realized that Meg thought Robert was a jealous husband.

But Rebecca knew different. It was his proud name that Burlingame cared for, not his wife, not ever his wife. But there was no use in feeling bad. She was Robert's legal wife, and that was something not even Lady Catherine Carrington, with all her flamboyant beauty, could take away from her.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a rush. There were visits to the milliner, the glovemaker, the bootmaker, and the jeweler. Rebecca grew more amazed at the things Burlingame insisted on buying for her. But when she protested, as sometimes she could not stop herself from doing, especially when he insisted on buying her a heavy necklace of emeralds set in silver, she received only a bright smile and the words, "But my love you need this."

By the time the afternoon had drawn to a close and the barouche was stopping in front of the house on Grosvenor Square, Rebecca was glad to see it end. She did not like pretending to love him, pretending for the benefit of shopkeepers and clerks, but most of all for Meg. For Rebecca knew how little pretending was necessary. And she lived in fear that Burlingame might discover what was so obviously apparent to everyone else that his little wife was quite madly in love with him.

She stifled a sigh as she laid her hand in his to descend from the barouche. From around the corner of the house Clem came racing, sliding to a halt by the horses, his bright eyes fastened on Rebecca's face. She smiled at him, receiving a beaming smile and a bob of the head in return. Well, she told herself, there was one person in London who was happy. Happiness seemed to radiate from Clem's pink-scrubbed face and clean fustian clothing. Suddenly he darted forward.

"I knows I shouldn't be botherin' yer ladyship. But I can't be believing it." The child shook his head in wonder. "Them horses. Me—to be caring for horses. And new clothes." His eyes grew round with delight. "The vittles, milady. Oh, 'tis true yer an angel."

Suddenly the boy seemed to realize his temerity and shot Burlingame a frightened glance. But Rebecca's heart swelled with pride as Burlingame spoke quietly to the boy, a kindness to his voice that she had heard only in those rare moments when she herself had been enfolded in the warm comfort of his arms. "There's no need to be frightened, Clem. You're a good boy. You'll always have plenty to eat now. And when you grow bigger and have learned more about horses, you shall be a groom and attend her ladyship. Should you like that?"

Clem's dark eyes danced with joy, and the look he gave Burlingame was one of purest adulation. "Oh yes, m'lord, wouldn't I ever!"

"Very well then. That is settled."

Rebecca, letting Burlingame guide her toward the house, felt herself blinded by tears that could no longer be contained. How kind he could be, how gentle and tender. And oh, she thought with an aching heart as Fairley opened the door before them, oh, how much she loved him.

Chapter 10

The days passed quickly for Rebecca. There was so much to do, so much to learn. Lady Melbourne came often. She was a good teacher, witty, decisive, able to sketch a person's character with a few well-chosen sentences, so that Rebecca felt she knew personally those Lady Melbourne spoke of.

Two afternoons were devoted to lessons in deportment—what was and was not done by a lady, how to manage the waltz, and so on. On the third, Lady Melbourne was enthroned on a divan in the little sitting room that adjoined Rebecca's bedroom. The new dresses had arrived, and each was brought forth by Meg to be examined and declared upon. "I must say that you have good taste in clothes," Lady Melbourne commented, eyeing the gown of muslin shot with gold and decorated with seed pearls.

"Oh, I didn't choose them myself," Rebecca was quick to point out. "Robert picked them for me."

Lady Melbourne smiled. "Yes, I might have known. His choice is exquisite. You'll be the talk of the Season."

Rebecca felt herself flush. "I—I really don't want—" she began.

Lady Melbourne lifted a detaining hand. "It's not what you want," she said dryly, "that counts in London. Society makes the rules. If you must break them, you do it discreetly, with due respect, not flaunting yourself in everyone's face."

"I—I don't mean to break the rules," Rebecca stammered.

"Of course you don't." Lady Melbourne sighed. "I'm thinking of that cabbage-headed daughter-in-law of mine. I'm sure you've heard of her latest escapade."

Rebecca shook her head. None of the ladies had come to visit yet, and Burlingame and Jamie steadfastly refused to gossip.

Lady Melbourne smiled cynically. "Well, you *will* hear, so it might as well be from me."

"Only if you want to tell me," Rebecca replied, motioning to Meg to leave them alone.

Lady Melbourne sighed. "I must talk about it to someone and you are trustworthy. The only woman I know who won't rush off to prattle my words all about London."

"Oh, no, my lady. I should never do that." Rebecca settled into a lyre-back chair, her gaze fixed attentively on her visitor.

"Caro, my daughter-in-law, says it's Byron's fault. She's madly in love with him, she says, while my poor son William—" Lady Melbourne sighed again. "Byron *is* a handsome fellow. In that dark, lowering way of his. Some say he has the face of an angel, but what he does to a woman's heart—" Lady Melbourne shook her head. "If I were just a few years younger, I might succumb to his charms myself."

Rebecca's eyes grew round as she listened to Lady Melbourne's description of the wicked man Meg had whispered to her about. All London, it seemed was talking about the man who had written *Childe Harold* and those other wicked poems.

"She's such a fool," Lady Melbourne was saying wearily. "I don't know why William stays with her. She could have had an affair with Byron. Women do that every day, decently, discreetly, but chasing him all over London and slashing her wrists in public as she did at Lady Heathcote's ball. That's beyond the line."

Lady Melbourne sighed again. "Well, enough of my troubles. You're a sensible enough girl. You'll not be getting yourself in the suds like that, now will you?"

"Oh, no, my lady. Not me." Rebecca's shock was quite genuine. She could not even think of loving someone other than Robert.

Lady Melbourne summoned a tired smile. "I dare say you'll run into Byron one of these days. Then you can judge him for yourself. Tonight I should wear the white dress with the gold embroidery and seed pearls. Prinny will like that."

Rebecca managed a trembling smile. She hadn't been at all happy at the Prince Regent's invitation, but Burlingame had scoffed at her fears. "He's only a man," Burlingame had said dryly. "Lady Melbourne will tell you how to behave."

It was to this end that the previous hours had been devoted. Carefully Rebecca rehearsed all the things she had learned. "I believe I remember everything," she said. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Lady Melbourne appeared to consider. Then she smiled. "Only one thing. Don't let Prinny get you off alone with him. Even though he's currently dangling after Lady Hertford, he tries that occasionally. And," Lady Melbourne broke into a girlish giggle, "don't be surprised if you hear creaking noises when he's near you. It's common knowledge that he's taken to wearing stays."

Rebecca suppressed a giggle. The thought of a prince in stays was certainly amusing. But then, she supposed, kings and princes could do as they pleased.

Lady Melbourne rose to her feet. "Well, I'll leave you for now. I've a great deal to attend to. If you remember not to waltz—I must speak again to the Princess Lieven about your voucher for Almack's, then you can waltz anywhere—and if you don't let Prinny come you alone, you should do quite well."

Lady Melbourne gave Rebecca a knowing smile. "That man of yours is a real Corinthian. The best. A bang-up-blade. You did a good job getting him for a husband. Most of us thought him completely immune to matrimony." She leaned closer to Rebecca. "Someday you'll have to tell me how you did it. But for now, I have to go. Melbourne House needs its mistress."

Rebecca, seeing the lady from her sitting room down the curving staircase to the front door, kept a pleasant smile on her face, but her heart was

fluttering dangerously. What would she do if Lady Melbourne asked her that question? She knew that she was not a good liar, and certainly Burlingame would not want her to tell the truth, even to this friend of his mother's youth. No one, no one at all, must suspect that theirs was not a love match.

Absently Rebecca retraced her steps back to the bedroom. With a sigh she stood in the middle of its lacquered grandeur and wished for the simple, old-fashioned room in Roedown House that she had learned to love. In that blue-and-white room she had felt close to Robert. Even in that moment of drunkenness when he had grasped at her and torn her nightdress, she had felt closer to him than she did here in fashionable London.

Rebecca shrugged. In this red-and-gold room she felt washed out, effaced. Its splendor was designed for a dark-haired, dark-eyed, voluptuous beauty, not for a slight, blond schoolroom miss. She stifled another sigh. Well, there was not much use in wishing to change what couldn't be changed. She turned to the closet and the dress that both Burlingame and Lady Melbourne had chosen for her to wear.

* * * *

That evening Rebecca stood looking at her reflection in the gilded mirror. Was this really her, she thought, this dainty creature with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, whose blond curls were piled in wild profusion on top of her head and intertwined with seed pearls strung on gold thread?

Behind her she could see Meg's reflection in the glass. The dark eyes in Meg's pixie face danced with delight. "Oh, m'lady. 'Tis like a princess you look."

Rebecca returned the maidservant's smile. "Well, at least I look presentable. I won't be a disgrace to his lordship."

Meg's laughter bubbled over. "A disgrace? You? Why, all the men will be dangling after you."

Rebecca smiled again, but she was aware that her lip trembled. It was not the men who frightened her. Certainly her devotion to Robert would be so apparent that they would not pursue her. It was those poker-faced misses and their dowager mamas who frightened her.

Moments later Rebecca was descending the staircase to find Burlingame waiting for her. His blue dress coat stretched tight over his muscled shoulders, his satin knee breeches admirable in their fit, his dazzling white stock elegantly yet carelessly tied in the Oriental. But all of that meant nothing to her once her eyes lit on his darkly handsome face.

An appreciative smile pulled at one corner of his mouth as she reached him. Emboldened by that smile, Rebecca asked, "What does m'lord find so amusing?"

His mouth let the smile take form. "I was just congratulating myself on my choice of gown. It befits you well."

"Thank you, m'lord. Lady Melbourne found it the most appropriate for this evening at Carlton House." Mischief danced temporarily in her eyes. "I hope Prinny will not find it *too* attractive. Lady Melbourne cautioned me against finding myself alone with him."

"Don't let yourself be found alone with Prinny or any other man there," Burlingame said, the black brows coming together dangerously.

Rebecca felt her heart jump. "Of course I won't, Robert," she assured him. "I value the reputation of our name." It rather surprised her how easily the "our" slipped out.

He turned suddenly toward her, his dark eyes burning into hers. "There is more to be lost here than reputation, Rebecca. I want you to remember that. The men of Prinny's court are hot-blooded, used to pursuing and capturing anything in skirts that takes their fancy. And the women are used to it, too. You are not. And you have that which to them is only a memory."

Rebecca flushed at the implication of his words. It was not her fault, she thought with anger, that she was still his wife in name only. Some of that anger surfaced in her next words. "I may have led a secluded life." She willed her eyes to meet his. "But I am not a fool. And I will not do anything to bring disgrace on our name."

For another long moment their eyes held, something strange and electric between them. Then it was gone, and Rebecca was unsure that it had ever been. "Good," said Burlingame, turning away abruptly and leading her out to the carriage.

There was no further conversation between them as they rode. Rebecca lost herself in trying to recall every bit of information Lady Melbourne had given her. *Oh please, she prayed, don't let me do anything to disgrace him.*

Then, long before she was ready for it, the carriage drew up before Carlton House. She had only a confused glimpse of the screen of columns and the many fashionable people dismounting from their carriages on Pall Mall. She clung tightly to Burlingame's arm as they made their way inside.

So much magnificence, thought Rebecca with awe. She followed Burlingame through the entrance hall with its porphyry columns and cornices adorned by Etruscan griffins. She stood with him under great crystal chandeliers and saw their reflections in the silver and pier glasses that lined the walls of the circular dining room. She walked with him across the blue velvet carpets bearing the insignia of the garter that covered the floor of the crimson drawing room; she stood with him in the throne room, where splendid ostrich plumes waved above the silver helmets of the high canopy and the eagle of Jupiter on the fireplace fender stood triumphant over the defeated dragons. And all the time, though her fingers clutched Burlingame's arm, her face remained poised and calm. No one here, Rebecca promised herself, would have the opportunity to call her a country miss.

And then, as Burlingame led her toward the conservatory with its stained-glass windows leading into the garden, they were stopped by a man who slapped Burlingame heartily on the shoulder. Rebecca realized this could only be Prinny. She was thankful for Lady Melbourne's description, for otherwise she would never have recognized him as a prince. His skintight "inexpressibles" showed a leg obviously past its prime. And the stays—Rebecca found herself listening for their creaking—were obviously a measure taken somewhat too late. Prinny's bulk was not easily containable.

The Prince Regent shifted his attention from Burlingame to his new lady. Rebecca forced herself to meet the Prince's blue eyes and found them gazing at her in admiration. She could not prevent her clear skin from flushing, but she continued to hold her head high.

"A rare flower, this one," Prinny was saying. "Ah, Burlingame, you rascal. You always were quite a hand with the fair sex."

Burlingame's only reply was a languid smile.

Suddenly Rebecca's attention was fixed on another man who had just made his way to Prinny's side. He was tall, blond, and very handsome, younger than Burlingame. His long legs were surpassed, in Rebecca's opinion, only by Robert's. His waist rivaled that of the slenderest of girls. In his bottle-green velvet uniform laced with gold and dripping diamond stars, he was enough to turn the head of any woman. His expressive countenance gazed pensively at her.

Then, while she was still trying to comprehend this dazzling sight, the handsome stranger spoke, his deeply accented voice carrying far even in the huge room. "Your Highness, I should like the favor of being made known to the lady."

The Prince's eyes did not seem to match his smile and Rebecca was aware that somehow Burlingame, without appearing to move at all, had drawn closer to her side.

"Lady Burlingame," Prinny said. "Alexander the First, Emperor of Russia."

Rebecca's knees felt suddenly weak, but she kept her head high and her expression poised. Then, as the Emperor's gloved hand raised her fingers to his lips, Rebecca was aware of something else. Burlingame was angry, extremely angry. The arm under her fingers was tight with the tension of containing that anger.

As the handsome blond head bent gallantly over her hand, Rebecca risked a quick sidelong glance at Burlingame's countenance. To her surprise it reflected nothing of the tension she felt under her fingertips.

Then the Emperor spoke again, his voice lingering appreciatively over the words. "The lady is most charming. Would she honor me with a walk in the garden?"

Rebecca felt the muscles under her fingers bunch in anger. She waited for Burlingame's words, but none came. He could not refuse such a request without angering the royalty, she realized.

"I am afraid I'm feeling a little faint." Rebecca spoke hurriedly, her tongue stumbling over the words. "I believe it's the heat. Robert, would you take me some place where I might sit for a little?"

"Of course, my dear. This way. Please excuse us, your Highness."

As Burlingame led her through the crowds of gaily dressed people, Rebecca felt that she really needed the support of his arm. How did a woman refuse a king, an emperor? She suppressed a shudder. The Emperor's very good looks were frightening to her. Such a man had probably never been refused. What was he thinking now?

Burlingame led her to another room and found her a seat. In vain she waited for words of approbation. Glancing up at him, she saw only sternness. His mouth was set in a firm line, and his jaw jutted out stubbornly. What a proud man she had married. What else but pride, she told herself, could have provoked him to such anger. Certainly it was not regard for her.

"Remain here," Burlingame said curtly. "I will bring you some punch."

"Yes, Robert." As she watched him move off across the crowded room, Rebecca was conscious of what a striking figure he cut. He was, she told herself with a silent giggle, handsomer than any emperor ever born.

As she waited, lost in her own thoughts, she gradually became conscious of the conversation around her. "I don't care if the war is over. Guineas must be kept in the country," one man was saying vehemently in a high insistent voice. "All that gold going out is bad business."

"Business, business. Always business," a bored voice drawled. "Boney was right when he called us a nation of shopkeepers. A gentleman has more important things to attend to than the disappearance of gold guineas—unless of course they're disappearing from *his* pocket!"

General laughter greeted this remark, and Rebecca turned her head slightly so as to see the witty gentleman. "That's all well and good for you, Beau," said the first speaker truculently. "But some of us do have more important things to do than tie a cravat."

There was a small pause, and then the short well-dressed man replied. "Indeed, Ned. There is *nothing* more important than tying a cravat. But I've always averred if you're going to do a thing, do it well. You, now, may do well at hunting down smugglers, dirty work that it is. However, I believe I shall just stick to cravats."

The first speaker shrugged angrily and moved away.

Eagerly Rebecca inspected the dapper little man. He was one of those about whom Meg had brought her stories from the servants' quarters. According to rumor. Beau Brummell had his boots polished in champagne and had separate tailors for his coats, waistcoats, and breeches. And two glovemakers—one being better able to fit the thumbs and the other the fingers. For some reason Rebecca had expected a pompous sort of man, but this one was merely dapper and well dressed, hardly even outstanding to look at except that he was so well turned out.

Then Burlingame was standing before her again. "Over there," he said softly as he bent to hand her the punch, "is Stapleton. The tall, angry-looking fellow."

Rebecca, following his glance, found herself looking at the Beau's conversational opponent. Amelia's brother! So it was Stapleton who was so vehemently against the smuggling of guineas out of the country. There was something a little strange about that, Rebecca thought. Raised as she had been on the south coast near Dover, she was well aware that smuggling was a common activity. Tea, brandy, tobacco, and lace were smuggled in from France, and had been for a long, long time. And no one really seemed to mind.

Gold, she supposed, was something different. She would have to ask Robert about it. But not here, not now.

The lilting strains of music swept through the rooms. "Would you like to watch the dancing?" Burlingame asked.

Rebecca nodded. She wished that the longed-for voucher had come from the Princess Lieven. It seemed a silly sort of rule. Why should a woman be forbidden to waltz until seven top society ladies had invited her to Almack's? She sighed. How good it would be to be held in Robert's strong arms and go whirling smoothly around the floor. But this night, at least, there would be no waltzing for her.

Burlingame led her to a place along the wall where she could watch the merrily swirling couples. "Oh, Robert," she breathed in excitement. "It looks like such fun."

Burlingame shrugged. "I suppose it could be called fun. Will you be all right if I leave you here for a while?"

She did not want him to leave her, but she was stung by his inference that she couldn't manage by herself. "Of course, I shall. And I shan't waltz either."

He bowed over her hand, and then he was gone, threading his way back toward the door. But before he reached it there was a flash of deep-coral gown and a mass of red hair topped by a towering ostrich plume. Lady Catherine Carrington laid a restraining hand on Burlingame's arm, and the next moment they were on the dance floor.

Rebecca bit her lip in vexation. How she hated the voluptuous and experienced Lady Catherine. How cruel, she was, too, Rebecca told herself, to waltz deliberately with Burlingame when she knew that his wife could not. But then there had been nothing in Lady Catherine's feline eyes to indicate that she found cruelty foreign to her nature.

Rebecca longed to run from the room, to hide herself somewhere, but that was impossible. Burlingame would expect to find her here when he returned. And besides, to wander unattended through the rooms of this huge palace could be very dangerous.

