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TAMING THE DUKE



Jackie Manning

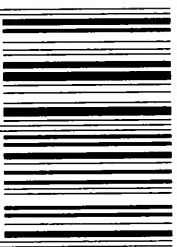
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“You’re staring at me.”

She bit her bottom lip as she studied him with an innocence that nearly undid him. What the hell was the matter with him?

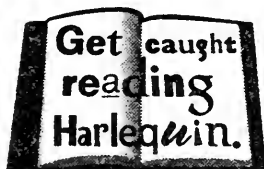
Maybe his strange feelings were the result of learning how another human being with nothing to gain sacrificed something for him....

Suddenly Bashshar whinnied, tossing his head, his ears back. Dalton leaped forward, grabbing the stallion’s bridle, holding the horse firmly. “Perhaps it’s best if you return to your cottage.”

“Bashshar has a right to express himself when he wants,” she whispered.

“Bashshar is injured and not responsible for what he’s doing. Besides, he obeys only me.”

Alicia pulled the shawl tightly around herself and lifted her chin in that stubborn way Dalton was beginning to recognize. “Then give Bashshar the orders, not me. For I don’t obey you, your grace.”



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TAMING THE DUKE

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This book is dedicated to Ellyn Manning Smith.

What a joy you are, my darling daughter.

Your dad and I are truly blessed.

Special thanks to my critique group, especially to my writer pals, Linda Lee Duffy, Maureen Greene and Kathy Stowers. I'm doubly blessed to have such good friends and expert critique partners. Love you, guys.

Chapter One



Marston Heath, England, 1811

“Lady Alicia! Come quickly!”

From the cool shelter of the herb garden, Alicia heard her maid’s summons and jumped to her feet. Claspig a basket of freshly gathered crosswort blossoms, Alicia called, “Hortense, whatever is the matter...?” Her words faded when the servant bolted toward her, Hortense’s long legs windmilling beneath her black skirts.

Alicia rushed in her direction, dropping the basket. “Hortense, what has happened?”

“It’s your father, my lady.” The lanky woman paused to gasp for air. “His lordship has just arrived and is—” she gulped a deep breath “—awaiting you in his study.”

“My father?” A feeling of foreboding crept over Alicia. He wasn’t due home for three more days—not until after the horse auction. “Does he appear...unwell?” she asked delicately, aware of her father’s weakness for drink.

Hortense caught her breath. “I’m not sure, milady. I’ve never seen the master in quite such a state.” She fanned her flushed face with her apron skirt.

“Sit and rest on the garden bench, Hortense, while I tend

to this." Alicia jumped over a clump of sweet basil and broke into an unladylike run along the garden path. If only she had accompanied her father to London. She should have known better than to rely on him for such an important errand.

By the time she reached the manor house steps, she was out of breath. Minutes later, Alicia tapped on the heavy door to the study. "Father, it's me." Her calm voice concealed the nervousness she felt.

A brief silence followed, then she heard her father's heavy footsteps creak the oak floorboards. The bolt clicked inside the lock, and the door opened. Alicia slipped inside and faced him.

When sober, her father prided himself on his immaculate attire. Now, he wore his dusty traveling cape. His white cravat was smudged and undone, his periwig tilted askew atop his bald head. What intensified Alicia's worry was the dazzling smile across his unshaven face.

"Father, you look so...unusual. Whatever is the matter?"

"The matter, Daughter?" He threw back his head and laughed. "Hounds of Jericho! Nothing's the matter, Daughter. In fact, I bring glorious news."

The smell of whiskey on his breath confirmed her worst suspicions. "Glorious news, Father?"

He moved behind his desk. "Our fortunes have been reversed by a miraculous intervention."

Alicia eyed him warily. "Oh, Father, you didn't gamble the money I gave you to bid on the mare, did you?"

Her father chuckled. "You remind me of your mother when you accuse me so." Pointing to the chair beside his desk, he said, "Take a seat while I tell you of our good fortune."

Anger and frustration welled inside her. He had promised that this time he could be trusted. She had wanted him to prove his trustworthiness as much as she had wanted Good

Times, the magnificent Thoroughbred mare her father was supposed to have bid on at Tattersall's Auctioneering Yard. The horse possessed the ideal bloodlines for Alicia's growing racing stock. She braced herself for his excuse. "Very well, Father. Tell me what happened."

"Your new mare awaits you in the pasture."

She could hardly believe her ears. "Good Times?"

His smile faded for a moment, then reappeared as brightly as before. "Er...nay, not Good Times. But Cinnamon Rose is a mare of better lineage and conformation than Good Times will ever be." He avoided her gaze, edging her fear up a notch.

"But the bidding isn't due to begin at Tattersall's until tomorrow," she said. "Where did you find this horse?"

"I came upon the mare by the grace of good fortune."

A familiar uneasiness invaded her mind. "I gave you almost two hundred pounds, my year's savings, to bid on Good Times." Alicia sat up stiffly and straightened her shoulders. "You gambled my money, then bought some bonesetter of an animal with what was left." She stood up. "Don't insult me by lying, Father." She glanced away, not wanting to repeat this embarrassing scene again. "How could you do this again after promising me—?"

He opened the desk drawer and plunked down the bulging silk purse she had given him when he'd left for the auction. She blinked when he spilled bright gold coins across the desktop and stared while he counted out the full amount she'd given him.

Alicia dropped into the chair. "If we own a new mare, I want to hear every detail about how you acquired her."

Her father grinned as he steepled his large hands in front of himself. "Cinnamon Rose is champion stock," he said finally. "Why don't you see the mare first, then we can speak more on the matter? The mare's tied to the willow by the stream. Go and see her, then decide for yourself."

Alicia rose from her chair. "I'll do just that. But I'll be

back to hear how you managed to gain a horse without paying so much as a shilling.”

When Alicia passed the stable a few minutes later, she heard a soft nickering. Jupiter, one of the three Thoroughbreds that made up her breeding stock, whinnied at her from the paddock. She called to him. “I’ll be back later to give you some tender carrots, sweet one.”

Her beloved horses—they were her joy, her comfort, her life. Jupiter was the first foal she had bred that showed the promise of quality racing lines. With a choice mare such as Good Times...

Alicia bit back her frustration. No, she wouldn’t allow this setback to anger her. Besides, she had no one to blame but herself. Although she had wanted to believe that her father could overcome his weakness for drink, she must face the truth. He would be helpless amid the horse-mad gambling world that frequented Tatts. His stories of when he rode the Prince of Wales’s horse, Escape, to victory at Newmarket would guarantee her father free drinks until dawn.

A gaggle of geese honked at her as she cut through the fowl yard and hurried toward the pasture beyond. She had no right to find fault with her father, especially after the disgrace she’d brought to the family name. And in the three years since her fall from grace during her social debut, she’d resigned herself to an old maid’s life. Better to be alone with her horses than to accept one of the unsuitable men who had offered for her.

Alicia banished the bitter memories from her mind, refusing to nurture the grudge against the unfairness of it all. Now, her days were filled with satisfying work and profitable income from healing the animals of her neighbors and friends.