Resolutely Rebecca shifted her gaze to another couple. If only Lady Catherine would not smile so seductively as she dipped and swirled. If only Burlingame would not smile so attentively. Rebecca rebuked herself sharply. There was no use hoping that Lady Catherine would change. As well to wish that Prinny resembled the Emperor, she told herself with bitter amusement.

And then, almost as though her thought had summoned him, the Emperor stood before her. Tall and debonair, by far the handsomest man, barring Burlingame, that she had ever seen, he bowed low before her. "We shall dance also," he said in royal tones.

Rebecca bit back an exclamation of dismay. "H-

His Royal Highness, Alexander the First, Emperor of Russia, stared at her with haughty blue eyes. "You do not wish to waltz with me?"

"I do. Oh, I do," Rebecca hastened to explain. Hurriedly she told him about Almack's, about the rules.

When she paused for breath, he smiled. It was an enchanting smile, she had to admit that. How glad she was that he understood. Then he reached for her hand. "I am Emperor of Russia," he said. "I do not heed rules."

Her knees trembling, Rebecca followed him onto the dance floor. *What else is there to do?* she asked herself in terror. She could not pull away from the Emperor and run to Burlingame's side. Besides, she thought bitterly, Burlingame was off somewhere with that brazen Lady Catherine.

All eyes in the room seemed focused on them as the Emperor put his hand on her waist and propelled her into the passing stream of waltzing couples. As he moved them gracefully along, Rebecca decided to give herself up to the joy of the dance, reveling in the sheer beauty of the motion. If she were going to face the contempt of a society whose rules had been flouted, she might as well enjoy the flouting. Round and round the room they swirled. Rebecca, eyes gleaming and cheeks aflame with color, gave herself up to the intoxicating rhythm of the music.

When the music stopped, Rebecca could not quite suppress a sigh. But as she moved to return to the sidelines, the Emperor's hand on her waist stopped her. "We will waltz again," he said. "Unless, of course, you would prefer a walk in the coolness of the garden."

"Oh, your Highness," she begged quickly. "Let us waltz again. It's such fun."

The smile that lit the Emperor's face then made him even more attractive. If her heart did not already belong to Robert, Rebecca thought as they set off, she could easily have lost it to this man. No wonder Robert had cautioned her so sternly. It was practically impossible to say no to a prince or an emperor, and she did not have the sophistication to avoid such dangers gracefully.

Well, she told herself, at least she had chosen the lesser of two evils. A walk in the garden with a man of the Emperor's reputation, a man used to having any woman he fancied, would inevitably lead to disaster.

Through two more waltzes the Emperor guided her skillfully around the floor. By that time Rebecca found her enjoyment waning. She could not avoid seeing the expressions on the other dancers' faces. She was not sure which bothered her more—the eager speculative looks of the men or the hatred and loathing in the women's eyes. The men were obviously thinking that the Emperor had been her first conquest, and that perhaps later . . . And the women, jealous of her favored place in the Emperor's arms, were also fearful for their men.

Rebecca felt tears rising to her eyes. If only they knew how unnecessary such worries were. She could never love any man but Burlingame.

As the waltz came to an end, Rebecca longed to sit somewhere quietly. The excitement and the activity had left her exhausted. But she dared not mention being tired. She did not know how to refuse a walk in the garden, and she could not risk offending the Emperor.

That Burlingame would be angry she had no doubt. She had flouted society's rules, and after she had specifically assured him that she would not waltz.

Just as the music was about to begin again, Rebecca heard a deep voice behind her. "I'm pleased that you enjoyed the waltz with my wife, your

Highness," Burlingame said languidly. "I believe I should like a turn about the floor with her myself now."

Bowing over her hand, the Emperor kissed her fingers with lips that lingered. Then he straightened. "The man who possesses such a woman is indeed fortunate."

"I agree, your Highness. I quite agree."

As the Emperor walked away, Rebecca risked one look at Burlingame's cloudy face and waited fearfully for the storm to break. But there was only silence. Then the music began, and she was in his arms. How different this was, she thought, from the joyous whirling she had imagined.

"You're pale as a ghost," Burlingame remarked evenly as they whirled. "Look up at me and laugh. Your eyes were bright enough when you waltzed with him."

Obediently Rebecca raised her eyes to his face. His brows had not drawn together in that fierce way that showed his anger. In fact, he was smiling down at her pleasantly. But she was not at all deceived. Burlingame was very angry, and she knew it. She managed an answering smile, even a gay little laugh. But the brightness in her eyes was due not to happiness but to unshed tears.

And then the waltz was over and Burlingame was guiding her out the door and along to where the carriages waited. His grip on her elbow was going to leave bruises, Rebecca knew that. But she was too frightened to protest. The storm was coming, and she didn't know how to withstand its blast.

But Burlingame remained silent on the ride home. Rebecca, fighting hard to contain the tears, wanted to throw herself into his arms and plead for his forgiveness. Common sense told her that she had done the only thing possible, but how was she to convince Robert of that?

In silence they descended from the carriage and entered the red-brick mansion. "We'll be in the library, Fairley," Burlingame said. "We do not wish to be disturbed."

"Yes, m'lord."

With Burlingame's fingers still on her elbow she heard the oaken door of the library close behind them. If only he would allow her to sit down, she thought, a fit of trembling seizing her. If only she could cry out to him that she would never willingly do anything to harm him. But she could not do that, not without avowing her love.

For long moments she stood staring into the little fire that burned in the grate. Finally, unable to bear the silence any longer, she raised her eyes to his face. The anger was apparent now. His black brows met fiercely, and his mouth curled cynically. "So you enjoyed waltzing with the Emperor?"

Inside Rebecca, fear battled with anger. And, temporarily at least, anger won. "Yes, I did. But I couldn't help it. I had to." Fear was winning now, and the desire to placate him. "I explained to him—about Almack's and the rules. But he said—" Her eyes pleaded with Burlingame to understand. "He said he was the Emperor and he didn't heed rules."

She fell silent, waiting for him to say something. Anything. But still his mouth remained clamped in the firm line.

"Later, later he asked me again to walk in the garden. But I said I wanted to waltz some more. That seemed the best thing to do."

Again she waited for his reply, but no words came. She wanted to let the tears that were choking her flow free, she wanted to run for comfort to the warmth of his arms. But she held herself rigidly erect. "What would you have had me do?" she asked stiffly. "Should I have refused the Emperor of Russia? Should I have screamed for my beloved husband to rescue me?"

"I saw your face," Burlingame said, ignoring her questions. "You loved dancing with him."

Rebecca was confused. What was Burlingame after? "It was amusing. I like to waltz," she stammered.

"And so you smiled him to your side." The words were spoken flatly, yet they carried a heavy weight of anger.

"I didn't! I wouldn't! Robert, how can you say such a thing!"

"I saw you." His hands grasped her arms roughly. "I saw the way you smiled at him. Perhaps if I hadn't come upon you as I did, you would have gone to the garden."

His grip on her arms tightened brutally. She winced, but he didn't loosen it. Wide-eyed, she stared at him. She had seen Burlingame angry before, but never, never like this.

"Rob—"

Her words cut off as he crushed her against his waistcoat. "And then he would have kissed you— like this."

As one hand forced her chin up and his mouth closed over hers, Rebecca felt her heart thud painfully. This was no kiss for a schoolroom miss, her reeling senses told her. His lips took hers roughly, brutally, in a kiss that seemed as much in punishment as in passion.

At first she was too surprised to protest, and then it was too late. Her body betrayed her, and her arms crept up to cling around his neck.

Suddenly he thrust her away. "I'm sorry to have spoiled your little adventure with the Emperor," he said savagely, biting off each word. "But I think it best we make no more visits to Carlton House for a time. Do you understand?"

For long moments Rebecca stared at him. "You—you think I *wanted*, an adventure with the Emperor?"

"Of course. What fashionable lady wouldn't?"

The tears were overflowing now, and she couldn't stop them. "I am not—a fashionable lady," she cried. "As you've taken care to remind me—so often—I'm only a schoolroom miss. And—" Her words were interrupted now by the sobs that couldn't be contained. "I—did—the best—I could."

Through her tears she glared at him. "You're impossible. A brute. I hate you!"

Turning on her heel, she fled stumbling over her skirts toward the great oaken door. But he was there before her. "Rebecca." Once more his arms enfolded her, comforting, not the iron bands that had enclosed her before. Gently his hand stroked the tumbled curls. "Rebecca, I'm sorry. I've behaved abominably. You're only a child. I've no right to expect you to behave like a woman."

With her face pressed against his chest she felt the balm of his words. But there was poison in them, too. Almost better was his anger, if in it he saw her as a woman—the woman she really was. But she remained silent. At least there was peace between them now. She savored the warmth of his arms.

He held her comfortingly for a few minutes, then patted her tangled curls. "Run along now and have Meg put you to bed. You've had a hard day."

"Yes, Robert." She paused as he opened the door for her, and then she said the words that were uppermost in her mind. "I am sorry, Robert. I did so want to please you."

Then she was gone, fleeing lightly up the broad staircase to the waiting Meg. She didn't see the man she left behind her sink into a nearby chair and bury his dark head in his hands.

Chapter 11

The next morning Rebecca woke to a knock on the door. "Come in," she mumbled. It wasn't till she was struggling upright in the bed that she realized that the knock had come not from the outer door but from the one that connected to Burlingame's room.

She pulled the cover up as he entered and rubbed sleepily at her eyes.

"I'm sorry to wake you so early," he said as if to a child. "But I wanted to remind you. We're going to the theater tonight. Edmund Kean is playing Othello." He looked down on her soberly. "It won't be easy tonight. The ladies were not happy with you to begin with. Now they have a legitimate reason to ostracize you."

"Maybe . . . maybe, we should just stay at home." She hated the childish note in her voice, but she was frightened.

Burlingame shook his dark head. "No! Burlingames don't hide in shame. We'll go to the theater and face them."

"Yes, Robert." There was more strength in her voice now.

"I've sent a note to Lady Melbourne explaining what happened and asking her to intercede for you with the others. Perhaps she can bring them round." He turned to go.

"Robert?"

"Yes?"

She forced the words out before she could become too frightened. "Why did *you* waltz with me last night?"

He frowned. "The Burlingame men stand by their women," he said firmly. ~~Even~~ against society"

And then he was gone, and Rebecca was left with the puzzle of a man who so disliked her that he refused to make her in fact what she was in name—his wife—and yet had faced the opprobrium of society for her sake. It's his pride, she told herself. His pride in the Burlingame name made him uphold it against any slur.

It was Burlingame pride, Rebecca felt, that sustained her that night when, dressed in a gown of azure blue trimmed with darker velvet ribbons, she entered Drury Lane on Burlingame's arm and glanced up at the domed Corinthian rotunda. Then all her attention was centered on meeting the stares of those around her. With great effort of will she kept her head high and her mouth smiling. No one looking at her could have imagined that the new Lady Burlingame was at all upset by her disgrace.

Skillfully Burlingame guided her through the crowds to their box. "Keep smiling," he said softly. "There will be eyes on us all night."

"Yes, Robert. I know." Rebecca's own eyes were roving idly over the assembled throng, when suddenly they stopped. Brilliant in a dress that was a shimmer of gold embroidery sat Lady Catherine. Into the masses of her lustrous red hair were woven great golden chains that caught and held the light. Her full lips were open in a seductive pout as she raised her eyes to a handsome young officer standing beside her. And then her eyes swept around the theater. And stopped. Rebecca repressed a shudder. Lady Catherine's feline-green eyes were obviously on Burlingame, and her mouth curved in another seductive smile.

Burlingame, moving languidly, returned the smile and nodded in acknowledgment. "Smile," he hissed under his breath. "Lady Catherine has some power in society. It's kind of her to recognize us."

Dutifully Rebecca put a smile on her lips. She would obey Burlingame, but nothing would ever make her believe that Lady Catherine Carrington had a single kind bone in her body. No indeed. If Lady Catherine smiled, it was for one purpose and one purpose only—to ingratiate herself with Burlingame.

Rebecca's smile was not returned. In fact, she had the distinct impression that Lady Catherine's green eyes turned to two sharp pieces of ice as they swept over her. But Rebecca kept her head high and her face poised. She was a Burlingame, she told herself firmly, and a Burlingame never bowed her head in shame.

As Rebecca continued to glance out over the audience in a desultory fashion, she was acutely conscious of the cold stares of several large dowagers with pasty-faced daughters hovering at their sides. One exceptionally large matron sported an enormous purple silk turban decorated with an ostrich plume that swayed haughtily from side to side as she condescendingly surveyed the theater. The girl beside her, whose face was so pale it looked floured, was obviously unhappy. Her dark eyes and hair only served to emphasize her pallor. Sadness was written large on her face, but there was no trace of bitterness in the sweet curve of her mouth.

Suddenly she met Rebecca's eyes, and the sweet mouth curved in the merest flicker of a smile before the dark eyes were cast modestly down.

"Robert," Rebecca whispered. "Who is that lovely girl? Over there by the monstrous purple turban?"

Burlingame turned to the indicated box. His brows drew together in the beginning of a frown. "That's Amelia. Jamie's Amelia. And the turban is the old dragon Stapleton's brought in to guard her. Some sort of aunt, I imagine."

"To guard her?"

"Yes. Stapleton has some sort of grievance against Jamie. We've not yet figured what. Amelia and Jamie were ready to be pledged. Jamie's been dangling after the chit since he was naught but a lad. And she had a *tendre* for him."

Rebecca sighed. Was love always so difficult? "What happened to change things?"

"Amelia's father, old Stapleton, died. Her brother Ned took over, and he forbade the banns. He wouldn't say exactly why, but word is he's after the girl to marry a cit, a rich old merchant who's willing to pay a high price for her."

"Oh, no!" Rebecca flushed, hoping her words hadn't carried through the theater. "They love each other. You can see it."

Burlingame shrugged. "It's a shame for the girl to go to a cit. She's a fine girl, well brought up. But love is a delusion of the mind. It afflicts those who are weak."

"Robert!" In spite of herself she was goaded into replying. "How can you say such things. Love is the most important thing in the world."

He lifted one eyebrow cynically. "Indeed," he whispered in a voice that raked her heart while his lips continued to curve in a blasé smile. "I suppose that is why you were willing to marry me—because of the great love you conceived for me." He eyed her quizzically. "Well, will you insist that there is love in our marriage?" His eyes regarded her searchingly.

Rebecca forced back the words of devotion that had leaped unbidden to her throat. "No, m'lord," she faltered. "Unfortunately, ours is not a marriage of love. But I still believe that love is the most important thing in the world. And I always shall."

For long moments his eyes held hers. What was it, she wondered, that he seemed about to say. And then the play began. "They say Kean is as good as Garrick used to be," Burlingame said. "Othello is not an easy role."

Rebecca turned her eyes to the stage. There stood the figure of a man. Rebecca knew that Edmund Kean was a man of slight stature, yet somehow as he stood there he seemed tall—a veritable warrior. And as he told Desdemona of his experiences, Rebecca felt herself drawn into the play.

The intermission wrenched her abruptly out of the magic world of love and treachery back to her world, where love, according to Robert, was a pastime for children and fools, and treachery was a woman with red hair.

Rebecca suppressed a sigh. Burlingame stood looking down at her languidly. "I trust you can find no way to disgrace us here." He frowned abruptly. "Don't leave the box. And do not meet the eyes of any men you see out there."

Rebecca bit back a nasty remark. "Yes, Robert. Will you be gone long?"

He shook his head. "I want to speak to Lady Melbourne. I see that she has finally arrived."

Glancing across the theater, Rebecca saw Lady Melbourne smile her way. Her heartache lifted a little. One person, at least, understood. Lady Melbourne would appreciate that, being young and frightened, she couldn't very well refuse to waltz with the Emperor of Russia. Gratefully Rebecca returned the smile.

As Burlingame closed the door behind him, Rebecca busied herself with glancing around and not meeting anyone's eyes. That was easy enough with the women, for they all seemed eager to give her the cut. But with the men it was not so easy.

Her glance moved once toward the girl Jamie loved. She looked like a Burlingame, Rebecca thought. Dark hair and dark eyes. She didn't look like she had the Burlingame temper, but perhaps she could cultivate that after marriage, Rebecca thought with a slight smile. If Jamie were anything like his brother, cultivating a temper would be an easy enough task.

She glanced once more toward the stage, and then the door of their box opened. She smiled in relief, Burlingame was back. But when she turned, it was not Robert she saw. Two men stood in the shadows at the back of the box. Even before the one spoke Rebecca recognized him, and her heart sank. Why had the Emperor come to their box? Why couldn't he just leave her alone?

"Blue becomes you, Lady Burlingame," said the Emperor, his heavily accented voice carrying to adjoining boxes. With difficulty Rebecca refrained from wincing. She really didn't fancy being the cynosure of all eyes, but there was no way to avoid it.

"Thank you, your Highness." Rebecca swallowed hastily. "Won't you sit down?" she faltered. The Emperor moved out of the shadows, another resplendent green-velvet uniform gracing his tall, manly form.

With him came the impeccable Beau Brummell. The Beau gave her a graceful inclination of the head. "I have presumed to come with his Highness so as to be introduced to the beautiful Lady Burlingame."

For some strange reason Rebecca felt suddenly like giggling. "I'm surprised you should want to visit me," she blurted. "The ladies of society have condemned me."

The Beau shrugged. "Society listens to me. I do not listen to it."

Rebecca smiled. She liked him; his eyes were warm and friendly. And he *had* defied the old dowagers in coming to her box.

"Shall you attend the execution in the morning?" the Emperor asked Rebecca, bending toward her in an intimate manner that obviously solicited her complete attention.

"I think not. Who is being executed?" The very thought made her shiver.

"Some highwayman caught in the act," the Emperor replied.

The Beau shrugged again. "Perhaps the example will deter others."

The Emperor frowned. "I think not. You English are too harsh in your laws. From what I have seen they are so severe that some malefactors are let go free out of pity, while others are executed in accordance with the law."

"What would your Highness suggest?" Rebecca asked with interest.

"A little more in the manner of preventive measures," said the Emperor with a seriousness that matched her own. "You've need of more police on the street, better means to prevent crimes before they happen. And you need more sensible laws—ones that can be equitably enforced."

Rebecca found herself nodding. "You're right," she agreed. "You must have given a lot of thought to such matters." Her smile reflected her improved opinion of him.

The Emperor smiled in return. "Everywhere I go I observe. Perhaps I may learn something worthwhile." His blue eyes held hers, and there was an invitation smoldering in them. "You are a very interesting woman, Lady Burlingame."

Rebecca dropped her eyes quickly. She did not know how to deal with such a man. "Thank you, your Highness," she murmured. "You are most kind."

Beau Brummell, who had been quizzing the other boxes in the theater, suddenly spoke. "Lady Catherine is certainly a sight tonight. Is she not, your Highness?"

Rebecca, looking across the theater at the same time as the Emperor, found herself meeting Burlingame's thunderous eyes. Even across the intervening space she could feel the intensity of his anger, see him scowl ferociously, while beside him Lady Catherine's pouting red lips curved in a malicious smile. Rebecca suppressed a shiver and turned away.

"Lady Catherine is an artificial golden bird," the Emperor observed idly with a glance at Rebecca. "She glitters, but inside she is nothing but cold, hard machinery. There is no heart in her song."

His bright blue eyes swept over Rebecca. "Lady Burlingame, on the other hand, is a beautiful bluebird, natural and lovely. Her song is real, full of feeling and warmth."

At the last words his hand reached out and grasped hers. He bent his blond head low as his lips lingered persuasively on her fingers. He was very gallant, Rebecca thought. His words about Lady Catherine, so neatly echoing her own sentiments and so graciously complimentary to her, were balm to a wounded heart. After being treated as a child for so long, it was good to have an attractive man see her as a woman. If only that man were Robert.

The door to the box opened suddenly, and Burlingame stood there. To all outward appearances he was just another Corinthian, stepping in to chat with friends. His face was calm, his mouth curved in a languid smile, he moved with studied grace. "Good evening, your Highness. Beau. Well, what do you think of Kean and his Othello?"

Beau Brummell rose from his chair. Perhaps, Rebecca thought, he was no more deceived than she by Burlingame's apparent calm, for he seemed rather anxious to leave. "I can't say as yet," he responded, "not having seen the whole play. But I did catch his Hamlet the other night, and it was superb, just superb."

By this time the Beau had reached the door. "I'll just be getting back to my box," he said. "The intermission will soon be over." With a quick bow he was gone.

The Emperor did not seem perturbed by the Beau's sudden departure. He sat gazing speculatively at Rebecca, and she began to feel uneasy under the intensity of those eyes. Helplessly she glanced at Burlingame, but he stood calmly, apparently quite at ease. "And how does your Highness find the play?" he asked casually.

The Emperor did not take his eyes from Rebecca's face as he replied. "I find Mr. Kean quite a good actor—with a great deal of power."

There was a long silence in the box as he continued to gaze at Rebecca. Then with no indication of any unease, Burlingame moved closer and laid his hand possessively on Rebecca's bare shoulder. She felt the warmth pouring over her, and she hoped no one would be able to see the telltale flush spreading over her cheeks.

The silence continued for some moments before the Emperor arose and lifted Rebecca's hand to his lips. "I shall hope to have the honor of your company soon again," he said, bestowing on her a smile that would have melted the heart of any other woman in England. Then he was gone, moving gracefully away.

As the door shut behind him Rebecca turned hastily to Burlingame. But he calmly removed his hand from her shoulder and took his place in the chair just vacated. "Robert—" Rebecca began.

He motioned her to silence. "We shall not discuss it. The Emperor is a very attractive man. It is only natural that you should enjoy his attentions."

"Robert, I didn't—" Her heart was pounding, and she found his anger easier to bear than this pretended indifference. "I mean, I didn't do anything to make him come to our box. Really I didn't."

Burlingame shrugged. "As I said. We shall not discuss it. You have given me your word not to disgrace our name, and I believe you will keep it. No matter what the attraction."

Rebecca flinched at the bitterness in the last words. How was it that Burlingame could visit Lady Catherine's box and be the recipient of her pouting, seductive smiles and her gay, provocative laughter, and it was all right? But when the Emperor came to Rebecca without invitation or encouragement, when she was only normally polite to him, why was she accused of jeopardizing the Burlingame name?

She stole a glance at Burlingame, who was idly quizzing the huge crowd. "Smile," he whispered without turning his head. "Remember, we are newly married, happily married. Pretend that I am the focus of that most important of things—love."

Rebecca, staring blindly out over the theater, forced her lips into the semblance of a smile, but her heart was weeping. Would Robert, her beloved Robert, never know the meaning of love, never know its sweetness or its agony?

Fortunately, the curtains opened, bringing Edmund Kean's Othello back, and the play began to work its magic on her once more. How fiercely Othello loved, she thought. With a passion that matched the fire in Burlingame, a passion that recalled to her mind the picture of the fiery Constancia. If only Robert would realize, she thought painfully, that passion did not come only from the hearts of dark-eyed, dark-haired, or redheaded beauties. Surely no woman's heart had ever held more love than she felt for her lawful husband.

With a sigh Rebecca leaned back in the chair and gave herself up to the play. Tears rolled unnoticed down her cheeks as the distraught Othello, in a voice of despair, poured out his agony: ". . . Then must you speak/Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well;/Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,/Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,/Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/Richer than all his tribe. . . ."

Rebecca, enveloped in the grief of the poignant, tragic figure on the stage, did not see the dark man beside her gaze speculatively at her rapt face, nor hear him murmur under his breath, "lov'd not wisely but too well."

Chapter 12

The days that followed were difficult ones for Rebecca. There were no callers, ladies or gentlemen, except for Lady Melbourne. And on what pretext could she stroll along Piccadilly of a morning with Meg behind her—she who had enough new clothes to last a lifetime? Besides, she had no desire to expose herself to be cut direct by some fat dowager and her pasty-faced daughter.

And so she kept to the house in Grosvenor Square, tagging after Spence from room to room and out into the garden, trying to learn how such a little woman could run a huge household and run it so well.

Spence shook her white-capped head, her bright eyes sparkling. "'Tis because of Master Robert," she said in answer to Rebecca's question.

Rebecca stared in bewilderment. Surely he was not in the house long enough to see to its running. "I don't understand."

Spence smiled. "'Tis because he's such a good master that all's harmony here. He treats us good, and we love him for it." Spence's eyes took on a faraway look. "Well I remember the day he was birthed. Such a husky handsome lad, even then. I saw him grow into the man he is. My, but the lad was a terror," she continued, but her eyes glowed with affection. "Always in the briars, he was. Mischief! That one could think of more things—"

Spence, casting a glance at Rebecca's enraptured face, appeared suddenly to realize that she was being indiscreet, "And eat," she added, shifting the subject slightly. "He ate like a horse, the lad did. Most as much as that Clem does now." Her face took on a tender look. "'Tis nice to have a child in the house again. Soon, I'm hoping, there'll be one of yours I can be nurse to."

Rebecca swallowed the sudden lump in her throat and murmured, "I hope so too."

Just then Clem came bouncing around the corner and skidded to a halt by a bed of variegated geraniums and china asters. Rebecca's quick eyes noted his scrubbed face and clean clothes. "Well, Clem, are you enjoying your work in the stables?"

"Oh, yes, m'lady." Clem's eyes glowed. "I loves the horses. And Starfire most." He drew himself up to his full height. "And I'm growing fast, I am." The bright eyes shifted to Spence, and she nodded. "Soon I'll be a groom, I will."

Rebecca smiled at his childish enthusiasm. "I'm sure you will, Clem. I'll be waiting for you to attend me." With another bob of his head Clem scampered away.

Spence gave a little laugh. "Aye. The lad couldn't be happier."

Rebecca, turning back into the house, wished that she too could be happy, as happy as Clem.

* * * *

So the days passed, long days in which she rarely saw Burlingame. In the evenings they sometimes attended the theater or the opera, but these were certainly not festive occasions. Indeed, Burlingame sat sternly beside her, not leaving her side even during intermission, and little conversation passed between them.

Rebecca filled the days one way or another, finally even managing the hateful needlework to the point where she once stitched for a whole hour without stabbing herself.

And then one bright day Lady Melbourne arrived beaming, to inform her that her sins had been-forgiven and the coveted voucher for Almack's was on its way.

"I've no doubt," said Lady Melbourne with a conspiratorial smile, "that Lady Jersey had much to do with the decision. The Emperor has been paying her a great deal of attention lately. The other night at Lady Cholmondeley's he waltzed with her practically all evening. And of course he's close to the Princess Lieven. I'm persuaded that the man, conscious of the injury he did you, has done his best to make amends."

Lady Melbourne's eyes softened, and her lips curved into a sensuous smile. "He cuts quite a leg, the Emperor does. It's unfortunate that Burlingame is such a bore where you are concerned. Lord, I never thought to see Burlingame so smitten with a chit.

"But there's no accounting for men. I've told my girls that many a time. None at all. Still—" Lady Melbourne rattled on, entirely unconscious of the turmoil she had created in her listener's heart. "The Emperor of Russia would have been quite a feather in your cap."

"Lady Melbourne!" The words burst unbidden from Rebecca. "I could never— that is—the Emperor is quite a handsome man, true. But I— that is—"

Lady Melbourne's dark eyes gleamed. "There, there, child. There's no need to be upset. I know— you love your husband. The rascal doesn't deserve an innocent like you. Not at all. Why the life he's—"

Lady Melbourne stopped suddenly, made aware by the stricken look, on her young listener's face that she had been overly frank. "Not that he does such things anymore," she hastened to add. "They say he hasn't even been to Harriette Wilson's since—"

She broke off in mid-sentence. "Now, now, my dear. I see I've upset you. But surely you know about Harriette. The Queen of Hearts, they call her. I'm sorry, truly I am, for saying such indelicate things. But you've nothing to worry about, really. It's plain as day that Burlingame dotes on you."

With that Lady Melbourne rose to take her leave. "You're looking a little peaked," she observed in motherly tones. "Perhaps you'd better lie down for a while. I'll send your Meg up to you as I go."

"Yes, thank you. I am feeling a little unwell." In a daze Rebecca watched Lady Melbourne make her way to the door. Her thoughts were all in a whirl. She

was glad that the voucher for Almack's was coming, glad that she could report to Burlingame with something good. But then Lady Melbourne's words swept through her mind. Robert could not possibly dote on her. Much as she wished to believe such a thing, she found it impossible.

It was his concern for the Burlingame name that accounted for his actions, that and nothing more. And as far as Lady Melbourne's assurances that he had not been seen at Harriette Wilson's—Burlingame needn't visit a demirep. Lady Catherine was certainly available.

Rebecca shook her head. No, as much as she admired Lady Melbourne's astuteness, in this matter she was mistaken. Burlingame did not dote on his wife; he could barely tolerate her company. A sob broke from her at the thought. Dear God, what she wouldn't give to make Lady Melbourne's words come true!

When Meg entered the room later, it was to find her mistress dissolved in tears. "My lady!" Meg hurried across the room. "What is it?"

Remembering her position, Rebecca stifled a sob. "I—I am unwell. I've such a horrid headache."

"Come, m'lady. Lie down for a while, and I'll put a cold cloth on your head."

As Rebecca surrendered herself to Meg's ministrations she wondered with bitter amusement how one could put a cold cloth on an aching heart.

By mid-afternoon Rebecca was feeling better. Meg's gentle care and her own determination had brought her back from the despair into which Lady Melbourne's careless words had plummeted her. She was still Burlingame's wife. No amount of Lady Catherine's or Harriette Wilson's could change that.

She had even picked up the miserable needlework again, grimly intent on making perfect stitches. She had just stabbed her finger for the fourth time with what appeared to be a singularly vicious needle when Amy appeared at the door to announce that Lady Catherine was below.

Rebecca's cheeks reddened, and she rang hurriedly for Meg. "Tell Lady Catherine I shall be down directly."

Amy's round face reflected some concern and Rebecca wondered immediately if all the servants knew of Robert's connection with Lady Carrington. Then Meg appeared in the doorway.

"Lady Catherine is below, Meg. You may bring your needlework and attend me." Rebecca hoped that her voice held no hint of the fear that gripped her heart. At least Meg's face gave no sign that she saw anything out of the ordinary as she snatched up her embroidery and followed.

"Lady Catherine, how very pleasant to see you." Rebecca advanced across the library to the chair where Lady Carrington, in a dress of green-sprigged muslin, sat impatiently tapping a green kid slipper.

The cat eyes lit up maliciously. "Your manners are good, at least," Lady Catherine observed, rising suddenly. "But I didn't come here to bandy words about. Nor do I need to be polite." Her eyes shifted to the corner of the room where Meg bent unobtrusively over her embroidery. "I had hoped to see you alone. Such things are better discussed in private."

Rebecca reddened at this slur on Meg's character. "I have complete confidence in Meg's discretion," she said in what she hoped were haughty tones.

Lady Catherine chuckled dryly. "I should have thought that by now you would have less confidence in your ability to discern character. Ah, well," she said, tossing her head of splendid hair indifferently. "That is your business."

Lady Catherine extended a small wrapped parcel. "This was left in my room by mistake," she declared, and Rebecca wondered at the strange glow in her eyes. "I thought I should deliver it myself rather than entrust it to a servant. They do gossip so."

She moved toward the door. "I shan't task your hard-worn hospitality any further," she said. "Your butler can let me out."

It was some moments after the front door closed and the sound of Lady Catherine's carriage had disappeared down the street before Rebecca could bring herself to glance at the package in her hand. Whatever it held, whatever reason had prompted Lady Catherine to bring it to her, there was no good intent behind it. Of that Rebecca was quite sure.

Finally she turned, to find Meg's brown eyes surveying her with worry. "I believe I'll go back upstairs, Meg. Do you come along."

Moments later Rebecca's trembling fingers were unwrapping the parcel. It was good that she was seated on the little divan, for when the wrappings fell away and Rebecca's hand unfolded a wrinkled length of white cloth, a moan escaped her. It was a cravat, a worn cravat. Now Rebecca knew why Lady Catherine's feline eyes had gleamed so. This was Robert's cravat, left there during some hour of dalliance.

Her fingers closed around the offending material. "No, oh, no!" she moaned softly. It was one thing to suspect but quite another to have the proof right there at her fingertips.

Rebecca's misery was interrupted by Meg's firm tones. "Your ladyship, sure, an you don't believe it. Not his lordship."

"It's plain, Meg," Rebecca forced the words out. "It's his. Oh, I feared this so."

As the tears poured down her cheeks she knew that she should stop crying, that she should make an effort to pull herself together. But it was no use. She *felt* like a miserable little girl.

"'Tis a stock," Meg said as though to a child. "But what does that signify? Every lord in London wears a similar one. Why, it could belong to any of them."

Rebecca wanted to take hope from Meg's statements, but she could not. "It's his, Meg. I'm sure of it. She wouldn't dare lie about a thing like that."

"It's my opinion *that* one would lie about her own mother," was Meg's sharp reply. "Come now, ye've got to stop these tears. It's all blotchy you'll be getting. And his lordship'll be home to dinner soon. You'll not be wanting him to see you in suchlike. Come now, come and lie down a bit and I'll wipe your

face with a clean cloth."

As Rebecca submitted to Meg's care, a fresh cause for misery came to her. She must see that the cravat reached Burlingame's hands. And she must do that herself. Lady Catherine had been right about one thing. It wasn't wise to have servants involved in such matters. Meg she could trust implicitly, and she had no doubts about Peters. But she was certain that Burlingame would expect to hear about the visit from her own lips. No doubt he would expect her to behave quite coolly and calmly when she handed him the cravat he had so carelessly left behind in his inamorata's boudoir. And she would do that, she told herself grimly. She would quite casually announce to him that, her sins having been forgiven, the voucher from Almack's was on its way. And then she would nonchalantly hand him the package and remark easily that he seemed to have left this at Lady Catherine's.

Rebecca sat up in the huge red-and-gold bed. "Meg, find Peters and tell him I must have a word with Lord Burlingame before we dine."

"Yes, m'lady. I'll do that right now."

Meg's bright eyes seemed to register approval, Rebecca thought as the door closed behind her. Doubtless she thought her young mistress was going to take her husband to task for his peccadillo. A bitter smile curved Rebecca's mouth. How little Meg knew of the true state of affairs.

* * * *

Rebecca had changed into a pale pink dress trimmed with knots of coral ribbon and had been pricking alternately at her fingers and the needlework for well over an hour when the sound of Burlingame's boots was heard in the hall. His brisk knock on the door caused her to start and stab her finger again. Then Meg opened the door and with a quick, encouraging grin slipped out, closing it behind the advancing Burlingame.

"Peters tells me you want to see me," he said, his dark eyes surveying her.

Rebecca nodded. From the looks of his dusty boots and his riding clothes he had come directly to her.

His eyes lit on the needlework. "Have you summoned me in order to show me your mastery of the needle?" His smile was meant to take the sting out of the words.

Rebecca flushed and thrust the offending work behind her. "No. I do have some good news though." He frightened her, towering over her as he did. "You must be tired, my lord. Sit down."

Smiling wryly, Burlingame settled his long, lean form on a lyre-back chair and extended booted legs. "I'm exceedingly pleased to hear that you have good news."

Rebecca found herself clutching her fingers nervously in her lap. "Lady Melbourne was here this morning. She says that Lady Jersey and Princess Lieven have interceded for me. My voucher to Almack's is on the way."

Burlingame sighed affectedly. "I suppose that means I must escort you there."

"I thought you should be glad that our name is no longer in disgrace.*"

Something flickered across his face, and his tone was gentle as he said, "I beg your pardon, Rebecca. I was only teasing you. I'm really most pleased that we are no longer in disgrace. And I'll be happy to escort you to the next ball at Almack's."

He pulled up his legs as though to rise. "There is something else, milord." Rebecca forced herself to go on calmly. "Lady Catherine paid me a visit this afternoon. She was returning this to you." She reached for the package at her side. Her mouth only trembled a little as she continued. "She felt it best, she said, that no servants should be involved in the matter. She seems to think that servants gossip."

She could not keep the unshed tears from making a lump in her throat, but she could continue to hold her head proudly high. And her hand, she saw as she extended the package to him, was really quite steady.

Burlingame, whose eyebrows had risen quizzically during this recital, removed the wrappings from the parcel. There was a long silence while Rebecca fought hard to keep back the tears.

When Burlingame finally spoke, it was in a voice so grim that it made her heart flutter. "She told you this cravat was mine."

Rebecca nodded.

"She said I left it in her rooms."

"Yes." Rebecca managed to get the word out.

"I see."

Frightened as she was, Rebecca would not lower her eyes and so saw with what effort he restrained his anger. Though his brows met in that ferocious line, his voice was quite calm as he spoke. "I am sorry that Lady Catherine saw fit to bother you with such a triviality. It was unnecessary. I shall see that it does not happen again."