When Alicia came to the grassy edge of the stream, the aroma of roses from her mother’s garden drifted on the July air. Shielding her eyes from the sunlight glimmering off the

water, she scanned the area beneath the ancient willow, but there was no horse in sight. A gust of wind billowed her skirts; she brushed down the pink muslin fabric, her gaze searching the pasture.

She was ready to march back to her father, demanding to know what game he was playing, when a horse's soft nicker rose from the other side of the trees. There, in the sunlight, stood the most splendid mare Alicia had ever seen. She stopped to stare. The animal, as though on cue, trotted toward her. Alicia sensed the horse's strength and well-being.

The cinnamon-colored Thoroughbred tossed her head, the silky black mane shimmering in the golden afternoon. The mare walked gracefully toward Alicia, who watched, mesmerized by the horse's elegant demeanor.

Her father had been right. This animal was a fine piece of blood. Their fortunes would be reversed if this horse proved as superior as she appeared to be. Breeding this mare with Jupiter could result in winning racing stock.

The mare lifted her refined head in a playful game. Alicia reached to touch the satiny red coat and found it as soft as a dove's back.

"Like all beautiful ladies, she takes your breath away, doesn't she?"

Startled by the deep masculine voice, Alicia whirled toward the sound. In the dappled shade beneath the oak tree, a tall, broad-shouldered man, dressed in an elegantly tailored, black superfine waistcoat, leaned lazily against the tree trunk. His snowy white shirt and dazzling cravat gleamed brilliantly against the dark shadows of his jacket. He grinned crookedly at her. She noticed his lean hips and thighs, encased in buff, calf-length trousers. The elegant silver spurs he wore on his black leather boots were more suited for show than for riding, Alicia thought. He sketched the briefest of bows.

Alicia met his amused blue-eyed stare. "Do you always

hide behind trees, ready to pounce upon unsuspecting maidens?"

He laughed. A warm, rich, intimate laugh, as though she had just shared a funny secret about herself.

She took a deep breath. His abrupt appearance caused her knees to feel like jelly, jarring her with the loss of speech—something that rarely happened to her. Maybe her strange reaction was caused by the trick of sunlight and shade, which played across his aristocratic features. Black shiny hair, longer than what was fashionable, framed his regal face. His deeply chiseled mouth lifted in a sardonic tilt, and she realized he was very much aware of her assessing gaze.

His blue eyes twinkled. "I only pounce on lovely maidens, and a prettier maid than you I've yet to see."

The flippant compliment returned her wits to her. "Who are you and what is your business at Marston Heath?" Just then, Cinnamon Rose pranced toward him and nuzzled against his jacketed sleeve. "Do you have something to do with this mare?"

"Forgive me, my lady. Your rare beauty makes me forget my manners." The intelligent eyes beneath that lazy gaze told her this man never forgot anything.

"I'm Dalton Warfield, the duke of Wexton, at your service, Lady Alicia, and I'm here to see if Cinnamon Rose suits your fancy."

Alicia gasped. *Warfield—the duke of Wexton*. Although it had been three years since that fateful night of her social ruin, all the shame and injustice of that evening ignited within her.

Her heart pounded. She blinked back at him, as angry as if the incident had been yesterday. Those vivid blue eyes—just like his mother's—brought back the painful accusations.

Alicia fought for control. "What do you have to do with my father bringing home this horse?"

Dalton raised a well-defined black brow. "Your father didn't tell you of our arrangement?"

Alicia felt her anxiety rise. "Our arrangement?"

He patted Cinnamon Rose on the neck. "A month ago, one of my stallions—Bashshar—suffered an accident that left him badly injured. Since then, his physical wounds have nicely healed, but the horse suffers greatly from hysteria. I'm afraid I'll have to put him down unless... I was hoping you might treat him."

Alicia felt her stomach clench. "My father knows of this?"

A hint of surprise flickered across Dalton's face. "Of course. In fact, your father agreed that you would come immediately to our country estate. In exchange for your healing skills, I've offered him Cinnamon Rose, one of my family's more promising mares. He said your stable needed a quality mare."

Oh, Father, how could you? She felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. Fighting for control, she took a deep breath. "I'm truly sorry that your horse is injured, but I'm certain that you can afford more than your share of healers." She took another fortifying breath. "But there's no way I'll consider your offer. My answer is no." She gave a lingering glance at Cinnamon Rose. "And take your bribe along with you."

She strode purposefully toward the path. Dalton's long strides quickly caught up to her.

"It is said that your sweet nature can tame savage beasts, my lady," Dalton drawled. "So maybe you refuse me, not because you are unkind, but because of my wealth. I assure you, my horse's misery is as great as if he belonged to a beggar man. Or is your compassionate nature only a rumor, then?"

Alicia stopped and turned to face him. She shielded her eyes from the sun with one hand. "Your wealth has nothing

to do with it, your grace. And I find such your suggestion offensive."

"Offensive?" His brows formed a V.

Alicia's patience was at an end. "Do you pretend to know nothing of your mother's part in my fall from grace?"

Dalton stood, his mouth open. "What the deuce are you talking about?"

Alicia took a deep breath. Obviously, her loss of reputation was such a trifle to him that he'd forgotten all about it. "Very well, if you wish to play sport with me, I'll tell you why I won't honor my father's arrangement." She brushed back an auburn tendril from her cheek. "Only a scoundrel would forget what your mother did to me. And I don't honor arrangements with scoundrels." She turned and dashed along the path, but his long strides soon overtook her.

"Do you know that if you were a man, I could challenge you to a duel for besmirching my mother's honor?"

She paused. Whether it was the injured tone in his voice, or the very fact that Wexton refused to understand it was *she* who was the injured party, Alicia couldn't ignore his charge.

"A duel, is it?" She glanced up at him, wiping her hands together in glee. "How I'd relish to meet you on the field of honor. Oh, if only I could run you through—"

"I believe you would!"

"But you're not worth dulling my blade," she snapped. "Now please stop following me. Our business is concluded."

Dalton clenched his teeth as he watched Lady Alicia stride past the rose garden, her long chestnut hair cascading down her back. Damn, what was all that breeze about his mother causing her to fall from grace? A scoundrel, she'd called him. Why, the woman was dicked in the nob!

Cinnamon Rose raised her head and whinnied a low

horse laugh. "Ah, you think it's funny, too?" he said, grabbing the horse's halter as he led the mare along the path. He wasn't sure whether to confront Alicia's father now or later. Yet Dalton surmised that confronting her father was exactly what Alicia was planning to do this very minute.

No, Dalton could wait until she faced her father, all tearful and dithery, most likely. Before he left, he should check out the horseflesh in their stable to be sure what he had heard was true. Her father might be a baron, but the Spencer family was purse-pinched and in dire need of new sporting blood for their stable. Yet if it was true, why had Lady Alicia thrown a rub in the way? Why, indeed?

He'd heard she was a tempting armful, but no one warned him of her temper and headstrong ways. Not to mention her passionate spirit, which sparked the beauty's dark eyes with fire.

Why hadn't she married? Perhaps her young man had died in the war. The thought reminded Dalton of his older brother, Drake, a soldier among many who had met the same fate.