His eyes as they met hers were hard and unfathomable. "I trust you remember that we attend the opera tonight. I shall see you at dinner."

"Yes, Robert." She even managed a smile. And then he was gone, striding lightly out the door and over to his room. And Rebecca, staring before her while the tears ran silently down her cheeks, could only repeat to herself, "a triviality, he called it a triviality."

For a moment longer she allowed the tears to fall, and then she rose resolutely and began to wash away the telltale signs from her face. There was no need for Meg to know that her fears had been confirmed. That would remain her secret.

And tonight at dinner, and at the opera, she would hold her head high. It was not so unusual for a man of the world, a man with an innocent young wife, to form another attachment. But much as she would have liked to deny it to herself, she knew that her love for Burlingame could brook no rivals. As long as he cared for anyone else, demirep or lady, her life would be one of agony.

With a grim face Rebecca moved toward the wardrobe. It was time to search for a dress in which to face the opera and the eyes of the *ton*.

Some time later, when Rebecca descended the curving stairway to the hall below, she was attired in a dress of pale green sarcenet trimmed with dainty seed pearls and knots of white ribbon. Meg had skillfully piled her hair and intertwined it with strands of white ribbon from which hung several large pearl drops. And around her neck she had fastened the necklace of emeralds set in silver that Burlingame had insisted on buying her. The necklace lay heavily there, as the memory of that day lay heavily in her mind.

As Rebecca reached the foot of the stairs the front door opened to admit Jamie. She had seen relatively little of him in the last few weeks, and she sorely missed his company. "Oh, Jamie. I'm glad that you're dining at home today."

Jamie shook his dark head sadly. "I've no spirit for anything anymore, Rebecca," he said, walking with her toward the library. "The mill, the racetrack, the cards at White's—nothing."

Rebecca, her own troubles forgotten, eyed him anxiously. "Oh, Jamie, I am sorry. What is it?"

"It's Amelia, that's what it is. I'm clean out of my mind with worry. Stapleton's been pressing her to have this Cavendish—a dreadful fellow. A fat cit merchant, fifty years old, but he's offered to clear all Stapleton's debts. And they are many. He's been gaming heavily. And losing."

Rebecca was confused. "But couldn't you do that?"

"I could and I would," Jamie frowned. "I've got a considerable income of my own. But Stapleton won't have it. He has some crackbrained notion of honor. He won't take money from a fellow lord. Oh, Rebecca, I'm at my wit's end. I just don't know what to do."

Jamie threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, Jamie. It can't be that bad. We must think of something."

"There's nothing, Rebecca, I tell you. Nothing. That fat toad will have her."

Rebecca swallowed twice, remembering her conversation with Burlingame. Then she spoke softly. "There's . . . there's Gretna Green."

Jamie raised his head and stared at her in astonishment. "An elopement! I can't subject her to that. Amelia's not like you. She's a fragile thing. To fly to Scotland—" He shook his head.

"Women are very strong where love is concerned," Rebecca said emphatically. "I am quite sure that Amelia would go with you. And consider, Jamie, what would be harder on a girl of her sensibilities? An elopement or marriage to a man like Cavendish?"

For a long moment Jamie considered. Then he leaped to his feet. "I'll do it, Rebecca. I'll do it!" He glanced anxiously at the door, as though he might leave that very minute to put his plan in action.

"Gently, Jamie." Rebecca laid a restraining hand on his arm. "You cannot go storming up to the house and make off with her. We must use caution."

Jamie smiled. "Of course, Rebecca, you're right." His smile sobered. "You'll be in the briars with Rob over this if he finds out."

"There's no need for him to find out," Rebecca said, hoping the words were more convincing to Jamie than they were to her. She was sure that eventually, in some fashion, Burlingame would be apprised of her role in things. But that did not deter her. She had faced his wrath before—and for a far lesser cause. This time, at least, she *knew* she was in the right. In spite of Burlingame's ridicule of it as green sickness, Rebecca knew with a certainty that could not be denied, that love was the most important thing in the world.

"Don't despair, Jamie," Rebecca whispered as they made their toward the door. "I shall enlist Meg's help. Between us we'll find a way. I'm sure of it."

Jamie's smile was sufficient reward, but she could not help but relish the brief ebullient hug that also enveloped her. Ah, she thought as they entered the dining room where Burlingame waited, if only her husband would do that much for her, just that much.

The meal seemed long to Rebecca, and conscious of the incriminating role she intended to play in Jamie's elopement, she found it difficult to meet Burlingame's gaze. But gradually she grew a little more comfortable. Perhaps, she told herself, something else would happen, and she would not have to do something she knew quite well Burlingame disapproved of.

Jamie, in more hopeful spirits now, recounting tales of events at different mills and fairs he had attended, had them all laughing. Burlingame looked happier than he had for some days. "I'm glad to see you coming out of the sulks, Jamie. This business of love is for lads in short coats and country misses, not for men."

Rebecca, biting back her own reply, hoped that Jamie would be equally circumspect. This was not the time for a valiant defense of love. Fortunately Jamie, too, seemed aware of that and held his tongue.

Then, finally, her long cloak wrapped securely around her to ward off the chill, she was handed into the carriage. To her surprise, Burlingame settled beside her, and then she realized why. Jamie was going to the opera, too, and this way Burlingame would not even have to look at her. Still, she told herself firmly, she would not behave like a crybaby. She was going to the opera with two charming, handsome men. She gave Jamie a little smile. "I've never been attended by two such handsome men before," she said, striving for a little gaiety in her voice. "I shall be the talk of the whole opera."

It wasn't until she felt a sudden stiffening of the man beside her that she realized she had said something wrong. Jamie, fortunately, did not seem to notice anything amiss. And as Burlingame remained silent, he gallantly replied, "Yes, but we are escorting the most beautiful lady in London. So that is

most appropriate, isn't it, Rob?"

Rebecca, flushing in the dimness, hoped that Burlingame would have sense enough not to let Jamie see his anger. To her relief his voice sounded quite calm. "You're right, brother. Rebecca is quite lovely tonight." These words, which once would have made her heart beat with joy, were only, she recognized sadly, meant to deceive Jamie.

They were soon at the Haymarket, and Rebecca accepted Jamie's hand to alight. She knew that Robert was giving directions to the coachman, but she shivered and drew the cloak closer around her. It would prove a most difficult evening if Burlingame remained angry throughout it.

But once they were inside she felt Burlingame draw her arm through his, and even though she was well aware that it was for the benefit of the *ton*, she felt her heart lighten a little.

As Burlingame led her into the lobby, Rebecca noticed that nods and bows were aimed in their direction. They had again resumed their rightful place in the *ton*, accepted by the women in beautiful gowns baring their shoulders and their escorts in dashing uniforms blazing with military orders.

The lobby also held several flocks of young girls, each shepherded by an old woman in a duffle cloak and rusty black bonnet. Puzzled, Rebecca looked to Robert. "Who are the young ladies?" she asked softly. "Have they been brought from some young ladies' academy to hear the opera?"

Burlingame, casting an eye in their direction, scowled and refused to answer. But Jamie, still feeling the exhilaration of his decision to save his Amelia, chuckled. "There's no need to be so stuffy, Rob. After all, *you* told her about damping petticoats." He turned to Rebecca. "Those young 'ladies'"—his stress lent the word a debatable meaning—"are doxies—lightskirts. The old women are their keepers."

Shocked, Rebecca raised her eyes to Burlingame's lowering face. "I—I didn't know. They look so young, so innocent."

Burlingame was not appeased. "Looks are not everything in this world," he remarked darkly. "A most innocent-looking girl can also be a most accomplished doxy."

Rebecca's heart fluttered uncomfortably as she followed him through the red curtains and into their box. As she settled into her seat—glancing first up at the great flame-colored dome and then around her at the turbanned dowagers and bejeweled ladies, at the swells with their quizzing glasses held high as they regarded each other in the light of the thousands of candles—she realized suddenly that the sharp words had seemed directed at her. But if they were, what could Robert mean by them? For certainly, she thought, with a bitterness that did nothing to lighten the fact, there could be no girl in all of London more innocent of that kind of experience than she.

Chapter 13

The days sped by. All of London was agog over plans for Prinny's August First Victory Celebration. Society, much of which had not deserted the city as was its usual custom in July, could talk of nothing else. Rebecca discovered this as, with all forgiven, she received and returned innumerable calls.

Burlingame seemed to pay her scant attention. He was always riding off on business. Many times he announced that he was going to Roedown and would spend the night there. Rebecca, haunted by visions of Lady Catherine in his arms, could only nod and wish him a good journey.

She had to admit that the idea of Jamie's elopement was made somewhat easier by Burlingame's absence. Somehow it was difficult to think about such things when he might at any moment walk in, looking as though he could read her thoughts. And with the handsome young Emperor returning to his Russia, her husband could not accuse her of tarnishing their name.

When Burlingame was at home, he scrupulously escorted her to Almack's, to Drury Lane, to the Haymarket. Sometimes he rode with her in Hyde Park of an afternoon.

But now that the Season was over he was increasingly absent, and Jamie was her almost constant escort. At least, Rebecca thought with heavy heart, Burlingame would not accuse her of casting out lures for his brother.

Together, as they rode or strolled under the trees, Jamie and Rebecca proposed and discarded various plans to rescue Amelia. Their spirits were high. Nothing could persuade Rebecca that the cause of true love was not worthwhile, and Jamie, having finally decided upon action, was content to wait until they found the most opportune plan.

Sometimes when she was alone, especially as she struggled with the detestable needlework, Rebecca suffered grim forebodings. At these times her imagination inevitably conjured up visions of Burlingame's outraged countenance when he realized that his lady wife had once more got herself in the briars.

But what else was there to do? she asked herself. Jamie and Amelia must be helped. And Burlingame would not do it, not the man who smiled so sardonically and relegated love to halfings and schoolroom misses.

Meg, her brown eyes wide with excitement at such romantic doings, had already been called into service. She had managed to make a friend of Amelia's abigail, a girl whose hand had already received Jamie's bounty, but one also genuinely devoted to her mistress. And so the missives, previously rather perilously passed to the abigail by Jamie, were now much more easily transferred by Meg. And little notes of Amelia's, written in spite of her brother's dire threats, similarly made their way to Jamie's eager hands.

In his letters Jamie implored his love not to lose heart. They would flee first to Gretna Green and then face the world's displeasure together. With trembling pen, Amelia had concurred. But they must wait, she said. Perhaps something would happen to change her brother's mind. Perhaps he would still relent. This, of course, was Rebecca's devout hope.

* * * *

And so the days went by. When the great day of the celebration arrived, Rebecca, caught between hope for Jamie and despair for herself, was uncertain whether to wish for Burlingame's escort to the Victory Celebration. He had set out early in the morning in spite of the rain, and he had not mentioned the celebration to her. Perhaps he would be too busy on the mysterious business that called him so often to Roedown, a business Rebecca was sure had to do with a red-haired beauty.

Still, as she stood in the drawing room arranging the lovely flowers that Spence had cut for her, she couldn't help wishing that Burlingame would come home in time. She missed his company. Even, she thought with a wry smile as she moved a rose, even if he were as cold and distant as he had been so often of late, she wanted to be with him.

She had moved back, hands on her hips, and was thoughtfully studying the effect of another rose when a voice from the doorway startled her. "So, little wife, you have taken up flower arrangement."

Flushed, Rebecca turned to face him. "Robert. You are home."

"Indeed, I am." His dark eyes were veiled. Try as she would, she could read nothing there.

"I have sped back to London in order to take my dutiful wife to Prinny's Victory Celebration."

She couldn't help flinching at his tone and the use of the word "dutiful," but she replied as calmly as she could. "They say it will be a truly great sight." She knew that her voice was quivering, but she couldn't help it. It seemed impossible that he shouldn't already be able to read her misdeeds in her eyes.

Indeed it seemed he did see something there, for his mouth tightened in the grim line she so hated, and his voice held no gentleness as he said crisply, "I thought that you would want to attend the celebration. I finished up my business at Roedown so that I might be here to escort you."

"Thank you, Robert." Her lips wanted to tremble, but her voice was even. "I do want to see the celebration. And I shall be glad of your company. Jamie, of course, had offered to take me. I expect he shall come with us."

She had let her eyes fall and thus did not see the darkness of his glance or his scowl. Nor did his voice indicate any anger as he replied calmly, "If that is how you wish it."

His words seemed strange to her. Did not Robert want his brother along? She raised her eyes to his face, and her heart fell. He was plainly very angry. Panic washed over her. Had he in some way discovered their hopes for the elopement?

Her stricken expression was plainly visible for a moment, and then, realizing that if he knew of such an arrangement he would already be giving her a

scold, she tried to pull her features together. "Of course I would wish it so, Robert. Don't you?"

His eyebrows still drawn together in a thunderous scowl, he ignored the question, merely giving her a curt bow and saying, "I shall see you later then," he was gone. Rebecca reached blindly for another rose and then stood staring stupidly at the scarlet spot of blood on her finger caused by an unseen thorn. For the thousandth time she asked herself the unanswerable question. What had she done to offend him this time? And why should he be angry with Jamie? Jamie had been the best of brothers. She had deliberately discouraged the gentlemen callers who had attempted to pay her court, and certainly Burlingame knew that she could not go around London of an evening without an escort. And since she had chosen his own brother, his name should be safe enough.

Rebecca thrust the last rose into the vase with savage disregard for the niceties of floral composition, then turned away.

* * * *

The morning's rain had left London cool and comfortable, and as Rebecca came down the stairs toward mid-afternoon, she carried her long cloak over one arm. If the Prince's celebration went as the papers had proclaimed, it would be late before they returned to Grosvenor Square.

Rebecca cast a quick look at Burlingame's face, but it was calm and serene. Before he could speak Jamie came hurrying down the stairs. "Well, I'm all set for Prinny's fireworks, Rob. Lead on."

Rebecca's spirits lightened a trifle as Burlingame slipped her arm through his. "We have tickets for St. James's Park," he said. "I expect Rebecca will be more comfortable there. They're providing an enclosure for ticket holders."

As the carriage moved slowly through the streets Rebecca looked around her in amazement. She knew that London was a bustling city, but the huge crowd that packed the street from side to side seemed utterly impossible.

On every side the crowd pressed close, and only by extreme effort did Burlingame avoid trampling various people under the hoofs of his smart bays. By the time they reached St. James's Park the press of people had grown even more intense. Rebecca, fighting her fear of descending into such a mob of humanity, cast a frightened look at Burlingame. "It will be more comfortable in the enclosure," he said calmly. Finding herself more frightened of him than of the press of people, she obediently put her hand in Jamie's and descended. With a brief word to his groom, Burlingame leaped lightly down beside her.

Rebecca, glancing down at her dress of pale green trimmed with seed pearls, wished momentarily for her old stableboy clothes of serviceable fustian. *Wouldn't it be fun, she thought, to slip through the crowds and investigate all the booths that have sprung up in the park, to look into each marquee and see what its canvas roof covers, to drink lemonade and sit on the grass, and never, never again have to worry about being a lady?* But such thoughts were childish. For Burlingame, settling her on a bench, said crisply, "I'll bring you some lemonade."

"I say," Jamie settled beside her and whispered softly, "do you suppose old Rob's got wind of the plot we're hatching?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No, if he did we'd have had a royal scold by now. It's—it must be something else." She could not bring herself to discuss it anymore.

Curiously she looked around her. Farther away, outside the enclosure, she could see men and boys hitching themselves up into the trees for a better view. She smiled, thinking of Clem.

It seemed to be taking Burlingame a long time to get the lemonade, and then, on the far side of the enclosure, Rebecca caught a flash of red hair, and her heart threatened to leap out of her breast. Could that be Lady Catherine? Was she waiting there to speak to him a few quick words of love, to make their next assignation?

Burlingame materialized in front of her with a suddenness that caused her to start violently. His eyebrows elevated at the sight, but he made no comment, merely handing her the glass of lemonade.

"I expect we shall have a long wait," he observed laconically. "But we had best stay here. Prinny had these benches placed so that we could observe the pagoda on the canal. And if we leave our seats, we are not likely to find others."

Rebecca contented herself with looking at the crowds and at eying dubiously the curious seven-story pagoda that had been constructed on a special Chinese bridge over the canal.

Sometime later she was roused from her reverie by the sound of gunfire. "Look," Jamie cried in excitement. "Over there! The balloon!"

Outlined against the evening sky a balloon was slowly and majestically rising. In the brilliant car that hung below, decorated with four flags, stood a youthful aeronaut, waving several cards.

"It's Mr. Sadler!" Jamie cried. "He's a game one, that fellow. Imagine going up in the air."

Rebecca couldn't help laughing at the wistful-little-boy expression on Jamie's face. "I'd much rather have a good gallop on Starfire," she said.

Again there was a long period while Rebecca occupied herself with watching the ever-increasing crowd of people and listening to the strains of music coming faintly over the murmur of the crowd.

Finally, when darkness was descending, men hurried around lighting lamps and the Chinese lanterns that hung in the walks between the trees. Rebecca saw that some looked like Mr. Sadler's recently departed balloon, some like Noah's Ark. Some had paintings on them—not particularly good ones—of the Tower of Babel, the Chinese pagoda, Mr. Kean as Richard, and the Great Mogul.

The bridge, with the pagoda, was lighted and because of them the whole canal took on the appearance of a lake of fire.

As they watched, bemused by the spectacle, the sound of more cannonades came through the air. Rebecca glanced at Jamie questioningly. "It's the

fortress in Green Park. They're having a mock battle, and then the fortress will become a temple of peace."

Suddenly Rebecca caught her breath. With great whooshing noises huge rockets were flying above the pagoda, throwing out great bursts of many-colored sparks. Roman candles emitted blue stars, and balls of fire exploded high in the darkness, sending down showers of light.

"Perhaps we should have gone to Green Park," Jamie said. "I'd like to see the temple of peace. There's supposed to be water flowing from lions' jaws into golden basins and a detachment of Foot Guards on the roof. I heard about it from someone who knows." Rebecca could only smile at his enthusiasm.

Suddenly Burlingame spoke. "I see someone that I've been trying to reach for some time. I'll be back later."

Before Rebecca could muster her thoughts, he was gone, threading his way through the crowded benches. She watched until his dark head was lost from her sight. Somewhere in that darkness was a redheaded beauty waiting for him?

Robert had been very silent tonight, she thought. Perhaps he was regretting his marriage more than usual, sorry that he had come home from Roedown to spend a boring evening with her.

She swallowed hastily over the lump in her throat. How dreadfully dry it seemed. She turned to Jamie. "Would you get me another glass of lemonade?" she asked.

Jamie's forehead wrinkled in a frown. "I can't leave you alone in this crowd. And we can't leave our seats."

"For goodness sake, Jamie. There's a booth right over there. Why, you can see me from there. And I promise to sit perfectly still, right here."

Jamie still frowned, but she saw him measuring the distance with his eyes. Then, seeming satisfied, he nodded. "All right, but you sit right here."

She nodded. "I will. I'll watch the pagoda, though why on earth Prinny should have built it just to burn it up I'll never know."

Jamie shook his head, also watching the burning pagoda. "He probably wanted to give the people in this park as good a grand finale as they got in Green Park."

Rebecca shrugged. "I suppose so." She watched as Jamie made his way through the crowd, his dark head keeping him visible to her. The lemonade would taste good, she thought idly, watching as the pagoda continued to burn. Suddenly there was a strange buckling noise, and the building tilted toward the booth where Jamie stood purchasing her lemonade. It landed with a great crackling and scattering of flames, partly in the water and partly across the booth.

"Jamie!" The scream was torn from Rebecca's throat before she knew it. Then she was on her feet, using her hands, elbows, knees, anything to get her through the crowd to where Jamie was. Oblivious to everything but reaching his side, she lost a kid slipper, heard her fragile dress give as it caught on a bench. But nothing mattered, nothing but reaching Jamie.

If Jamie were gone—her heart sickened at the thought—also gone would be the only person for whom Burlingame really felt love. Driven even more frantic by the thought, she kicked and elbowed her way forward. But as she drew closer to the booth she was met by a frantic throng seeking to escape the sparks and burning timbers that had landed among them.

Rebecca was no match for them. Her other slipper was lost in the scuffle, and she heard her fragile dress rip again. All around she felt the pressure of bodies. The breath seemed to be squeezed out of her, and she felt panic, worse panic that she had known that day on the beach. For here there was no place to climb to escape the crushing human waves that threatened to engulf her, to knock her from her feet and smother her.

She struggled to keep erect, but she knew it was useless. She was going down—and under all those trampling feet there would be little hope. As her legs were knocked from under her, she heard herself scream, "Robert!"

And suddenly, miraculously, he was there. One strong arm encircled her waist and swung her up against his broad chest. She clung to him as a child clings to its mother, wrapping her arms securely around his neck.

Somewhere in the hazy recesses of her mind she knew they were in danger, but she was not frightened, not at all. It was like their perilous journey up the cliff—if Robert was there she was sure she was safe—and then everything went dark.

When she returned to consciousness, she had regained the comparative safety of the benches, where he had laid her down and was chafing her hands. Suddenly Rebecca remembered why she had been in that mob.

"Jamie!"

Burlingame's eyes met hers sternly. "Be still. Jamie's all right."

"No! No! You don't understand. The pagoda fell. He was in the booth getting me lemonade."

Rebecca struggled to escape his hands. Why didn't he do something? "Your brother," she cried. "Your brother is hurt. He may be dead!"

Burlingame shook his head. "No, Jamie's all right. You'll see." He glanced around them. "Carleton House to China orange he's looking around for you." He scanned the crowd, then pursed his lips and gave a piercing whistle. In a moment, back came an answering whistle.

Burlingame turned to Rebecca. "I told you. There's no need to fly into a pelter. Jamie's not one to be put out by a little burning kindling. You'll see your Jamie soon enough."

True to his word, in a few moments a scowling Jamie appeared. His face lit up in relief as he spied Rebecca and then, as his eyes took in her shoeless feet, her ripped and tattered gown, and the hair that had escaped to hang in disheveled curls around her shoulders, he exclaimed, "Rebecca!"

"Rebecca is well enough," Burlingame said dryly. "It's you for whom she is concerned."

"Me?" Jamie's amazement might have been comical at some other time, but bruised and exhausted as she was, Rebecca could not manage a smile.

"The pagoda-it fell-on the booth."

"Oh, that." Jamie shrugged in the best tradition of the swell. "Just a few sparks—that's all. Most of it fell into the lake."

At this point Jamie registered his brother's brooding expression and thought to explain. "Rebecca was thirsty. And the booth was so close. And she promised to sit still." The last was said in an accusing tone that plainly bespoke Jamie's vision of himself as the injured party.

"I did—" Rebecca acknowledged the truth impatiently. "I promised to wait. But when the pagoda fell—and I thought Jamie—" For a moment she was unable to go on. "He's your only family," she continued, hoping to pierce Burlingame's steely indifference. "I know how much you love him. I love him, too. He's like my own brother. The only one I've ever had." Her voice broke then, and the tears threatened to fall. "I'm sorry," she sobbed.

Something flickered in Burlingame's eyes and was gone, but his features relaxed a little, some of their sternness vanishing. "Now, now, little one. No need for waterworks. I'm not going to fly into a pet. It wasn't anyone's fault."

He looked around the park. "The problem now is to get you home." He sighed. "How are your walking legs, Jamie? I sent the carriage home. That crowd was no place for my bays. I thought to hire a hackney for the ride home, but I doubt there's a man in London who's driving this night."

"I'm game to walk, Rob, of course. But—" His eyes rested on Rebecca's stockings. "Rebecca can't—"

"Rebecca won't have to," Burlingame said firmly. "I've carried her before. Up the cliffs, in fact. You'll have to tell Jamie that tale sometime, my love."

To Rebecca the whole thing seemed like a dream. Then she was in his arms again, and because Jamie was there she told herself it was all right to wrap her arms around Burlingame's neck and press her cheek against his buff-stripped waistcoat. "My love," he had said. In jest, of course, but still he had said it.

"Fortunate, isn't it, Jamie," Burlingame said with a dry chuckle as he turned to begin the slow, difficult journey toward the gate and the safety of the house on Grosvenor Square, "most fortunate that our campaign to fatten her up has not succeeded. If it had, I should be carrying considerably more woman than I am."

Rebecca, her face pressed against him, did not hear any more. She felt so wonderfully good and comfortable, safe there in her husband's arms.

So it was that when sometime between one and two in the morning Fairley opened the door to them, most carefully preserving his dignity at the spectacle of the master carrying his young bride, Rebecca was quite surprised that the journey should have been so short.

She found herself carried upstairs and deposited on the big red-and-gold bed. Regretfully she removed her arms from around Burlingame's neck. "Her ladyship has met with an accident," Burlingame said calmly to Spence and Meg, both of whom hovered watchfully by the bed like mother hens. "She has not been injured, but the ordeal has been exhausting for her. She needs to be washed up and put to bed." He looked down at Rebecca. "Sleep well, my love," he said, smiling laconically.

Then he was gone and Rebecca, cosseted and cared for by two clucking hens, fell asleep at last, hugging the precious words "my love" like some magic amulet. Of course he had spoken in jest or for the benefit of the servants. But her last thought before sleep overcame her was the unspoken prayer that someday, someday soon, he might speak those words again—and mean them.

Chapter 14

It was several days before Meg and Spence, solicitous as they were over Rebecca, would allow that she was completely recovered from the ordeal. And indeed, she had to admit to herself that the experience had considerably unnerved her. Even worse than the encroaching waves of the angry sea at Roedown had been the terrifying surge of human bodies that had threatened to engulf her.

But nearly a week after the Victory Celebration she felt fully recovered. And Burlingame, when he came to see her in late morning, as he had done every day since the celebration, found her fully clothed and bent determinedly over her needlework.

Losing the battle to a particularly stubborn knot, she sighed in exasperation. Then, startled by the sound of his soft chuckle, she looked up to find him observing her with a warm smile.

One quick stride brought him across the room. In vain Rebecca strove to hide the needlework from him. Burlingame was quicker than she. One eyebrow cocked quizzically as he surveyed it with a half smile.

He dropped onto the divan beside her, consigning the offending material to the floor. "What is this that you are making?" he asked, merriment glistening in his eyes.

Rebecca felt the mischief rising in her. How she loved him when he was laughing and gay spirited like this.

"It's the top of a stool, m'lord. But I fear I'll never make a credible seamstress, not if I live to be a hundred."

Burlingame reached for her hand. "Perhaps it's well then that you are a marchioness and need never work for your living."

Rebecca, watching his dark head as he bent over her fingers, felt her heart pounding in her throat. He was so close—and she loved him so.

And then he exclaimed in surprise, "My God, chit! Whatever have you been doing to your fingers?" His eyes as he regarded her were quite sober.

"I—I'm afraid I've been pricking them," she faltered. "The needles, you see—" She attempted a little smile. "The needles seem to be after me. And bitter enemies they make, too."

The smile she had hoped for appeared on his face, and his voice lightened. "Do you enjoy then this torture?" he asked.

"Oh, no, Robert! Needlework is detestable. I hate the very sight of it."

His voice deepened. "Why then do you pursue it so diligently?"

For one brief moment she was afraid that the words "because I love you" that had risen unbidden to her lips had been spoken, but he continued to scrutinize her, plainly waiting for an answer.

"I—I want to be a proper lady," she stammered.

Burlingame raised an eyebrow again. "A proper lady would hardly go around with fingers looking like a sieve. Have you nothing else to do? Have you sufficient books in the house?"

"Yes, Robert. Though I haven't read much lately."

"I see." Burlingame appeared to be thinking deeply. "Well," he said finally, "I see I shall have to take drastic steps."

Rebecca stared at him in bewilderment.

"I shall have to forbid you ever to use a needle again." His eyes sparkled at her. "You would not disobey your lord, would you?"

An answering sparkle appeared in Rebecca's eyes. "Oh, no, m'lord, and most especially not in a matter like this," she replied gaily. And if her heart gave a little flutter at the great disobedience she might have to do in helping Jamie, she managed to dismiss it.

Burlingame took her face between his two hands and regarded it seriously. Rebecca, closing her eyes because his nearness so unnerved her, could not help trembling under the touch of his strong yet gentle fingers.

"Yes," he remarked finally. "I believe you are sufficiently recovered."

Rebecca's eyes flew open. Could he be intending to take her back to Roedown?

"No need to look so startled. Jamie and I are planning an excursion to Vauxhall Gardens. I simply wanted to assure myself that you are fully fit."

"Oh, I am, Robert. Shall we go tonight?" If Robert stayed in this same happy mood, what fun they could have in the gardens—fun together.

Burlingame nodded. "Yes, I shall make the plans." He smiled at her again as he bent to retrieve the offending needlework. "Just to be sure that you obey, I shall take this vicious piece of trouble with me. And you are never more to bother your head about such things. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Robert. And—and thank you." Her lips curved in a mischievous smile. "You seem to have rescued me again."

Burlingame chuckled. "May all my rescues be so easily effected." His fingers reached out briefly to touch her cheek, and then he was gone.

For a moment Rebecca sat silent, her own fingers pressed to that warm spot on her cheek. Then she sprang to her feet and rang for Meg.

The maidservant, when she arrived moments later, found her mistress bright eyed and rosy cheeked. "Oh, Meg, guess what? His lordship has absolutely forbidden me to touch another needle—ever. And we—we are going to Vauxhall Gardens tonight. And—what *is* the name of that novel Lady Melbourne was talking about last week? Run quick to the lending library and get me a copy. I shall spend the afternoon reading."

Meg, whose own eyes had begun to sparkle at the sight of Rebecca's happiness, answered quickly, "I'll do just that, your ladyship. My, but he's a great one, his lordship is."

"Yes, Meg. Yes, he is." The joy in Rebecca somehow kept her from sitting quietly. "I believe I'll just go walk in the gardens for a while till you come back with the novel. I'm feeling so much better."

"Yes, your ladyship."

It was Meg's private opinion, as she hurried off to the lending library, that what had put the bloom in her mistress's cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes had much more to do with the cherished attentions of Lord Burlingame than with the disappearance of the offending needlework.

* * * *

When Rebecca descended the stairs to meet her husband and his brother that evening, her heart was pounding in joyous anticipation. Meg had chosen for her a dress of palest peach muslin trimmed with brown velvet. The same kind of dark ribbon confined her curls. Over one arm she carried the cloak that Meg, with a worried smile, had insisted upon.

As she neared the bottom step Rebecca was conscious of two pair of eyes upon her. Burlingame and Jamie, both wearing blue coats of superfine and well-fitting fawn inexpressibles above gleaming black boots, were by far the two handsomest men in London, complete to a shade. She told them so gaily. "Though I must admit," she added with a devilish grin at Jamie, "that I prefer Robert's plain buff waistcoat to your striped one."

Jamie returned the grin. "Ah, well, since I'm still the second-best-looking swell in London, I suppose I'll have to settle for that."

"Enough, you two." Burlingame's tone mocked severity, and his eyes sparkled. "We've a ride yet to Vauxhall."

The ride passed pleasantly, with Burlingame and Jamie laughing and chaffing at each other in a way that reminded Rebecca of the early days of their marriage. Oh, it was good to be so happy. Resolutely she quelled the little pang of disloyalty that threatened when she thought of what havoc Jamie's elopement plans would wreak on this new-found amity. But perhaps it would not be necessary, she told herself, perhaps Stapleton would come to his senses.

Long before she thought they should arrive, they were in the gardens. Arm in arm with her escorts, Rebecca sauntered down the paths among the trees where Chinese lanterns threw dancing lights into the shadows. They paused for a moment before the statue of Handel.

"The old king," said Burlingame, "greatly admired Handel. It's said that he still enjoys his music."

For a moment Rebecca thought with pity of the old king, shut up in the palace in his madness. And then the sound of the music reached her. "The orchestra pavilion is this way," Jamie said, setting confidently off down a path. And she and Burlingame were pulled along.

They stood outside the pavilion, which in the flickering lights of hundreds of lamps looked like something out of a fairy tale, a giant seashell upended by some whimsical giant. For long moments they watched and listened.

The music, Rebecca had to admit, was quite delightful, but even more so was the feel of Burlingame's arm against her side, the sound of his laughter, the smile on his handsome face.

As they strolled happily along down the avenues of trees, stopping now and then to admire a fine fountain or a beautiful cascade falling in sparkling tumbles among the rocks, she felt that perhaps this was all a dream. Burlingame seemed in such good spirits, and the way he looked at her and spoke to her, with the same jesting yet intimate tone he had employed in their discussion of the needlework that afternoon, made her heart sing with joy.

They had been sauntering for some time when they approached some paths that seemed, in contrast to the rest of the gardens, very badly lighted. Rebecca looked inquiringly at Burlingame. "How dark those pathways are. Have they run out of lamps?"

"No," Burlingame replied, silencing Jamie's guffaw with a stern look. "Those are called the Dark Walks."

"Whatever do they keep them so dark *for*?" Rebecca asked, still in her innocence.

Jamie's merriment could not be contained. "Oh, Rob, what fun Rebecca is. Come now, she's only asking a civil question."

Burlingame, his own face breaking into a smile, tried to look reproachfully at his brother and failed. "The alleys are left dark of a purpose," he said, then paused.

"Go on, Rob," Jamie urged. "You told her about damping petticoats."

Still trying unsuccessfully to frown, Burlingame continued. "Certain young ladies, of rather questionable prudence, sometimes walk there."

Rebecca was shocked. She knew enough of London and its ways to say, "In that horrid darkness? Why—why just think what might happen to them there!"

Jamie's merriment could not be contained. "Oh, Rebecca, you ninnyhammer. That's the whole idea. In the Dark Walks they may be approached by young gentlemen."

Rebecca shivered and drew closer to Burlingame's side. The very idea of being in such a dark place with a strange man frightened her. "I—I guess I am still a country miss about many things," she admitted.

To her surprise, Burlingame squeezed her arm comfortingly. "There's nothing wrong with innocence," he remarked with a look at Jamie. "It is an attribute sadly missing in most ladies."

"I say, Rebecca." Jamie apologized contritely. "I'd no intention of offending you. Don't fly up in the boughs on me now."

Rebecca smiled. "I'm not angry with you, Jamie. How could I be? You're the best brother in the world. Still," she could not help shuddering a little as squeals and laughter came to them out of the darkness, "I wish we might walk somewhere else, if you please."

"Of course." Instantly Burlingame was guiding them back toward the orchestra pavilion where the lilting music of a violin concerto hung in the warm night air. When it drew to a conclusion, Rebecca lifted a glowing face to Burlingame. "It's so lovely. Perhaps the music of heaven is like that."

"Perhaps," answered Burlingame, smiling gravely. "And perhaps the angels who listen to it are as lovely as you."

Confusion swept over Rebecca at such a compliment, and she knew that she colored up. Fortunately she need make no answer, for Jamie, hearing the compliment too, added enthusiastically, "You're so right, Rob." Then with a mischievous grin, he said, "Come now, Rob. You'll have to stop making your lady such compliments or the *ton* will think you a regular Jerry-sneak."

"I do not think yet," answered Burlingame with a sparkle in his dark eyes that made Rebecca's heart pound, "that I qualify for the sobriquet of henpecked husband."

"Jamie! How can you!" The words left Rebecca's mouth before she knew it, and she found herself regarded by two pair of gleaming dark eyes.

"How can I what?" Jamie asked, obviously enjoying his tease.

"How can you say that—that Robert is—" She faltered and could not continue.

"A henpecked husband? Why, hasn't he visited you every morning this past week?"

"Yes, but I was ill. The Victory Celebration— Surely there's nothing wrong with a man evidencing concern for his wife's health."

"Not in the least," Jamie conceded, and then, seeing her distress, he quickly changed the subject. "What do you say we find ourselves a supper box? I'm frightfully famished."

Rebecca, keeping her eyes on the ground, hoped that she hadn't angered Burlingame again. With a sigh she wished that others, like Lady Melbourne and Jamie, would not so misconstrue the dutiful attentions that Burlingame showed her. For being told such things as that he doted on her could only make her long, with all the love in her heart, to make them come true.

Then, just as she was ready to raise her head and make another remark to him, she heard the tinkling of a woman's laughter, and her heart fell. There was no mistaking the owner of the laugh, not ever. Rebecca raised her eyes and met those of Lady Catherine Carrington,

As usual. Lady Catherine was dressed in the extreme of fashion. And Rebecca, noting the way the pale coral of her gown seemed to draw out the copper glints of the lady's hair, felt herself once again an ignorant country miss. She, in her innocence, could never expect to win in competition with Lady Catherine. And indeed she could not blame Burlingame for being attracted by the charms so obviously offered him.

Lady Catherine's eyes, which had been regarding her with acute dislike, changed suddenly and moved seductively to Burlingame's face. "Well, Robert, I see that you are showing your wife about the city. It must all be so strange to her."

Rebecca suffered this affront in silence. For it did carry some truth. She felt Burlingame draw her closer to his side.