He must ask his sister, Olivia, about Alicia Spencer's background. He should have done so earlier, but he'd never expected that she'd refuse him.

Anger. The air was still charged with it. Yet her father had shown no animosity toward Dalton. What had he said to fire up such resentment in her?

Damn the luck. Better to use his time thinking of another way to coax Lady Alicia into seeing his stallion, Bashshar. Dalton knew that one glance at the pitiful animal, and even the hard-hearted Alicia would melt and want to help him.

Dalton's thoughts wandered back to the lady. He gathered the lead rope and led the mare toward the carriage. "Come, Cinnamon. We've not been beaten yet. Like brother Drake used to say, when you've drawn your last ace, it's time to play the one up your sleeve."

* * *

"Hounds of Jericho!" Alicia's father pounded his fist on the desktop. "You'll march right back and apologize to him. Do you hear, Daughter?"

"I can't believe you would ask such a thing of me." Alicia paced in a tight circle. "I refuse, and you can't make me, Father," she shouted, surprising them both. She had never raised her voice to him before, but this time, she was filled with a sense of betrayal. Her father cared so little for her feelings that she didn't care what he thought of her.

Her father's face colored a deep puce. "Very well, Alicia. I'll give you a choice." His heavy jowls shook with anger. "Widower Sedwick Rollins has asked for your hand. If you refuse to tend the duke's stallion, then I'll be forced to tell Rollins that you'll marry as soon as a special license can be obtained."

"You're bluffing!" She bit back a laugh. "Rollins hasn't a sixpence to scratch with—"

"Don't force me to—"

"Some basket you'd be in with a son-in-law like Sedwick Rollins. With those twelve children and not a feather to fly with, he'll not be content to live down by the river in that sod hut if he marries me." Alicia couldn't keep her face straight. "He'll move his brood in here faster than the scullery lads steals Cook's pies left cooling on the windowsill. And you'll not keep your brandy long with Rollins dipping deep in your jugs."

Her father's watery eyes didn't blink as he stared long and hard. Then he drew a parchment from his desktop and grabbed his inkpot and quill.

She wet her lips, her mouth as dry as the cold ashes in the fireplace. "What are you doing?"

His mouth firmed into a hard line, his pen scratching across the rough paper. Alicia watched as her father's large, spidery black script began to fill one side of the page. She glanced at the letter addressed to Sedwick Rollins. Alicia's

heart leaped in her throat. "You can't go through with this outrage."

"I can and I will. Rollins has inherited a small purse and will be moving to Dorset. You'll be leaving with him unless you come to your senses."

"Mother will never allow this."

"Your mother already knows and understands the necessity."

"I'm going to speak with her anyway."

"Your mother has nothing to say about the matter. You will go through with the arrangement I've made with Wexton, or you'll pack your things and be gone from here by nightfall."

Alicia had never seen her father like this before. A heavy weight pounded in her chest. She drew her hand to her mouth, but the question wedged in her throat. "Why, Father? Why are you doing this?"

"Because we're in quite deep. I've borrowed against Marston Heath, and..." He closed his eyes, and she watched him fight to control himself. Once again, she sensed that he had gambled heavily and lost.

"You're the only one who can bail us out of this sinking ship," he said, his voice strained.

"You know what Wexton's mother did to me, Father. How can you—"

"Damned what she did to you, Daughter. The boot is quite on the other leg, now. It's time that family paid you back for what the dowager did. Cinnamon Rose is worth five times the horseflesh we can afford, and we have the advantage because Wexton is soft on this stallion of his. Now carry on with your part of the bargain. I've negotiated a price from the duke. All you have to do is cure his horse, and we'll be in the money."

Words were useless. There was nothing she could say to refute the value of Cinnamon Rose and the importance the mare would bring to their stable.

Her father's cheeks puffed with agitation as he waited for her answer. Alicia sighed. She might as well talk to a stump. "You win, Father." She ran to the study door and burst from the room.

The long hallway and the staircase at the end blurred into a watery splotch as tears welled in her eyes. Hiking her skirts, she dashed through the house, too upset to speak to her mother. First, she needed time alone. Alicia tore open the front door and sped toward the quiet sanctity of the herb garden.

Chapter Two



Lacy umbels of angelica blossoms waved gently amid the plants shading the curved garden bench. Alicia sat down, her brow furrowed. What was the use? She might as well be a prisoner, for all the say she held in her life. In spite of the active role she took in running the manor, she was required, like her mother, to obey her father, regardless of his foolhardy decisions.

Her thought went back to Wexton's stallion. If the horse was suffering, then she wanted to help. Healing wounded beasts was her salvation, her greatest pleasure. While she remained at Havencrest, she'd focus only on the horse.

But what if Wexton's mother, the dowager duchess, lived at Havencrest? She would consider Alicia a servant, a woman toiling with her hands. The dowager would consider Alicia's work with animals proof that she wasn't fit for Society.

Alicia swept her hand gently across the clumps of frilly, green leaves at her feet. The air was charged with mint, lemon verbena and scented geranium. She felt her anger change into practical determination. Maybe the dowager had remained in London instead of returning with her son to the country for the summer. Especially since the duke

would be at Havencrest until his stallion improved. The idea gave her hope.

Alicia passively swatted a flowering stalk of comfrey, the cloud of yellow pollen dusting her skirts. But why should she care who would be at Havencrest? She hadn't deserved to be banned from society, and she would face the dowager or anyone else if need be. But she wasn't foolish enough to go looking for trouble.

A soft nicker, then a velvet nose snuggled against her ear. Startled, Alicia turned as Cinnamon Rose nibbled her neck. Despite her mood, she laughed. "Have you come to plead your master's case, too?" Alicia asked, rubbing the mare's satiny ear.

The horse tossed her head playfully. Indeed, the animal was magnificent. She pressed her cheek against the mare's velvet neck. "You needn't plead, pretty thing. I'll help your friend."

Alicia stood, still petting Cinnamon Rose's reddish-gold neck, when she noticed Wexton leading a handsome cur-ricule with a matched pair of white Lusitano horses from the livery building. She warily narrowed her gaze at him.

"Did your master put you up to finding me and giving me a kiss, Cinnamon Rose?" She couldn't help but chuckle. Alicia grabbed the mare's halter and strolled across the lawn to meet him.

The duke appeared not to notice her as he drove the carriage in her direction. When the rig came to within a short distance from where she stood, Wexton stopped the team, his face revealing no emotion. Instead of a last-minute appeal, which she had expected, Wexton remained silent as his gaze fixed with hers. Yet the effect of his mesmerizing scrutiny couldn't have been more calamitous to her nerves. Shock waves from his beseeching blue eyes made her insides feel jittery and her knees weaken.

Alicia steeled herself. "I admire a well-trained horse, but to have one seek me out and give me a kiss shows your

hand as a spectacular trainer." Any chance that the trick was a coincidence was erased by the answering twinkle in Wexton's eyes.

"I've reconsidered my decision to help your stallion, Bashshar," Alicia said, hoping the statement sounded as though it was her idea. "You can expect me to arrive at Havencrest by the first of next week. I expect to have private quarters where I can isolate myself and Bashshar away from people. I refuse to be put up in the main house. I need nothing fancy, a suite prepared above the carriage house will do." She met his attentive gaze. "Are there any questions concerning my terms?"

Wexton studied her with an interested look. "What changed your mind so quickly, may I ask?"

Alicia braced her shoulders. What changed her mind, indeed. No doubt he'd known that her family was purse-pinched, and her father would never allow her to back out of the chance to own such an expensive mare as Cinnamon Rose.

"I'm not doing this favor for you, your grace. I'm doing this for your stallion."

"Thank you, my lady," he said finally. "I'll leave Cinnamon Rose here, at your stable. If you journey to Havencrest, regardless of your decision to remain and help my stallion, your kindness earns you the mare."

"Take Cinnamon Rose with you. A finer animal I've never seen. Although my father is lord of the manor, he allows me to manage the few horses that make up our breeding stable. I'll add to my horses quite nicely without any help from you."

Dalton caught the mare's line as she tossed it to him. He sat, dazed, while Alicia raised her head and swept across the lawn toward the manor, as proud as any English filly.

He felt as though he'd been properly put in his place, but what the hell had he done to deserve it? He rubbed his chin as he watched her stroll along the drive. Egad, he'd

never met a more cantankerous wench. Were all the females in her father's household as disagreeable and cranky as Alicia? If so, no wonder old man Spencer found comfort in the gin bottle.

Candlelight glowed from the massive, tiered chandeliers in the great salon of Havencrest. Ionic columns graced the second-floor balustrade where Dalton stood, gazing down upon the couples dancing quadrilles to the lilting music.

For the past week, Dalton had thought of nothing but this day, when Lady Alicia would arrive at Havencrest and finally meet Bashshar. The carpenters had been hammering day and night to finish the quarters Alicia had requested. If only she could cure Bashshar. His gut clenched again when he thought of the animal's worsening anxiety. Was he selfish to try to keep Bashshar alive?

His gaze swept the faces of his mother's guests for the week-long country party. How he detested these boring affairs. If he hadn't expected Lady Alicia today, he would be long gone, buried with work, overseeing the fields, anywhere as long as he was away from his mother and the trappings of Society.

"Dalton, I beg your attention."

He turned to see his sister Olivia, her lovely face pinched with concern. "Sister, have you found out what I asked you concerning Lady Alicia?"

"Not yet, but I expect Great-Aunt Mary will know. I expect her any time now." She grinned. "I must say, Dalton, from what you've told me about Lady Alicia, I'm as curious to find out about her background as you are."

Dalton nodded. "Then what serious business drives you from the arm of your devoted Robert?"

Olivia's blue eyes sparkled with pleasure at the mention of her husband. "There's a fuss going on downstairs. The butler is extremely upset and insists that only you can remedy the situation."

"Thank God for small favors," he said with a smile. He knew his sister understood that he would rather be alone with the horses than playing host to the ton.

"Dalton, I've seen so little of you this past week. Are you purposely avoiding your family?" She smiled mischievously. "Or are you trying to avoid Elizabeth?"

Olivia was teasing, he knew. She couldn't keep her face straight as she gazed down at the black-and-white marble dance floor to the slender blond woman, who appeared to be flirting outrageously while dancing with a viscount. Olivia held on to her brother's sleeve, showing no intention to let go until he answered her.

"I've not avoided anyone deliberately," Dalton said, watching the blonde blush becomingly as several young men joined the growing circle of admirers. Elizabeth had been engaged to his younger brother, Drake, and after his death, the dowager duchess and Elizabeth had presumed she would eventually marry Dalton, something he had never encouraged. He liked Elizabeth, but only as a man cares for a younger sister. She was a graceful little thing, but too spoiled for his taste.

"Look how the lady gathers men's hearts," he said to Olivia. "I'm certain that Elizabeth hasn't even noticed that I've been gone." He smiled as he gently removed his sister's hand from his sleeve.

Olivia's delicate brow lifted. "Her flirtations are only a ruse to make you jealous. She's mad about you. I overheard her say that she hopes you'll announce your engagement to her before the party ends next weekend."

Dalton frowned. "I've never invited the idea, my dear. It's our mother who encourages her, not me."

Olivia nodded. "That may be true, but I think Elizabeth needs very little encouragement, Dalton. The only heart she wants is yours, dear brother. I'd be very careful, if I were you."

"Don't worry, Olivia. I have no wish to marry Elizabeth or anyone."

She tilted her fair-haired head to one side. "I so wish you'd find a woman who will make you happy," Olivia continued. "You deserve the pleasures that a wonderful marriage can offer."

He smiled at the romantic young woman of whom he was so proud. "Little sister, I hope life never rears its ugly head and disappoints you."

She scowled at him. "You're much too young to be so cynical, Dalton."

Dalton's only answer was an enigmatic smile. "Excuse me, dear Olivia, but I must see what the butler wants."

Ignoring Olivia's look of frustration, he turned and waded through the sea of guests. Maybe when he returned, the overdue Lady Alicia will have arrived.

Raised voices greeted Dalton before he reached the main hall. At the front entrance, Jarvis, the butler, towered over the slightly built young woman in front of him. On second glance, Dalton recognized Alicia with her hair pulled severely beneath a low-brimmed bonnet. Although she wore a traveling cape over her gown, he could imagine her shapely feminine charms hidden by the loose-fitting garment. The servant turned at the sound of Dalton's footsteps.

"Er, your grace. This lady refuses to give her name, and she refuses to speak to anyone but you."

Dalton smiled at the plainly dressed young woman before him. "Quite all right, Jarvis." To the young woman scowling up at him, he said, "Welcome to Havencrest, Lady Alicia. I've been expecting you."

The butler's face paled when he realized the duke actually was acquainted with the lady. "I—I'm sorry, your grace, I—I—"

"I'll take care of the matter, Jarvis." Dalton led her from the hall and out the front door. "Come this way, Lady Alicia." He signaled a groom standing outside. "Bring my

urricane around. I'll drive it myself." The groom dashed off along the sheltered path leading to the carriage house.

While they waited, Dalton glanced at Alicia, wanting to see her expression, but she turned away, her face in shadow. "I'll show you to your quarters, myself," he said.

He saw her steal a look at him beneath her floppy hat rim. "I asked that I not be quartered in the manor house."

Dalton peered down at her. "Your lodging is separate from the manor. In fact, the cottage is so far away that I've requested my carriage, my lady." He was relieved to see her relax slightly. Damn, she was the most peculiar thing. But if she was willing to help Bashshar, he shouldn't care if she wanted to bed down with the cattle.

The young groom arrived with the handsome black curicle pulled by a sprightly set of grays. The groom handed her up to the front seat while Dalton took the reins. Within minutes, the carriage clattered down the well-trimmed path along the gardens, past the numerous outbuildings, over a stone bridge and through a grove of trees. On the other side, the sheltered path curved toward a small cottage surrounded by trees and hedges.

Alicia stared at the thatched-roof bungalow. Dalton watched her brown eyes widen; her full lips formed an O of surprise before she masked her feelings. "Is this where I am...?"

He felt relieved at her pleased reaction. "I hope you find the quarters suitable, my lady. If not—"

"I'm certain the cottage will be most suitable."