"I myself have enjoyed seeing London through clear, unjaded eyes," he said in the politest of tones.

Lady Catherine stiffened. "I trust that you received your property." Lady Catherine obviously enjoyed this thrust.

Rebecca felt Burlingame tremble with suppressed anger, but his voice remained cool as he replied. "Indeed, I'm quite sorry that you exerted yourself so. That matter was a mere trifle."

Lady Catherine, Rebecca saw with widening eyes, did not any more like such a matter to be described as a trifle than she had herself. But just as she appeared about to say something that Rebecca feared would be most indiscreet, she seemed to recollect that others were present. Stepping closer to Burlingame, she grasped his free hand. "I am deeply touched," she said in a voice of such seductiveness that Rebecca wanted to sink for very shame, "at this *continued* evidence of your regard for me."

Then, before Burlingame could reply, she had turned to her escort and swept away. For some moments the three of them stood in silence. Finally Jamie spoke. "I say, Rob, what the devil was she chattering about. It sounded for all the world like—"

Burlingame cut him off with a scowl. "The subject is not open to discussion," he said firmly. "And I'll thank you not to mention it again. We came here, I believe, for an evening of entertainment." Fortunately for Rebecca's peace of mind, Jamie heeded this reproof, and the subject was dropped.

Soon they reached an empty supper box, and with relief Rebecca dropped onto the seat. In a moment Robert and Jamie were beside her. Conscious of their eyes on her she rallied her spirits. She would not let Lady Catherine spoil her beautiful evening.

And so, when she raised her eyes, she forced a smile to her lips, a smile, she saw, that was greeted by relieved smiles on the faces of her men. "It's so delightful here," she said softly. "And indeed, I am very thirsty. What shall we have to eat?"

Burlingame's face still reflected concern. "Perhaps we brought you out too soon. If you're tired— We needn't wait for the fireworks. We can leave right away."

"Oh no!" Rebecca was reluctant to cut the evening short. For who knew, she told herself, when she should again find Robert in such good spirits. "I'm fine, Robert, really. And I do so want to see the fireworks."

Burlingame's face relaxed, "In that case we shall order some supper. But, mind you, I expect to be told immediately if you should feel tired or unwell."

"Yes, Robert," Rebecca replied with an exaggerated meekness that made Jamie break into laughter.

"Well," he said, "if that is all settled, can we get some food? This rambling has made me infernally hungry."

Burlingame smiled. "Well, then, we'll have the usual Arrack punch, shaved ham, custard, and syllabub laced with wine. I suppose that will have to sustain you until we reach home."

Grinning ruefully, Jamie conceded that he supposed it must serve. And so they made a little supper. Rebecca, her spirits wonderfully revived, found herself once more very happy. Oh, if life with Robert could always be like this, she thought as she laughed with them over one of Jamie's droll stories.

The time passed so cheerfully and quickly that the sudden ringing of a bell startled Rebecca, who jumped up and found herself in a flurry.

"Shall we step outside where we can enjoy the fireworks better?" Burlingame asked.

As Rebecca followed him from the box she found him waiting to slip the cloak around her shoulders. A warmth that had nothing to do with the cloak poured over her. "Thank you, Robert," she murmured, as tucking her arm again through his, he led her toward the fireworks. As the girandoles whirled round and round, shooting off great showers of many-colored flames, and as the rockets exploded, filling the air with blue and green and gold and red stars and sending down trails of shining splendor, Rebecca stood silent with Burlingame's arm protectively around her.

Were the rockets in the sky, she wondered with trembling heart, any more powerful than the fireworks going on that very moment in her heart? Burlingame was being so kind to her. Was it possible that he had forgiven her whatever it was that had made him so excessively angry? She leaned just a little closer to his tall warmth.

When finally the great booming finale was over, Burlingame said quietly, "I believe it's time we went home. I don't believe Rebecca is yet quite recovered. And we have made a long night of it."

Reluctant as she was to end so beautiful an evening, Rebecca did not protest. For she found suddenly that she was rather tired. And the thought of being snugly in the carriage with Burlingame beside her was a pleasant one.

And so the three of them returned to the carriage. Burlingame handed her inside, and then he and Jamie got in. As Burlingame settled on the squabs beside her Rebecca stifled a sigh. But he saw it. "You see. I was right. I must get you home to the ministrations of Spence and Meg. Spence will give me quite a dressing down if you should become ill."

"Really, Robert, I'm quite fit. Just a little tired. It is late, you know. And Meg's had me abed at ten these last nights."

Burlingame chuckled. "Between the two of them you should certainly be well cared for. Especially now that you have given up that detestable needlework. You have, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes, Robert." Rebecca giggled. "Meg has taken away all my things and she has promised never to let any of her own vicious needles near me."

Jamie interrupted, his face in the lamplight reflecting his bewilderment "Vicious—needles?" he asked.

Burlingame laughed, a sound that made Rebecca's heart glow. "Tell him, my love. Tell him the story of my latest rescue."

Rebecca felt the joyous laughter bubbling up within her as she told Jamie of her efforts to learn needlework and Robert's decree against the disliked task.

Jamie chuckled. "I see. Old Rob always was the knight to the rescue. Many's the time he's pulled me out of the suds." The brothers exchanged affectionate smiles, and then Jamie laughed. "Of course, he did his share of tumbling me in, too."

Jamie began to recount the numerous misdeeds of their childhood, and when the carriage pulled up to the house in Grosvenor Square Rebecca could hardly believe they were home. She had listened intently to Jamie's tales of their boyhood scrapes and had been more and more pleased to realize that even in his mischief Burlingame had taken care to hurt no one.

She could, she felt, have stayed up much later listening to Jamie. But as they entered the front hall, Burlingame, giving his gloves and beaver to Fairley, said quite firmly, though with a twinkle in his dark eyes, "I'm afraid the rest of our adventures must wait for another occasion. Rebecca must rest."

"Goodnight, Jamie." With a little sigh that spoke plainly of the futility of even attempting protest, she gave Jamie her hand.

"Goodnight, Rebecca. Sleep well." Jamie's grin indicated that he did not believe that Burlingame's only concern was her health and she fought a sinking feeling. Thank God Jamie had no idea of the truth.

She was surprised then as Burlingame pulled her toward him. "You will go to bed and not lie awake with a new novel, won't you, my love?"

Conscious of Jamie's amused glance, Rebecca could only murmur, "Yes, Robert." And then, as she saw his mouth descending toward hers, she closed her eyes.

It was a little kiss, the merest brush of his lips against hers. It was nothing like those other two kisses he had given her. This one was soft and friendly, tender, she thought, as with a smile to each of them she turned and made her way slowly up the curving staircase to where Meg waited.

Later Rebecca drifted off into a lovely sleep, the feel of Burlingame's lips still against hers, a lovely sleep in which he declared, quite to her amazement,

that he loved her.

Chapter 15

For several days after that everything went well for Rebecca. The world seemed so beautiful, even the August heat could not wilt her spirits. There was no further word from Amelia concerning her marriage to the fat Cavendish. Rebecca still cherished a hope that Amelia's brother might relent. Surely he could not be so heartless a man as to condemn his own sister to the embraces of a man that Jamie, with pardonable prejudice, characterized as a fat toad. Stapleton might be weak and heavily in debt from his gaming, but surely, Rebecca told herself, surely he loved his sister.

She kept that thought uppermost in her mind. For she greatly feared the loss of the new rapport between herself and Burlingame. Every morning he visited her in the sitting room as had become his custom when she was recovering from her fright at the Victory Celebration. Rebecca cherished those precious moments alone with him when they laughed and had fun together.

Sometimes she told him about the latest novel she had borrowed from the lending library. Sometimes she spoke of the time she spent in the garden or with Spence. Sometimes she told him how Clem, now eating enough for two boys, was growing apace and would soon, as he declared stoutly, "Be the bestest groom yer ladyship ever did see." On occasion she even regaled him with stories from Lady Melbourne's visits, stories about the latest doings of society's ladies.

And every morning, in what had become a solemn ritual, Burlingame took her hands in his strong brown ones and inspected them minutely. What strength there was in his long lean fingers, she thought. And yet how gently he held her fingers captive.

His inspection over, he would raise laughing dark eyes to hers. "I see that you have been obeying my orders—and most profitably. These are most assuredly the lovely hands of a lady."

Blushing, Rebecca received his compliments, wishing most fervently that now that he saw her as a lady he would also soon begin to see her as a woman—a wife.

One morning a week or so after their trip to Vauxhall, when she had almost resumed the busy rounds of a society lady, except of course for the time she kept sacrosanct for him, he smiled at her mischievously and announced, "My previous command to your ladyship being so well received, I have determined to issue another."

For one brief instant panic assailed her. Had he somehow discovered their elopement plotting? But then common sense asserted itself, and she realized that he would not approach such a serious subject in a lighthearted fashion. And so, laughing to cover her confusion, she asked brightly, "What, my lord, may that be?"

"I want you to go shopping. You've been in London several months, and except for the day that I took you myself, you've hardly been near a shop. Your allowance is not half spent."

"But I've so much. I need nothing."

"Need?" Burlingame's eyebrows rose. "Since when must a lady *need in* order to buy? I must insist that you go shopping today. All London will soon be talking of me as clutch-fisted if you do not spend some money."

Rebecca smiled, sensing that behind this raillery was a real desire of his. "Well, then, my lord, I shall do as you order. This very day. Though what I shall begin to buy—" She threw up her hands in despair.

Burlingame chuckled. "I have anticipated your problem. I have engaged Lady Melbourne to accompany you. She, at least, has no compunction about spending money. She should be here within the hour. I shall leave you now so that Meg can dress you. And," he said as he rose from the divan and pulled her to her feet, "I expect you to come home absolutely loaded with packages. And to order at least six new gowns. You can use several morning gowns, too," he added, eyeing the simple muslin dress that she was wearing.

"Six! Robert!"

"Six," he said sternly, glaring at her ferociously in a way that made her break into a giggle. "And two morning gowns."

"Yes, Robert, but—"

"No buts," he said, drawing her gently to him and dropping a quick kiss among her curls. "Be a good girl now."

Then he was gone and Rebecca, savoring that brief kiss, turned to the bell rope to summon Meg. Lady Melbourne, unlike many ladies of her acquaintance, was always on time for appointments.

* * * *

Lady Melbourne, Rebecca thought some time later, as they left Madame Dowd's establishment, did most assuredly know how to spend money. Rebecca's head spun at the very thought of the cost of the new dresses Madame Dowd had promised for "very quick delivery."

Rebecca herself thought that her very favorite was the pale green morning gown of crepe, with its delicate ruching of fragile white lace at throat and long, full sleeves. It would be just the thing to wear for Robert's morning visits.

"You're strangely quiet this morning," said Lady Melbourne as they made their way back toward the carriage. Before Rebecca could answer there was the clatter of approaching wheels, and another carriage drew to a stop behind theirs, a carriage lined in blue satin. From inside it descended a glowering man whose dark eyes looked fiercely haunted. Rebecca noticed immediately that he limped. The handsome man with the dark leonine head extended his hand to the woman in the carriage.

"Lord Byron," whispered Lady Melbourne. "And Harriette Wilson. Come, I daren't speak to him now she has him in tow. But I don't want to give him the

cut direct. And the man is such a devil. If he once lays eyes on you—and starts coming around—Burlingame will fly up in the boughs for sure."

As Lady Melbourne's carriage took off down the street, Rebecca found herself sighing. How could Lady Melbourne think that Byron, or Burlingame for that matter, could prefer her to the bright-eyed vivacious beauty that she had just seen? Certainly it was no wonder that Harriette Wilson was called the Queen of Hearts. That nickname fit her well, Rebecca thought, the memory of the laughing face still strong in her mind. Harriette Wilson, she found herself thinking, looked like an amusing person to know. Rather shocked at this discovery, she decided to keep it to herself.

From Madame Dowd's they journeyed to the milliners, where Lady Melbourne insisted on a poke bonnet so huge that Rebecca doubted her neck would support it. From there to a glove shop, where they purchased a pair of York tan gloves, several pairs each of lemon, stone, and lilac to go with her new gowns, and half a dozen pairs of white kid. "For evening wear," Lady Melbourne said. And then they proceeded to so many other shops that the carriage was soon overflowing with packages.

"Robert will be pleased," Rebecca said artlessly, looking at the accumulation of their purchases.

Lady Melbourne's laughter pealed forth. "That I should live to see the day that a man should be *pleased* to see his pounds departing." She shook her head. "It hardly seems possible."

Lady Melbourne's amusement seemed a little excessive to Rebecca. "Do husbands in London never rejoice to buy things for their wives?" she asked rather shyly.

Lady Melbourne laughed again. "Rarely indeed," she said. "But perhaps that is because most wives have spent their allowances long before the quarter ends. Or even before it begins!"

Rebecca sighed. London life still seemed very strange to her. Husbands and wives, instead of loving each other as she had been wont to believe they would, seemed intent on becoming enemies. One thing she knew for sure, however. No matter what the fashion she would continue to love Burlingame.

When finally there appeared to be no more fashionable shops that they had not visited, the carriage turned back to Grosvenor Square, where Rebecca and Meg alighted, arms full of bundles. Handing over the bundles and packages to Fairley to be carried, they hurried upstairs to unpack their treasures.

It was there that Jamie found them moments later. One look at his face and Rebecca dropped the lacy shawl she was holding and hurried to shut the door. "Jamie, what is it?"

Jamie sank into a lyre-back chair. "It's Amelia. Her abigail came while you were gone. They're sending her into the country tomorrow. The banns will be read there. And I'll never be able to get her away. Not with Stapleton and the dragon both there. It's all up, Rebecca. It's all up with us." Rebecca took a deep breath; now was not the time for despair. "Nonsense, Jamie. We still have tonight. Now don't sit there like a simpleton. We must think—think hard."

It was Meg, flushed and hesitant, who finally came up with the plan. "If we could smuggle miss out—in her abigail's clothes—"

Jamie's face lit up. "I'll be waiting with a closed carriage, just down the street."

"She'll need her maid, too," Rebecca said. "Especially on a journey like that."

"Her maid and me, we've been figuring," said Meg, eyes glowing with suppressed excitement. "We think we know just how to do it. The dragon, she goes to bed early. And Lord Stapleton stays late at White's. We can sneak her out the servants' quarter. We'll put a bolster in the bed, so it looks like she's sleeping."

"Meg, my girl, wherever did you get such a capital idea?" Jamie's eyes were alight, his despair vanished.

Meg smiled in triumph. "'Twas in a book we got from the lending library. You remember it, m'lady."

Rebecca nodded. So Meg was dispatched to tell Amelia's maid that their plan was to be put into action that very night. Jamie made off for his rooms to pack up what he would need, and Rebecca was left alone, surrounded by the packages that should have made Burlingame smile and now would only serve to increase his wrath.

The afternoon passed slowly. Meg returned and, with sparkling eyes that spoke her joy in such romantic goings-on, told them that all was planned. Amelia and her maid, both in maid's clothes, would wait until the dragon had retired and then sneak out the back and down the street to the waiting Jamie. "It'll all go just as easy as in the book," Meg said confidently.

Rebecca, mustering a smile for Jamie's sake, was not so sure. The nearer the elopement came the more harebrained it seemed. And she was increasingly haunted by visions of Burlingame's rage when the news reached his ears. The storm that would descend on her then would probably surpass any she had ever seen. The thought was terrifying.

And as the dinner hour approached she simply couldn't bring herself to face him. "Meg, I can't. I just can't," she told her worried maidservant "He'll know I've done something wrong the minute he sees me."

"Sure, an' his lordship couldn't be so cruel as to wish two lovers kept apart," said Meg soothingly.

But Rebecca, who knew better, could not be comforted. "No, no, I shall have to tell him I've the headache and can't come to dinner. And oh, Meg, I believe I really do."

"Now, now, m'lady." Meg's gentle hands guided Rebecca to the bed. "We'll just take care of that. Don't be worrying yourself none. Just leave it up to Meg."

Rebecca felt rather cowardly behaving in this weak way, but the thought of facing Burlingame with the terrible secret weighing on her heart caused her such distress that she felt truly ill. And so she accepted the cold cloths and lay thinking. Robert had said he would spend the evening out, probably at White's, she thought, though thankfully he was not a man to game away great sums, unlike the great lords who nightly gambled away thousands of pounds.

and sometimes their very estates, at the green baize tables in White's and Brook's and other such clubs.

Yes, she thought, if she avoided Burlingame at dinner, he would soon be gone. Then she would rise and help Jamie. With her help and Meg's they should be able to get his small bag into the carriage without Fairley suspecting anything.

She closed her eyes and dozed off. The sound of someone entering the room woke her.

"Rebecca, are you very ill?"

She opened her eyes to see Burlingame standing over her, a frown on his handsome features. He had apparently just risen from dinner.

"No, Robert, really. It's just the headache. It will pass." Her eyes lit on the bundles still awaiting his inspection. "I just overdid the shopping, I fear."

"Well, if you are quite sure. I don't like to leave you this way."

"I'm all right, Robert, really." Rebecca bit back the tears. How considerate he was, and how wicked she was to deceive him so. "You go now. I'll go to sleep early. And in the morning we'll look at my treasures."

A smile lightened his face. "I shall hold you to that," he said. "Till tomorrow. Sleep well, my love."

It wasn't till the door closed behind him that she realized that the two of them had been alone in the room. For whose benefit, then, had he uttered those beautiful words? But this was no time for speculation. This was no time for regret. Only time for wishing for Jamie and Amelia the love that would now never be hers.

Pent-up tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks to soak the pillow. How very much she loved him. And, she realized as the tears continued to fall, how many lovely dreams she had built on those last golden days. They were dreams now that would never see reality. And finally, when the pillow was practically soaked through, she forced herself to accept that inevitability and to turn her thoughts once more to the happiness of Jamie and his Amelia.

It was then that she bethought herself of something *she* could do to help. Amelia would need a bundle of things to take along with her. And it would make her departure much more dangerous if she should try to carry them out with her.

"Meg, is his lordship gone out?"

"Aye." Meg's eyes did not indicate that she found her mistress's present condition more satisfactory than the one in which she had left her. But she joined with a will in putting together a bundle of things for Amelia. "Put in my best cashmere shawl," Rebecca directed. "It may get chill in Scotland."

"Yes, m'lady."

Jamie arrived sometime later with a parcel of his own things in hand. He enveloped Rebecca in a great hug. "You're a spirited lass, Rebecca. And I thank you for all your help. Amelia will thank you, too. It'll be rough for a little when we return, but Amelia is such a good person that surely the ladies will forgive her eventually. They forgave you for dancing with the Emperor."