Dalton didn't know what benefit she'd gain from sleeping away from the manor house, and he really didn't care. "If you change your mind—"

"I'm here to be with Bashshar. He's all that interests me at Havencrest. I had already instructed the groomsman to bring my trunks to my quarters."

"Then if there's nothing else you require...?"

"No, your grace." Alicia covered her mouth with her

dainty hand and as if on cue, yawned. "It's been a frightfully long journey. I'm quite tired."

Dalton turned to walk away, then paused. "Tomorrow morning, after breakfast, I'll introduce you to Bashshar."

"Why not now?"

"Because it's late, and I don't want the horse overly excited."

"Good evening." She bobbed a short curtsy and strode toward the cottage.

Dalton hid his smile as she dismissed herself without his permission. "Good evening, my lady." No doubt the lady knew such behavior in front of a duke was considered a faux pas. Dash! He had hoped her distaste for him might have mellowed.

Dalton climbed into the curricule and headed back toward the manor. By now, maybe Olivia had learned something about this perplexing female.

Before he drove the carriage over the bridge, he gave in to the impulse to sneak a glance at her. She was standing at the cottage door, watching him.

Dalton smiled. Damn, she was an odd thing. And he couldn't help wonder, again, what caused her to take such an instant dislike to him.

Alicia watched the elegant carriage pause before slipping out of sight. Aye, Wexton was as polite and charming as Lucifer—and just as handsome. In his elegant evening attire, he was all that and more. She nibbled her lower lip. Although she had risked his anger, he had not only tolerated her wishes, but appeared challenged by them. She took that as a victory. He'd met her demands, and built a fetching little cottage. The whitewash was still damp in places, and she'd wager that the roof thatch was so fresh it would shine like spun gold in tomorrow's sunlight.

She hesitated before opening the door. How she'd hoped that the fluttery feelings in her stomach, when she was near

Wexton, would have faded by now. How strange she felt when he stared at her with his penetrating blue eyes.

In the darkness, the sound of horses' soft nickering from the nearby stables provided her with a familiar comfort. A wave of curiosity rose as she yearned to investigate Wexton's prize-winning stock. Far and wide, men spoke of the duke's horses, which were among the most splendid in England. She should wait until morning when the animals wouldn't be so unsettled by a stranger in their midst. But her insatiable curiosity wouldn't permit her to wait one more minute. The building was so huge, surely if she looked around for only a few minutes, no harm could come from that.

A short while later after she had settled in, Alicia slid the livery door open. She gasped, unable to believe her eyes. Walls of white alabaster marble rose to meet frescoed ceilings where every few yards lanterns flickered from ornate grillwork. White-graveled aisles led to the individual horses' quarters past the immense tack room with dozens of hooks holding bridles, harnesses and rows of saddles. "My stars!"

To the right, a hinged sign above the passageway announced the stable hands' wing. She peeked inside one of the empty chambers. The room was immaculate and its furniture clean and proper. The stable hands' quarters were larger and more comfortable than her chambers at Marston Heath!

She hurried to take a glance at some of the horses. Lifting a lantern from its hook, Alicia strode past the tack room toward the horse stalls.

"'Wha' ye doin'?" A lad, not much older than her ten-and-four-year-old sister, poked his head out from the last stall. She had apparently awakened him by the look of his tousled red hair and sleepy eyes.

"I'm inspecting the quarters," Alicia replied. "Who are you?"

The boy warily studied her plain dress and riding boots. "Name is Penn. I'm one o' the stable boys." He scratched his head and frowned. "Ain't never seen ye before."

Alicia bit back a smile. "I'll be working here for a while," she said instead.

A golden horse, similar in size to her own stallion, stuck its head over the stall gate and neighed a welcome.

Without a thought, Alicia peered over the rail, eager to see the animal's conformation. Suddenly, from the far end of the stable, came a piercing cry, followed by a chorus of whinnies from the other horses.

"What was that pitiful sound?" Alicia asked.

Penn's freckled face paled. "Nothin'."

"Nothing?" Alicia pushed past him and rushed toward the racket. The agonizing sound reminded her of the day, last spring, when one of her mares had broken loose and wandered along the river. Alicia had followed that fearful bellow until she found her horse, stuck in the mud, just in time to save her from a pack of wild dogs.

The racket in the stable stopped as quickly as it had begun. Raising the lantern, Alicia rounded the next row of horse stalls. At the end of the wall stood another box stall, walls too high to peer over.

Alicia forgot everything as she dashed toward the cubicle, hung the lantern on a peg and lifted the stout beam that held the door fast.

"Don't go in there, Miss," Penn yelled. "E'll kill ye."

Ignoring the stableboy's warning, Alicia stepped inside and closed the door behind her. In one corner stood a massive black stallion, trembling with fear. The horse's piercing black eyes were ringed in white as he backed into the corner, watching her with apprehension.

Alicia gasped. Somehow she knew this Thoroughbred must be Wexton's Bashshar. Dismissing thoughts of the man, she moved away from the stall's door to give the animal a sense that he wasn't cornered.

He tossed his massive head; the lantern's soft glow emphasized the fiery glints along his satiny black coat. The stallion pawed the ground, ears laid flat against his head, teeth bared.

Alicia's need to comfort far outweighed her fear. In a low clear sound, she began to hum, while in her mind she pictured a soothing image—wind rippling through swaying willow branches. At a safe distance from the horse, she stood still, allowing him to become accustomed to her scent. Although Alicia thought the stallion might rear, she held her ground and continued to hum.

She looked for some outward sign of his distress. Raised white scars zigzagged across the animal's left flank, shining in the lantern light. She grimaced but leaned closer. The laceration had occurred within the month, as indicated by the proud flesh—the raised, white tissue—that formed around the wound.

She met the animal's frightened eyes. Aye, what troubled the horse was more than his wounds. She could feel his terror and agony.

Penn peeked through a knothole in the wooden wall. Immediately, the horse caught the brief movement; his eyes again were ringed in white. Lips curling, the animal let out another terrifying scream. Alicia felt as if her body were being ripped in two. She squeezed her eyes shut, and reached to touch the animal's neck.

Immediately, the horse's feelings of fear and confusion shot through her—feelings so intense that she thought she had been pounded hard alongside the ear. Forcing the fervor from her mind, Alicia cleared her thoughts and braced herself. Her hand pressed gently along Bashshar's warm, silky neck.

"Nobody dares touch the 'orse 'cept 'is lordship." Penn had opened the door a crack, keeping a respectful distance from her and the stallion.

Alicia turned to face the lad, "Then this is Bashshar?"

Penn nodded, his eyes wide.

"How did the accident happen?"

When Penn didn't answer, she stopped petting the horse and backed up toward the door, moving very carefully so as not to frighten Bashshar.

"I asked you how the accident happened."

"Dunno."

"Nonsense. A valuable animal like Bashshar is injured and the stable boy knows nothing about it?" Maybe it was the severe look she gave him, but Penn finally answered her.

"Me father is Ulger, the stable master. He said fer me t' say nothin' 'bout that night." Penn muttered so softly she could barely hear him.

"Why would your father give such an order?" But as soon as she'd asked, she wondered if Ulger felt intimidated by the duke. She decided on a change of tactic. "Was the duke of Wexton riding Bashshar when the injury occurred?"

Penn's widening hazel eyes was his only answer.

"Please, Penn. If I knew how the horse was injured, it would help me understand him." She felt guilty pressing the lad, but she needed to find out what she could. "Was the duke riding the horse when the accident occurred?" she repeated.

Penn pressed his lips into a grim line. "Yes, my lady. An' weren't no accident, neither." His gaze narrowed with intended meaning.

"Surely you don't mean that someone deliberately harmed the animal?" She studied Penn, who immediately averted his gaze.

No, Alicia thought. Penn wouldn't dare say anything derogatory about his master, either. She took a deep breath. "Did you see—" she hesitated "—the incident?"

Penn shook his head. "Me father an' the master brought the horse in an'—" He shook his red curls. "Never saw

Bashshar like 'e was that night. Never saw any animal like 'im, thank God. When I asked what 'appened, they told me t' get out an' sleep in the servants' wing." Penn glanced around as if he might be overheard. "After I left the stable, I couldn't sleep thinkin' o' th' poor creature's sufferin'."

Although she wanted to know more, Alicia didn't want Penn telling Ulger or the duke that she was prodding the lad with questions. She'd find out what she needed to know in her own way. "Thank you, Penn. I won't say a word to anyone about the matter."

He gave her an uneasy look, then scratched his head.

Alicia felt the horse begin to settle. "Go back to sleep, Penn. I'd like to remain with Bashshar for a time."

His eyes rounded like amber saucers. "B-but..."

She smiled reassuringly. "If your father should question you, I'll explain to him in the morning."

"It's not me father I fear, my lady. It's 'is lordship. 'E'll eat me alive if 'e finds I let ye near 'is 'orse."

Surprised that Penn hadn't been told earlier that she was coming to help work with Bashshar, Alicia wondered how many people Dalton had told about her arrival. "Let me worry about his lordship."

Penn hesitated, then glanced at the stallion. Bashshar tossed his head, the long silky mane shimmering like black satin in the lantern light. "The beast does seem quieter," Penn said after a moment.

Alicia purposely waited for Penn's approval. She sensed that the lad, although now frightened of Bashshar, held great respect and pride for the stallion.

"I think Bashshar likes ye," the lad said finally, as though he'd considered the matter carefully. "'E might enjoy yer company." Penn gave her a furtive glance, then dashed out of sight, his footfalls fading along the crushed gravel.

After the boy left, Alicia was still caught up in the intense feelings of her intuition. Although the stallion was

still terrified of her, she sensed that eventually, she might earn the horse's trust. But first, she must insist upon the truth about the accident from Wexton.

A shiver passed over her. She glanced out the window to the golden glow of Havencrest, sitting in the distance like a glittering diamond against the inky velvet sky.

Whatever the truth, Wexton, I'll find it out, you can be sure of that.

Chapter Three



When Dalton returned to the ballroom, he was more determined than ever to find out what Olivia had learned about the mysterious Lady Alicia. His gaze veered toward the crush of his mother's guests—London's finest. Damn, his sister was nowhere in sight.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Elizabeth waving to him from a crowd of admiring young bucks. Dalton nodded politely, giving her a warm smile.

His mother caught his attention. Garbed in black widow's weeds, her diamond tiara atop her elaborately styled black hair, Mildred, the five-and-fifty-year-old dowager duchess of Wexton was still an attractive woman. She held court to the admiring throng of society's ton as she always had. Several wives of the earls and viscounts met his eye. Dalton gave them a perfunctory nod.

His mother knew the latest rumor and scandal, although she'd never admit it to him. How ironic, he mused. As he stood watching her, the unbidden childhood image of his mother and her lover jumped into Dalton's thoughts. He immediately pushed away the painful memory.

Reluctantly, Dalton made his way through the crush until he stood at his mother's side.

"It's about time you made your appearance, Dalton."

With stony dignity, her fingers brushed the glittering onyx-and-diamond necklace at her throat. In a whisper for his ears only, she added, "I expect you to attend these—"

"Dalton," Elizabeth interrupted. "I've been looking everywhere for you." She curled her hand around his sleeve, then gave the dowager a most dazzling smile.

"Your grace, surely you don't wish to keep your son from his guests?" she teased. "We see so little of Dalton as it is."

A look of pleasure transformed the older woman's thin face. "Surely my son doesn't ignore you, dear Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth coquettishly tilted her head at Dalton. "Yes, he ignores me most outlandishly." She pursed her lips into a delicate pout.

"I have been attending to the needs of one of the guests," Dalton said without emotion. "A special favor, you might say."

Curiosity sparkled Elizabeth's green eyes. "A special guest? Do I know him?"

"I couldn't say." Dalton felt a hint of satisfaction in countering her undisguised curiosity. He patted her gloved hand. "I'm afraid I must be leaving," he said, peeling her hand from his arm. "I hope to see you tomorrow."

His mother waved her fan in a furious blur.

"If you'll excuse me, Mother." He gave her a dismissive bow, then one to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's cheeks blushed. He wasn't aware that she had followed him out of the ballroom until he reached the hall. She rounded on him. "How dare you ignore me!"

Dalton stepped to one of the small private alcoves along the corridor. "Elizabeth, please—"

"You bastard!" Elizabeth's eyes glittered with outrage. "How dare you treat me with such open disdain in front of everyone?"

Surprised, Dalton took a step back. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

She glared back. "Oh, yes, you do. Only this morning, Lady Fredricks told me that I should learn to whinny if I hope to gain any attention from you." Angry red blotches begin to spread along her face and neck. "I'll not become a laughingstock because of you. I won't be ignored any longer!" She slapped his cheek, then spun around and rushed back toward the ballroom.

Dalton rubbed his stinging cheek and sighed. What in hell had brought that on?

"Dalton!" Olivia rushed along the hall to his side. "Whatever did you do to Elizabeth—?"

"I'm afraid it's not what I did. It's what I refused to do," he replied playfully.

"Oh, Dalton. Trifling with Elizabeth can be a dangerous sport."

Dalton laughed. "Dangerous?"

"Yes, dangerous." Olivia's blue eyes widened with alarm. "She fancies herself in love with you, Dalton."

He felt a sudden jolt of sympathy for Elizabeth. "She's still so very young, Olivia. Elizabeth only thinks she's in love. By next week, she'll outgrow her infatuation and fall hopelessly in love with someone else." He winked at her. "You'll see."

Olivia shook her head. "Elizabeth is a headstrong woman who knows what she wants. She wants you, Dalton. I wish you'd take her seriously."

He shrugged in futile helplessness. "You're a delightful romantic, my sister. I hope your belief in true love will never desert you. But I'm afraid that every coupling can't be as divine as yours and that husband you so cherish."

Olivia frowned worriedly. "Sometimes you can be the most stubborn man."

Dalton chuckled. "The evening is too lovely to spend arguing, Sister." He took her arm and led her back toward the ballroom. "Forgive me for changing the subject, but have you spoken to Great-Aunt Mary about Lady Alicia?"