"Yes, Jamie, that's true. And you will have friends. I certainly shall not give Amelia the cut And Lady Melbourne may help us."

"Yes, yes. I'm sure it'll be all right. And don't you tease yourself about us. We'll be safe away before Stapleton has any idea. And when we come back it'll be to you. And don't worry about Rob. He'll never know you helped us."

Rebecca kept the encouraging smile on her face until the door shut behind him, and then she sank down on the huge bed. She knew as sure as she was living that Burlingame would discover her implication in this night's events. If he did not discover it from Jamie or Amelia, he could figure it out for himself once he learned the details of the elopement. And even if he didn't discover it from any other source, surely the guilt that so increasingly weighed on her heart would be written in the refusal of her eyes to meet his, in the tears that she was sure would spring unbidden to her eyes when he looked at her. Oh yes, in securing for Jamie and Amelia their happiness she had almost certainly destroyed the chance for her own.

In a short while Meg was back, wearing a smug grin. "They're both in the carriage, the bundles are. And he's well away. Now there's naught to do."

Rebecca, though she matched Meg's smile with one of her own, was not so sure. A feeling of impending disaster hung over her head. And so she did not undress for bed but wandered around the room and finally sat reading aloud the latest novel from the lending library.

Rebecca was hard put to pay heed to even the most distressing passages. They passed several hours in this fashion, and Meg had more than once suggested that Rebecca might now be assured of the lovers' safety and seek her own comfortable bed.

But Rebecca had demurred. "I cannot, Meg. I just cannot."

And then, right in the middle of an appalling passage, came a heavy pounding on the front door. Meg, visibly frightened, shrank down into her chair, but Rebecca, whose first thought was for Burlingame's safety, was on her feet instantly and speeding down the staircase.

She arrived just in time to see Fairley open the door to Stapleton. Swallowing quickly over the lump in her throat, she continued her descent.

"Where is he?" Stapleton demanded. "Where is Jamie?"

"I'm afraid Jamie is not at home this evening, Lord Stapleton. Can I be of assistance to you?" Rebecca realized with surprise that her voice was calm and steady, as with measured steps she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Lord Stapleton, turning wild eyes upon her, seemed to remember himself. "I must speak to Burlingame. Where is he?"

Behind him Rebecca saw the dignified Fairley signaling her "no."

"I'm sorry. Lord Stapleton." Rebecca managed a bored look. "But Burlingame doesn't always enlighten me as to his every move."

Stapleton continued to glare at her. "Well, tell Burlingame when he returns from wherever he's at, that his blackguard brother has eloped with my sister. And he's going to regret it. If he thinks to escape me, he's *dead* wrong."

Then the man was gone, and for a moment Rebecca could only stand stricken. Then Fairley spoke. "Don't worry, m'lady. Jamie will outrun them."

"But if a horse should go lame— Oh, there's murder in that man's eyes. Where—"

A sudden closing of Fairley's features told her plain as words that he was not going to divulge Burlingame's whereabouts. Rebecca turned and sped upstairs.

"Meg, quickly. We have to find Clem."

"Clem, your ladyship?"

"Yes. Get him to saddle Midnight. Robert will have to leave directly to reach them in time. Hurry."

Without another word Meg hurried out. Meanwhile Rebecca, rummaging in the wardrobe, finally found what she had been looking for—Meg's old duffle cloak with its large hood.

Rolling it into a ball under her arm, she slipped out and headed down the backstairs. Minutes later she, too, stood beside the great stallion Midnight. She put a quieting hand on his velvet nose. "Clem." She turned to the frightened boy who held the great beast's bridle. "We've important work to do this night. Do you know where his lordship is?"

Clem's dark eyes grew rounder, but he made no answer.

"You *must* tell me, Clem. You *must*. It's Master Jamie's life at stake."

"He—I heard him say he was going to that one's house. The Queen of Hearts."

Rebecca, her own heart fluttering wildly, heard Meg's rapid intake of breath, but there was no time now to be conscious of the pain. That would come later.

"Do you know the direction? Can you show me the way?"

Clem nodded. "But-but his lordship?"

Rebecca led the stallion out of the stable. "There's no time for talking, Clem." Throwing the cloak around her shoulders, she swung herself up into the saddle, heedless of the delicate fabric of her dress. She extended a hand to the boy. "You must ride in front to direct me."

Obediently Clem swung up. Then, as they turned away, Meg recalled her voice. "My lady, no. You mustn't." But Rebecca was already out, cantering off down Grosvenor Square to the amazed surprise of certain passersby on their dignified way to the theater.

Some minutes later they clattered to a halt in front of a fashionable well-lighted house. The two of them slid down. "Can you hold the stallion?" Rebecca asked.

"Aye. He likes me."

Rebecca waited for no more but sped up the stairs to pound on the door. It was opened by a butler quite as dignified as Fairley, she noted as she gasped out, "Lord Burlingame, I must see

him." The butler's cold eyes took in the cheap duffle cloak. Angrily Rebecca flung it open. "Please, I'm his lady. I must see him."

"This way, m'lady. You may wait in the little parlor."

As the door shut behind her Rebecca did not know if he believed her or not. Nervously she paced back and forth, suddenly aware that her gown was ripped up one side. No wonder the butler looked at her in such a strange fashion. Rebecca suppressed a giggle that verged on hysteria. Perhaps he thought she was some poor innocent that Burlingame had deluded. Or perhaps—

The door opened, and she whirled. "Burl—" It was not Robert who stood there, but another man, well foxed, she saw from his glazed eyes. Those eyes slid over her, coming to rest speculatively on the ripped gown. "So, my little dove," he said. "Did your last protector turn ugly?"

Rebecca shook her head violently and with a shiver clutched the old cloak around her. But the rake just laughed. "Innocence in distress, is it? I must say you play the part exceeding well. But no real innocent has set foot in this house for lo these many years."

In horror Rebecca watched as he drew closer. With every step he took toward her she took one away from him. And then suddenly she was brought up short against a sofa. So quickly did it happen that she was down and he was upon her before she had time to think.

She fought then, with every ounce of strength she had. But he was a big man, and he entangled her in the folds of the cloak. She screamed once, summoning all her strength, and then she thought hope was gone.

As the overpowering smell of brandy filled her nostrils, the man was suddenly wrenched from her and flung bodily across the room. Then Burlingame was dragging her to her feet and glaring down at her. "Little fool! What are you doing here? Have you no sense at all?"

Any other time she would have cowered beneath his rage, but now not even that mattered.

"It's Jamie." She fought for breath. "They've eloped. Jamie and Amelia."

"Eloped! The scatterbrain." Almost unthinkingly Burlingame shook her. "But you needn't have come here."

"Fairley—Fairley thought Jamie would be all right. But his eyes—Stapleton's eyes. He's gone after them. Oh, Robert, I'm so frightened."

"Why don't you stop shaking the girl and pay attention to her?" a soft voice asked from the doorway. Rebecca looked up to see a smiling Harriette Wilson. "I know Stapleton. She's right. He's apt to kill anyone who gets in his way. He's about lost the whole estate at the tables."

"We must go home. I've got to get to Midnight."

"He's—he's outside. Clem's holding him."

"You rode the stallion?"

Rebecca could only nod.

Burlingame glared. "An idiot. I've an idiot for a wife."

"Now Burlingame. I think you've got quite a plucky wife. Rode through the streets of London to save your brother's life. And she was right to ride the stallion. I dare say she can handle him. And you can save a lot of time."

Burlingame just shook his head. "Don't you see, Harriette? The chit has to get home. I can't have her wandering the streets with a half-grown groom as her only companion."

Rebecca's estimation of the lovely little woman rose even higher as Harriette gave Burlingame a sweet smile. Imagine smiling in the face of that anger! "You needn't trouble yourself about her. I'll order out my closed carriage—the plain one— and send her and the boy home. And I won't leave her side till it's done."

Burlingame hesitated, obviously torn between the desire to rush to his brother's aid and his recognition of the impropriety of leaving his wife with such a companion.

"Robert, please. Don't mind me. Please, think of Jamie. Clem can tell you the way they were taking. Please, Robert!"

For another moment he stood irresolute, and then he strode angrily toward the door, shouting over his shoulder as he went. "You'll rue this day, Rebecca. I promise you! I'll deal with you when I return. Don't doubt it for one moment."

Then the door slammed behind him, and Rebecca found herself dissolved in tears. She sank onto the sofa.

"Don't cry, my dear," said a soft voice beside her. "Burlingame's thunder looks worse than it is. By the time he gets back he'll have cooled down."

Rebecca shook her head. "No, I have made him most terribly angry. I do it all the time. I—I can't seem to help it."

Harriette put a comforting arm around Rebecca's shoulders—a smooth white arm, Rebecca saw even through her tears, as smooth and white as the bosom so beautifully revealed by the rich gown.

"You're, you're so kind to me," Rebecca stammered. "Aren't you angry or cross with me?"

Harriette Wilson laughed, a warm merry sound. "Why child, whatever for?"

"Well, Robert—that is, he and you—I mean—" She found herself at loss for the proper words.

Harriette Wilson gave her a little squeeze. "You silly goose. There's nothing between your Burlingame and me. Never was. It's plain to see where that man's heart is."

Rebecca flushed. So even the demireps knew of Robert's connection with Lady Catherine.

"You're—you're very kind," she repeated. "But I expect Robert wants me to go directly home."

"I expect so, too." Harriette laughed. "What a scold he would give me if he discovered that I'd been discussing his love life—and with his wife! Come, pull your hood around your face and cover your gown with your cloak. The *ton* would devote a whole Season to talking of something like this."

Minutes later Rebecca found herself snug in a closed carriage with Clem beside her and two sturdy grooms in attendance. "You go home and get to bed," said Harriette with a warm smile. "Burlingame can handle anything that life can toss him—except perhaps love." And with that enigmatic statement she shut the door and sent them on their way.

Chapter 16

When the closed carriage reached the house on Grosvenor Square, Rebecca drew the cloak around her ruined dress and hurried after Clem to the stables in the mews. "You've been a big help to me tonight, Clem," she said. "And don't worry about his lordship. I'll take all the blame."

"Oh, yer ladyship," Clem replied quickly. "His lordship ain't hipped. Why, he said I was a rare 'un. Told me I did good, he did."

"He was right, Clem. You did very well." Rebecca managed a smile for the boy. "You're doing very well with the horses, too."

Clem nodded. "Yes, yer ladyship. They likes me." Clem grinned. "An' I surely likes them."

"I'll expect you to be a groom before very long. Goodnight now, Clem."

"G'night, yer ladyship." Clem's dark eyes regarded her warmly. "And don't you be teasing yourself none. His lordship, he's true as touch, that 'un. An' Master Jamie, he'll be all right with his lordship to look after him."

"Thank you, Clem." Rebecca turned away. Yes, Jamie would be all right now. She had every confidence in Burlingame's ability to deal with Stapleton. But, she thought as she slipped up the back stairs, she had no confidence at all in *her* ability to deal with Burlingame. When he returned, hot and tired from his long ride, he would most certainly be in a thundering rage.

Wearily she pushed open her door. "Your ladyship!" Meg was out of her chair in an instant, her hands reaching to undo the cloak. "Did you find him?"

"Yes, Meg. And he's gone after them. He's very angry."

"Now, now, your ladyship. Husbands has a way of doing that. But they come round—given time. His lordship will, too. You'll see. Oh!" Meg had just noticed the ripped gown. "What happened?"

"I tore it while I was riding, I suppose. And then a man—" But Rebecca dismissed the incident from her mind. Beside Burlingame's anger, it meant nothing.

With soothing hands Meg removed the torn gown and readied Rebecca for bed. "Now, your ladyship," she said softly. "You just be lying there and going off to sleep. You're plumb worn out, you are."

"Oh, Meg, I can't sleep," Rebecca wailed. "When he comes back—" she shuddered.

Meg's face took on her mother-hen look. "Sure, an' you *can* sleep. It'll be hours afore his lordship gets back. You can't be lying awake all that time. You close your eyes now and sleep."

Wearily Rebecca closed her eyes. She would not sleep, she thought. How could she, ever again, when she had put Robert's beloved brother in mortal danger, had scandalized the *haut ton* by galloping through the streets astride the stallion, and had followed her husband to a house of ill repute? No, Burlingame could not forgive her for even one of these atrocities, let alone all three.

The tears spilled soundlessly down her cheeks. Oh, if only she hadn't ruined the joy of their last days together. And yet, she told herself for the hundredth time, there had seemed nothing else to do. Amelia could not be sacrificed to the fat, toadish Cavendish. Jamie could not be doomed to a life without love. And the elopement seemed the only way to help them.

For hours she examined and reexamined everything. Perhaps if she had not recoiled so from the suggestion of marriage to a man she had heard was an avowed chaser of lightskirts. Perhaps if she had known enough not to get in trouble all the time. Perhaps if their marriage had not been in name only. But none of those perhapses made the present any more tenable or alleviated her fear of the horrible moment when Burlingame would come bursting through the door to give her such a scold as she had never known before. And she knew with dismal certainty that, even as he railed at her, she would long to throw herself into his arms and beg his forgiveness.

And yet, she told herself with more than a touch of anger, she had been right to encourage the lovers—and she knew it.

* * * *

Rebecca had finally fallen into a restless slumber, when the sound of movement in the adjoining room roused her. She shivered as she drew the covers around her. Robert was home.

She heard the sound of his boots hitting the floor. Then there was the opening and closing of his outer door, and she knew that Peters had gone. She sat up in the bed, clutching the covers, her heart pounding in her throat. Soon, soon, would come the knock on the door. In terror she waited, but there was no sound from the next room, no sound at all.

For a long moment Rebecca listened. Then she threw back the covers and struggled from the bed. Mindful of her nightdress, she reached for the shawl they had bought that afternoon—how long ago that seemed already—and wrapped it around her.

She stood for a little while before the door, then took a deep breath and knocked timidly. There was no answer, but she could not bring herself to go back to bed to endure the long vigil till Burlingame should wake. With trembling fingers she turned the knob and stepped into Burlingame's room.

He was slumped in a chair in front of the fireplace. He had removed his coat and cravat, and his white shirt gleamed in the flickering light of the moon. His dark head was bowed.

Her bare feet making no sound, Rebecca approached him. "Robert—I—"

He was on his feet instantly, glowering down at her. "What are you doing in here?" he demanded.

"I—Jamie," she faltered. "Did you get there in time?"

Burlingame sighed. "Jamie and Amelia are well away. Stapleton, the fool, drove his horses so hard that he overturned and threw a wheel. The youngsters didn't need my help at all. In fact, I managed to get away myself without Stapleton seeing me."

Rebecca heaved a sigh of relief, but she began suddenly to shiver. The worst was coming now.

Burlingame's dark eyes focused on her. "And what part did you have in this bumble-broth?"

For a moment Rebecca actually considered lying to him. But only for a moment. It would be useless, she knew. Burlingame's piercing eyes missed nothing, not a flushed cheek, nor an unshed tear, nor a quivering lower lip.

"I—I suggested it," she confessed miserably, unable to meet his eyes.

"I see." His voice remained calm, but she knew he was angry. She could feel it in the very air, and when she grew brave enough to meet his gaze, his fierce scowl confirmed it. "You saw fit to encourage my brother in a scatterbrained scheme that could have meant the end of him."

"Robert! I didn't—" There was a long pause. "Yes, Robert." Before the angry accusation in those dark eyes, she could not defend herself.

"Then you saw fit to go chasing over London astride a stallion, all the while clad in a wisp of a dress and a cloak that could only make people suspicious."

Rebecca hung her head. "I—I didn't think—" she began.

"It appears to me that you seldom think," he said angrily. "Following me to Harriette Wilson's! The very idea! One would think you were short a sheet, not right in the upper story, to do such a hen-witted thing. Why didn't you have Fairley send a groom with a message instead of cantering up yourself like some avenging Amazon?"

"Fairley said he didn't know where you were. But Clem heard you tell the coachman. And—and I didn't think about—about the way it would look. I was only thinking about Jamie."

"I would hope so," he said sarcastically. "Since you're the one got him in the pickle."

Rebecca felt her anger rising. It was useless to try to tell him anything when he was in such a pet. "I didn't make Jamie fall in love," she retorted. "And I'm sorry if I've tarnished your precious name again." She flung the words at him. "Love obviously means nothing to you. However, all people are not so unfortunate. Jamie and Amelia deserve a chance at happiness. I wanted them to have it."

"So you deliberately disobeyed me?"

"No! You never told me *not* to help in such a venture."

"Rebecca!" His voice cracked like a whip. "Chuff it! You knew perfectly well that I should never approve such a hubble-bubble notion. Didn't you?"

For long moments she refused to answer, but then the words seemed drawn from her. "Yes, Robert. I knew," she said softly.

"And so you deliberately disobeyed my wishes."

"But you were wrong!" Rebecca trembled, but it was no longer with fear. At no matter what cost, Burlingame must be made to understand that love was important.

"Wrong?" The eyebrows were really fierce now. "Wrong to want my wife to behave in a decent fashion, wrong to be upset when I find her in a house like Harriette Wilson's in the arms of a drunken lord?"

"Robert! That wasn't my fault. He attacked me. My God, I was terrified about Jamie. And anyway—" All the hurt and anger of the past months suddenly boiled over. "What right have you to place yourself on so high a form? The public lover of Lady Catherine; a regular visitor to Harriette Wilson's. You've no right to lay such in *my* dish. You are a man of your word, though," she added bitterly. "You've certainly returned to your previous haunts, just as you said you would."

"Rebecca!"

She had no more words, but the anger continued to sustain her.

"Go to bed," Burlingame said sternly. "You are distraught. The events of the past night have been too much for you."

Rebecca laughed, a harsh laugh even to her own ears. "No, Robert. I am fine. I'm sorry if I put you in a pet. But surely all London must know by now your connection with Lady Catherine. What harm can an eccentric wife do?"

"Rebecca, I do not wish to discuss this further."

"I don't care what you want." She had thrown all caution to the winds. "Just because you're a lord doesn't mean that you can run everyone's life. You've no right to order me around. I hate it. I hate *you*."

Burlingame's face darkened. "I believe you are mistaken. As you are my wife I have some control over your life. And besides, I don't *order* people around."

"You do, yes, you do."

Burlingame sighed in exasperation. "I have spent quite a busy day. I have been many long hours on the road. And now my wife has decided to give me a scold. This is utterly beyond the line."