She stopped and looked up at him. Her fingers worked nervously with the ribbons on her fan. "Yes, I did."

He glanced around for a quiet place to talk. "Come," he said, urging his sister through the French doors and onto the terrace, away from the threat of meeting Elizabeth again. He took a deep breath of the invigorating night air. "Let's take a walk through the gardens."

Lilting music floated from the ballroom's open windows as they strolled across the broad terrace. When they came to an empty bench beneath towering rhododendrons, they took a seat.

Olivia collected herself. "Alicia's father is a notorious drunk, a gambler who has almost lost their family estate many times. Three years ago, when Alicia arrived for her first Season, she was thrown into the most shocking scandal."

Dalton knew that Olivia, unlike their mother, disliked gossip, and he wished he could have found out what he needed to know about Lady Alicia Spencer some other way. But he needed to be discreet, and Olivia was one of the few people he trusted.

"The incident happened during Lady Alicia's first ball, which was given by Mother at our London town house. It was also Elizabeth's first Season. In fact, mother was Elizabeth's patroness that year. Do you remember, Dalton?"

He shook his head. "No. That spring I was in Portugal, fighting with Wellesley's campaign. Just before Drake enlisted—"

His words faded when he saw the pained expression cross Olivia's face at the mention of their brother. "I'm sorry, Olivia. I didn't mean..."

She laid her white-gloved hand on his sleeve. "It's quite all right, Dalton." She paused, glancing up at the stars twinkling overhead. "You'd think after three years that I would accept that he's never coming home." She shook her head. "I know I sound foolish, Dalton. Forgive me."

"You're not foolish, my dear. I miss him, too."

"The worst part for me was not having Drake's body returned to England. I so hate to think—"

He patted her hand. "Drake will remain alive in our hearts as long as we remember him, Olivia. He'd be so proud that you named your first son after him."

The tight smile on Olivia's lips faded. "Thank God that you returned safely from the war. I don't know what I would have done without you, too."

Olivia, so sensitive, so caring. He squeezed her hand in an attempt to comfort. She was almost nine years younger than he; maybe that was why he would always feel so protective of her.

"I haven't told you the worst about Lady Alicia's past," Olivia said, recovering. She met his gaze. "On the evening of Alicia's first ball, she was found with your friend, Justin Sykes, alone in his bedroom."

"Sykes?" Dalton released her hand. "I don't believe it."

She nodded. "There's no mistake. In fact, Great-Aunt Mary said that Mother and several of her friends found them together."

Dalton furrowed his brows in disbelief. Justin Sykes's reputation as a rake and a scoundrel was well-known. Rumor had it that he'd made his wealth from selling contraband to Napoleon's troops, but Dalton had never believed it. Certainly an innocent like Alicia would be warned to steer clear of such a scoundrel, unless she thought herself in love with him. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. Word of the affair spread and by nightfall of the next day, Lady Alicia had returned home in utter disgrace." Blue eyes, so like his own, stared back at him. "Great-Aunt Mary remembers the incident vividly. Before Alicia's downfall, everyone said that she was by far the most beautiful jewel of the Season."

"Did Sykes offer for her?"

Olivia's eyes widened. "That's what upset everyone the

most. Justin Sykes offered to marry her, and the girl turned him down."

"That's devilishly queer. Why?"

"Despite all the rumors, no one knew the truth."

Dalton thought back to the lovely, free-spirited woman who had barely concealed her animosity toward him. Beneath her plain gown, he'd seen the full high breasts and the feminine outline of her tiny waist and gently rounded hips, and he remembered his immediate reaction to her. He prided himself on being able to look beyond this sort of attraction to women in order to make astute judgments of the fair sex.

Yet the more he discovered about Alicia, the more mysterious she became. Now, he understood her initial refusal to tend Bashshar, and the sacrifice she'd made to come to the family estate and face his mother.

"I've done Lady Alicia a grave disservice, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean, Dalton?"

"Alicia has put aside her feelings about our mother to help an injured animal. She's here solely because she wants to cure Bashshar."

"Hmm. I see she's impressed you, brother." A note of inquisitiveness rang on her words. "I'm curious to meet her."

"Perhaps you could pay her a visit tomorrow. I haven't told anyone else that she's arrived. I'm afraid you might be her only friend while she's here."

"Oh, Dalton. Mother will never permit her to stay."

"I'm now the duke. Mother will have to accept the fact."

Olivia shook her head. "Don't underestimate the damage Mother can do, Dalton. She's still one of the most powerful members of the ton. She can destroy people with her tongue as easily as Wellington can with his sword."

"No need to warn me about the dragon," he answered lightly.

Olivia's assessing gaze told Dalton that she was won-

dering, again, what he knew about their mother that had so hardened him against her. But Olivia also knew that he would never speak of the matter.

"Let me escort you back to the ballroom, Sister. Your husband must be frantically looking everywhere for you." He rose and took her hand, then accompanied her back toward the hall.

After Dalton left Olivia, he headed for the livery stable. He wanted to check on Bashshar for the night.

When he came to the stables, golden light flickered from the west windows of the building. Since the accident, Dalton had ordered the lanterns high above Bashshar's stall to remain lit, hopeful the small gesture might ease the stallion's fears.

The memory of Bashshar's injury still haunted Dalton. So far, he had found no sound reason for anyone to shoot at him. But from the footprints the gamekeeper had found, there was little doubt that the shooter had waited for some time, stalking Dalton when he returned from Bashshar's workout.

Inside the stable, Dalton strode along the corridors. Several horses whinnied a greeting. When he approached Bashshar's stable room, a faint nicker told him that Bashshar recognized his footfalls. Dalton smiled, taking that as a sign of improvement. After the accident, Bashshar wasn't able to recognize what was familiar, what was strange. The horse saw everything as an attack.

When he approached the stall, Dalton noticed the bar across the door had been removed. Irritation rushed through him. It wasn't like Ulger or the staff to be careless and leave Bashshar's stall unlocked! Dalton eased the door open.

Alicia stood alone beneath the overhead lantern, barely a few feet from Bashshar. The stallion lowered his head, not making a sound. Dalton wanted to rush to her, protect her in case Bashshar reared. Instead, Dalton hesitated,

afraid to make a sudden movement that might startle the horse.

She was dressed in a pristine nightgown, with white lace circling her neck. Her unbound auburn hair shimmered like liquid fire beneath the lamplight. The white wool shawl draped around her shoulders did nothing to prevent his imagination from visualizing what she'd look like naked.

My God, she looked like an enchantress!

He was reminded of the scene painted across the ceiling of the hunting lodge. Potnia, the auburn-haired mistress of wild animals, cavorted in naked splendor among the clouds, surrounded by lions, griffins and deer.

Alicia turned to look at him, her fingers stroking Bashshar's neck. The stallion raised his powerful black head suddenly, as though showing his master the strange interloper in their midst.

Dalton couldn't believe his eyes. In one brief visit, Alicia had soothed the animal more than the other handlers had done in the past month.

How vulnerable and alluring she appeared in the soft lantern light. Gone was the stubborn glint in her large brown eyes. Now, those soft, velvety orbs were filled with compassion for Bashshar.