Then without word he scooped her up against his ruffled shirt front. For one panicky moment she meant to fight him, but of course it was useless. And then she had all she could to control her pounding heart. Here against his warm chest with his strong arms holding her close, here was where she belonged. She knew it. If only he would recognize it. But he simply strode through the door back into her room and deposited her unceremoniously in the big bed, then turned instantly away. "Goodnight, Rebecca. We will not discuss this matter again."

Then he was gone, shutting the door sharply behind him. Rebecca, still trembling from rage and from being in his arms, reached blindly for the covers. He was doing it again, she told herself in despair, he was treating her like a child. And he would never, never forgive her for those angry words. Never, even though they were true.

The rest of the day passed, but Rebecca knew nothing of it. For the sleep that overcame her that morning, a sleep of deep emotional and physical exhaustion, did not release her until darkness had fallen outside. When she opened her eyes, it was to see Meg sitting in a chair by the bed. The sight of Meg's face in the light of the single taper flickering on the bedside table brought everything rushing back to Rebecca. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

"Oh, Meg. I've slept all day!"

"Indeed, your ladyship, you were needing it."

"His lordship? Robert?" Rebecca found that even pronouncing his name made her lip tremble.

"His lordship was up and about by noon, he was. Nothing keeps that one down. He come home not long ago and said he'd be dining in tonight. If you're rested enough, I'd better be getting you dressed."

For a moment Rebecca wanted to burrow back under the covers like the frightened little girl she felt. But only for a moment. The longer she put off facing him, the harder it would be. And they *were* married—and would continue to be so. Burlingame would never disgrace his name by asking Parliament for a bill of divorce. So, she told herself firmly, she must face him—and the sooner the better.

Still, when Meg had dressed her in a becoming gown of green-sprigged muslin with long, narrow sleeves, coaxed her curls into some semblance of order, and rouged her pale cheeks, she felt like a bad child about to be disciplined.

As she entered the dining room, he rose from his place to conduct her to hers, but there was no warmth in his eyes, no smile on his face, and his voice when he said, "Good evening, Lady Burlingame," held only carefully modulated politeness, a politeness worse than scorn. Never had he called her Lady Burlingame, as if she were a distant stranger he had just met.

"Good evening, m'lord," Rebecca managed to reply. And that constituted their entire conversation throughout the meal. Rebecca, casting occasional glances at him from under lowered lashes, could not fathom Burlingame's mood. He did not appear to be angry. His attitude was more one of calm indifference.

Several times Rebecca attempted to speak to him. But at the detached look on his face the words died in her throat. She pushed the food futilely around her plate until he was preparing to rise. Then she, too, stood.

Burlingame turned to survey her. "I suggest that you resume your usual round of activities in the morning," he said. "The *ton* may be less censorious of Jamie and his Amelia if we appear to take the matter in our stride."

"Yes, Robert."

"And as for your mad gallop through the streets and your appearance at the house of the best-known demirep in London, neither appears so far to have reached the ears of the *ton*. Little Harry can be depended upon to keep mum. And I expect Lord Carstairs was so in his altitudes that he won't recognize you if he sees you again. So it appears that there, at least, you have escaped further censure."

"I'm exceeding glad not to have caused any more gossip," Rebecca said with relief.

"No credit to you," Burlingame replied coolly. "That was still the most bird-witted escapade I have ever heard of."

Rebecca felt her hackles rise. He could be so irritatingly superior. "I'm sorry no one taught me the stupidity of loving," she said sharply. "Perhaps then I would have been content to stay comfortably in my sitting room while Stapleton shot your brother."

Burlingame's mouth tightened. "Perhaps. But I seriously doubt that. If there's trouble about you're sure to tumble into it, and if there isn't you'll probably brew up your own."

Rebecca was beyond all caution. "Yes," she agreed acidly. "It appears that the great Burlingame finally made a mistake. He gave his name to someone unworthy of it. Certainly Lady Catherine would have been a better choice. She would not have disturbed you in your amusements just because your brother was in danger."

Burlingame's eyebrows drew together. "Lady Catherine is not a fit subject for discussion between us. You are becoming distraught again and shall soon go into an attack of the vapors if you don't have a care."

"I think not, my lord. I am, most unfortunately for you, a very healthy woman." Rebecca wondered why she wasn't more frightened, as, breast heaving, she continued to glare at him.

But Burlingame chose to ignore her last sally. "I am going out now. Fairley will know where to reach me should an emergency arise."

"Be assured, m'lord, that / shall not enlist your aid in *any* future emergencies."

One of his eyebrows rose in a quizzical curve. "That will indeed be a rare state of affairs. I believe I shall wait until I see it to believe it."

"You *shall* see it," Rebecca insisted. "From now on I shall cause you no trouble at all. You need not even know that I exist."

It looked for a moment as though he might reply to that. But then his jaw tightened. "Goodnight, Lady Burlingame." Again those distant, cold words. He gave her a studied bow and was gone.

For long moments Rebecca stood there fighting the treacherous tears—and then she fled through the kitchen and up the back stairs to the sanctuary of her room. There would never again be anything good between them, she thought, staring morosely at the bundles still piled in the corner. No more laughter, no more jokes. Nothing but cold indifference and sarcastic anger. With a despairing cry she threw herself onto the big bed and burst into tears.

Chapter 17

Following Burlingame's wishes Rebecca resumed her round of social activities. Stapleton's design to exchange Amelia for a fat merchant's gold did not sit well with the *haut ton*, and so Rebecca met with little censure over the event of the elopement. The romantic details of the elopement, which had become general knowledge through the agency of Stapleton's servants, appealed to the hearts of the ladies, more than one of whom herself carried fond memories of a forbidden love.

And so the breakfasts, fetes, shopping trips, and picnics all continued. But Rebecca, hiding a broken heart under a forced smile, did not enjoy any of them.

Nothing happened to change the cool politeness with which Burlingame treated her. He was invariably polite but invariably distant and preoccupied. At dinner he ate quickly and silently, and then he was gone. Off to White's—or more probably to Lady Catherine's, Rebecca told herself. For some strange reason she believed the words of Harriette Wilson that nothing existed between her and Burlingame. But she could not help believing that Lady Catherine had Burlingame in her pocket.

Without Jamie's escort and with Burlingame so often out, Rebecca was forced to remain at home in the evenings. It was just as well, she told herself dismally, because she had no feel for much of anything. She preferred to sit quietly in her room, remembering their happy times together. And none of Meg's efforts could rouse her from this heartbreaking pastime.

Several days had passed in this way when Rebecca, coming home from a late breakfast at Lady Melbourne's, found Fairley with a strange look on his face and heard voices from the library. Putting her bonnet into Meg's hands, she hurried toward the sound. "Jamie!"

With one stride Jamie crossed the room to enfold her in an exuberant bear hug. When he released her, Rebecca laughed shakily. "Marriage seems to agree with you," she said.

"It does indeed. Come." Jamie led her toward the fireplace, where a slight, dark girl stood waiting, her lips curved in the sweet, gentle smile that Rebecca so well remembered.

"Amelia," Rebecca said. "I'm so happy for you." And then the two girls had their arms around each other and were laughing and crying together.

"I say," complained Jamie. "Turn off the waterworks now, and let a fellow talk."

He led them to the divan, where they all settled comfortably, Jamie in the middle. "Tell me," he insisted. "How did Rob take my going off? Did he fly up in the boughs about it?"

"I think it'll be all right with him," Rebecca said. "And the *ton* seems to be fascinated by the romance of it. But Jamie—" A frown creased Rebecca's forehead. "Maybe you'd better go out of London for a while."

"Why? If the *ton is* on our side?"

"Amelia's brother— He was here after you left. Very angry. He came after you."

"But he didn't catch us." Jamie had taken his wife's hand and was reassuring her.

"That's because he drove his horses too hard and lost a wheel."

"How do you know that?"

"Robert followed you. He discovered it."

"Why did Rob follow us?" Jamie asked with a frown. "Did he think to thrust a spoke in our wheel?"

"I sent him."

For the first time Jamie seemed to notice Rebecca's pallor and the dark smudges under her eyes. "You sent him? Whatever for?"

"Stapleton came here. He was—he was raving. He was going after you—to—to shoot you, I thought."

"So you spilled the whole thing to Rob in order to protect us."

Rebecca nodded.

"And he was dreadfully hipped."

"Yes. Well, you see." Rebecca did not quite know how to proceed. "He—he was someplace, and Fairley wouldn't say where. But Clem knew. And, so— Well, we saddled Midnight and Clem gave me directions and we rode there to get him."

"He was someplace?" Jamie asked.

Rebecca nodded.

"Someplace a lady shouldn't know about?"

Again Rebecca nodded. "He was—he was at Little Harry's," she said with a glance at Amelia.

"And you followed him *there*?"

"Yes. There was no time, Jamie. And I didn't think. And I tore my dress—"

Jamie stared at her in amazement. "You rode Midnight astride, through the streets of London?"

"Yes."

"My God!" Words seemed to have momentarily deserted Jamie. "He must have been in a royal thunder."

"He is," Rebecca said simply. "He still is."

"I say, Rebecca." Jamie patted her hand contritely. "I'm sorry to get you in such a stew. But don't you fret. Rob'll come around. When a man's in love—" Jamie cast a glance at his Amelia, and so Rebecca was able to swallow quickly and hold back the tears.

A dignified rap sounded on the door. "Yes, Fairley?"

The door opened to disclose the frowning butler. "It's the boy from the stables, your ladyship. He insists that he must see you."

"Send him in, Fairley."

Moments later Clem came hurrying in. "Yer ladyship," he said, sliding to a stop before her. "I found this in the straw. He dropped it, he did. When he took Midnight. And—and he were carrying his pistols."

"Pistols!" The word went through Rebecca like a shot. "Give it to me," she said.

The note was crumpled but still legible, she saw as she spread it open with trembling fingers.

"'You was right about the beach,'" she read. "'It's there the smugglers is landing. We expect 'em to be moving stuff in the caves tonight. If you're here by dark, we'll be in a good way to flush 'em out. Burton.'"

"Smugglers! Oh, my God." Rebecca turned to Clem. "Saddle Starfire—and a horse for yourself. Bring them around as soon as possible."

Clem nodded and was out the door.

"Rebecca, what are you thinking?" Jamie demanded.

"I'm going to Roedown, Jamie. And there's no use arguing with me. I'm quite as stubborn as any Burlingame. I *am* a Burlingame! And I won't sit quietly here while Robert is in danger."

Jamie sighed. "You can't go riding to Roedown with only a child for a companion."

Rebecca was on her feet. "I haven't time to argue, Jamie. I have to change. Will you give me the directions?"

"Rebecca. My God!"

"Jamie." Amelia put a detaining hand on his sleeve. "Jamie, you must go with her. Can't you see, she loves him! And he's in danger. She *has* to go."

Jamie surveyed the two girls in amazement. "A couple of schoolroom misses you've turned out to be. Rob's not exactly in short coats, you know. He can take care of himself, smugglers or no."

"Jamie—" Amelia's dark eyes pleaded with him.

"Oh, all right. But it's all a bunch of silliness. And Rob will think so, too."

"I've got to go," Rebecca said simply. "How soon will you be ready?"

"I'll be waiting when you come down. I'll take the horse Clem means for himself. But mind, now," Jamie said with an apologetic grin. "You've at least got to wear your habit. And no galloping posthaste through the streets of London. Rob would have my head for such a stunt. And besides," he added, forestalling her reply, "we'll have to save the horses."

Rebecca turned toward the door. "Meg and Spence will make you comfortable, Amelia. I'm sorry to take your husband away so soon."

Amelia smiled that sweet smile. "Without your help," she said softly, "he would not be my husband. We owe you a great deal."

It took Meg only a few minutes to help her into her habit, but Rebecca begrudged every second of them. And she was greatly relieved as she hurried down the front stairs to find Jamie already waiting for her. "The horses are ready," he said.

Time seemed to fly as they made their slow way through the London streets to the, Dover Road. Starfire seemed to have picked up some of Rebecca's impatience, for she kicked up her heels. But Jamie insisted on a slow pace.

Once they were outside the city every nerve in Rebecca's already overwrought body called for her to gallop Starfire madly toward Roedown. But again Jamie prevailed. "There's no sense in foundering the horses, Rebecca. Use your head." And Rebecca, recognizing the truth of his statement, forced herself to hold the pace he indicated.

As the hours passed she grew more and more frantic. And when darkness fell and they were still some miles from Roedown, she cried out in anguish.

"Easy, Rebecca," Jamie admonished. "Smugglers aren't going to be about their business first off. They'll wait till honest folk are abed."

With a start Rebecca remembered the stormy night and the solitary figure she had seen riding along the beach. That had not been Constancia's ghost—it had been a smuggler. And Burlingame had forbidden her the beach and taken such drastic steps to assure her obedience, not because he was an arrogant tyrant but to keep her from danger. And now *he* was in danger.

Somehow the assurance of his safety that she had felt so strongly when he set out after Stapleton had deserted her. Smugglers were a different breed than a lord, no matter how raving he might be.

Fortunately the moon was almost full and threw a fairly good light. But still the horses did not go fast enough to suit Rebecca. And when finally they reached the edge of the cliff she was all for clattering Starfire down the path regardless of her safety.

"Rebecca!" Jamie laid a restraining hand on her arm. But then the sound of gunshots echoed through the night air, and Rebecca, driven frantic by images of a dying Burlingame, wrenched her arm from under Jamie's hand and urged Starfire down the path.

"Rebecca, stop!"

Stones slithered and bounced ahead of them as Starfire laid back on her heels and half-slid, half-walked down the path, but Rebecca was oblivious to danger. All her thoughts were focused on reaching the area of the beach from which the sound of scattered gunfire could still be heard.

And then they were in the sand, and Rebecca pushed the mare into a gallop. The gunfire had stopped now, but ahead she saw the blaze of torches. Starfire's hoofs dug into the sand as she brought Rebecca closer and closer to a scene of chaos. Torches cast a lurid light over the scene. Men lay in huddled heaps, others were crowded against the rocks. In vain Rebecca's eyes sought Burlingame's familiar form. Then, just as Starfire brought her to the edge of the group, Jamie called out behind her, "Rebecca, stop!" A tall form straightened and turned to look. As the mare slid to a halt beside him Rebecca threw herself from the saddle.

Two strong hands reached out to support her as her knees threatened to buckle. "Rebecca! In God's name, what are you doing here?"

Words had deserted her, she could not speak. She could only stand reassuring herself that he was alive. Robert was alive and unwounded.

Burlingame shook her roughly, his eyebrows drawing together in that ferocious frown she knew so well. "What a bird-witted thing to do! I suppose you rode here all the way from London?"

Rebecca could only nod. She fought down the bitter tears. Oh God, how she loved this man. And how often she had infuriated him.

He shook her again. "I should have left orders to keep you locked up. And, in fact, perhaps I shall."

As Jamie came toward them Burlingame released her and turned to his brother. With his hands gone from her shoulders, Rebecca staggered and almost fell. Then she turned and stumbled off into the darkness.

He would do that to her, she had no doubt. He would took her up like a child, she thought, tears running down her face. She stumbled over the heavy skirt of her habit and fell in the damp sand. The distant murmur of the sea came to her ears, the comforting sea that had taken the grieving Constancia into its warm arms.

She pushed herself to her feet and, sobbing wildly, stumbled on. Not, she told herself, as Constancia had, for even in the arms of death she would never be reunited with Burlingame.

And so she stumbled on until, dazed and exhausted, she reached its edge and fell there, her hands outstretched as if to seek its comfort. For a few moments she sobbed angrily, and then, exhausted, she lay quiet, letting the soothing sounds of the sea bring her peace.

In a kind of dreamlike lethargy she heard someone approach, but her face was toward the sea, and she was too tired to open her eyes.

"Rebecca! Oh, my God, what have I done?"

The voice seemed to be Robert's, but she had never heard it hold such anguish. *I am dreaming*, Rebecca thought. *I have fallen asleep and I am dreaming*. And so, when she felt herself rolled over and gathered into two strong arms, held against a warm chest, she carefully kept her eyes closed—to preserve the lovely dream forever.

A gentle hand pushed the tendrils of damp hair from her forehead. "Oh, Rebecca, my darling wife. How I've abused you. And all because I discovered that I loved you. And now— Oh, God, it can't be too late. It can't."

A rain of tender kisses covered her sandy, tear-stained face. What a lovely, lovely dream, Rebecca thought. If only she need never wake up. Then Burlingame's lips reached hers and evoked the response of her love. Startled, she opened her eyes and realized that the dream was not a dream at all, but reality. "Robert! Oh, Robert!"

He gazed at her tenderly. "My love. Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," she answered eagerly. "But that— what you said—" Suddenly she couldn't believe it. "You said—you did, didn't you?"

Burlingame chuckled. "I said, I love you, my little wife. Almost from the day I married you."

"But then, why?"

"I gave you my word, remember? Not to touch you. You were such an innocent little thing. And then I didn't know how to approach you."

"But you said you didn't believe in love."

"That was because I did love once—the woman I was going to marry. And when she left me, my pride was hurt. But that love—it wasn't like this."

"But you were always so angry."

"Some of that was at myself for having botched things so badly. Some was jealousy when I thought the Emperor— And then I even suspected Jamie."

Rebecca burrowed against his chest "But, Robert, I loved *you*. Always you."

His arms tightened around her as he helped her to her feet. "And then when you so calmly returned my cravat."

"It *was* yours!"

"Yes, but I didn't leave it there after our marriage. I haven't been near Lady Catherine since I met you. And as for Little Harry, I was at her place trying to discover something about Stapleton."

"Stapleton!" She looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, he's back there in the rocks—wounded. He was in league with the smugglers. The merchant Cavendish, too. That's why he was going to get Amelia. Stapleton'll be in a bad way with Prinny over this. But if he helps us break up the ring, Prinny may be lenient with him. The smugglers revived the old story of Constanca's ghost—to keep people off the beach. I had to take drastic steps to persuade you."

"Why didn't you tell me about the smugglers?"

"I didn't want to frighten you. Oh, Rebecca, when you said you hated me, life seemed over. But I still had to catch the smugglers. And now, when I saw you at the water's edge, all still and wet—"

He crushed her to his chest for a moment, and she did not protest at all. "I expect," he said as they began moving back toward the rocks and the men gathered there, "that I shall be quite a nuisance to you now. Literally living in your pocket."

"In that case, Robert," said Rebecca, squeezing the hand that held hers, "I suspect we shall both be nuisances. Can a wife be said to live in her husband's pocket?"

And there, in the darkness of a summer night, with the sound of the sea behind them, she threw her arms around her husband's neck and kissed him long and hard. The agony was over, she told herself with satisfaction as his arms folded her close against his lean hardness, and now the sweetness had begun.

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