Perhaps it was appreciation that filled his heart. She had put aside her anger to come to the estate to aid a wounded animal. Just watching her with Bashshar gave him hope that this strange young woman might accomplish what the horse experts had said couldn't be done.

Were you in love with Justin Sykes? he wanted to ask. Then for a split second, Dalton didn't care. He wanted her. Desire charged through his veins like molten lava. He wanted to be the man who would tame her haughty spirit.

"You're staring at me." She bit her bottom lip as she studied him with an innocence that nearly undid him. What the hell was the matter with him? He forced the incredible idea from his mind.

Maybe his strange feelings were the result of learning the details about her fall from grace. When was the last time he'd heard of another human being, with nothing to gain, performing a sacrifice for him?

Sacrifice, hell! Even though Alicia had refused Cinnamon Rose, more than likely she knew that her father would insist upon the mare as payment.

Suddenly Bashshar whinnied, tossing his head, his ears back. Dalton leaped forward, grabbing the stallion's bridle, holding the horse firmly. "Perhaps it's best if you return to your cottage."

"Bashshar has a right to express himself when he wants," she whispered, not wanting to excite the horse.

Express himself? Dalton turned to stare at her. "Bashshar isn't your common, tea-party-variety horse, Lady Alicia. He's injured and he's not responsible for what he's doing. Besides, he obeys only me."

Alicia pulled the shawl tightly around herself and lifted her chin in that stubborn way Dalton was beginning to recognize. "Then give Bashshar the orders, not me. For I don't obey you, your grace."

Dalton couldn't help but laugh. "Then consider it a suggestion rather than an order. Return to your cottage, my lady. I had a good reason for wanting you to wait until morning to see the horses. Many guests wander into the stables, eager for a midnight ride. What would they think if they found an angelic beauty wandering half-clad among the stalls?"

She patted at the folds in her nightgown. "And what are you doing here, so late at night?" Her tone made him feel as though he were the trespasser. "Are you planning a midnight ride?"

"No. I always look in on Bashshar before retiring. Regardless of what you might think of me, I care about Bashshar."

"Tell me how Bashshar was injured. You've frightened

your stable boy so badly that the lad is afraid to speak of the incident."

"You've been questioning my servants?" He smiled and folded his arms across his chest.

She glanced at Bashshar. "I'm here to try to heal your horse." Her aloof expression faded to one of compassion. "I need to know the truth about the accident." Her voice softened and there was no trace of her earlier rancor.

Dalton studied her. As she gazed at the stallion, goodness illuminated her face. When she looked like that, he felt he could trust her completely.

"It was late afternoon," he began. "I was returning from exercising Bashshar, when a shot rang out from the nearby gaming fields. We were almost on top of the man when the second gun fired—the shot that struck Bashshar."

"Did you see the shooter?"

"No, he was too well hidden in the hedgerow."

"Then why do you think the shooter was a man?"

Surprised, Dalton hesitated. "The idea that it might be a woman never crossed my mind."

Alicia's eyes flashed. "Really?" Her lips twitched. "You've never given a woman reason to shoot at you?"

He chuckled. "You bring up an interesting point."

Alicia's expression turned serious. "Were you injured, too?"

"No."

Alicia touched the horse's cheek. "Since the incident, you haven't found out any more about the shooter?"

"The authorities are still examining the matter."

She nodded, as though satisfied for the moment. "I believe I understand Bashshar's fear." She stroked the length of the animal's nose with a feather touch.

Dalton studied her delicate hands. For an instant, he could almost imagine those cool, soft, healing fingers upon his brow. "What is it you do? Do you see into the animal's mind?"

She shook her head, her gaze fixed on the horse. "No. I can't see things. I only sense things. Usually only fragments. But with Bashshar, I felt his panic before I opened the stall door and saw him." Her eyes brightened. "I also sensed that he wanted me to help him."

Bashshar was accepting her more readily than Dalton thought possible. What was there about this young woman that filled him with hope? Maybe he only wanted to believe that Bashshar might be saved? "How do you heal the animals?"

The question caused her to turn and smile at Dalton. How lovely she looked when she smiled. Or was it that she seemed, for the first time, to be at ease with him?

"It's quite natural, really." Her eyes shone. "First, I must gain their trust. Although this takes time, I begin by filling my mind with a sense of peace. Perhaps the animal senses that if I'm serene, then I won't harm it." Her cheeks brightened with a pink tinge, as if she expected he might ridicule her explanation.

Instead, Dalton was enthralled. "Who taught you this skill?"

"My grandfather taught me about horses and their training."

"Your mother's father?"

"Yes, the earl of Longworth."

"I've heard of him," Dalton said, amazed that he hadn't made the connection between Alicia and her well-known grandfather.

She smiled when she recognized his admiration. "My grandfather built Marston Heath on land he had inherited from his father. Grandfather was an expert horseman, who had developed a fine stable of racing stock before he died."

Dalton felt overwhelmed with curiosity. He wanted to know everything about her. "What did he teach you about horses?"

She chuckled. "It would take months to answer that

question." She glanced at Bashshar, her face becoming serious. "My grandfather had translated and studied the work of Xenophon, the Greek, whose training of horses in the third century, B.C., advocated kindness rather than cruelty." Her eyes sparkled with the memory. "My grandfather taught me Xenophon's techniques, which I've used with success on most animals." She brought her gaze back to his and smiled faintly. "I think you would have liked my grandfather, but he died six years ago."

"I would have considered meeting him a privilege," Dalton said, gazing into her immense brown eyes. Standing in the golden lantern light, in Bashshar's stall, she looked so natural, as though she were at home with the animals.

"The way you look just now, reminds me of Potnia, the Greek goddess of wild animals," he said. "In the hunting lodge, there's a ceiling mural of her, standing in the forest among lions and deer."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "She is also called the Sweet Virgin, and she's usually shown with her magical griffins, which are thought to protect her."

He lifted a black brow in amazement. "You're familiar with Greek mythology?"

She smiled. "My grandfather was also a scholar, who believed in the unpopular notion that women should be educated. My mother and her sisters were much too proper to care for books, but I loved to read. My grandfather taught me French, Latin and Greek, which came easily to me. He taught me history, literature and art," she added wistfully.

He realized again how truly amazing she was. She was nothing like his mother, or Elizabeth or the practiced lovers he had known. Alicia appeared to have a stronger inner strength than his sister, Olivia, but maybe Alicia's pride gave that impression. All he knew was that the more he learned about Alicia, the more he wanted to know.

"This sense of peace," Dalton said. "How do you manage it?"

She blushed becomingly, and, if he didn't know better, he'd have thought her shy. "No one has ever asked me that." Her gaze remained on the horse, her left hand petting the powerful neck.

Dalton was aware she hadn't answered his question, but he decided not to pursue it. Instead, he took her free hand and placed it against his chest. "What do you feel now, Alicia?"

Her dark eyes widened as he felt his heartbeat pound beneath her fragile touch. "Surely if you can behold a horse's spirit, you can behold a man's?"

A sudden spark ignited between them. He felt it through his fingers. Or had he imagined it?

Alicia curled her fingers into her palm and withdrew her hand. She stepped back, as though he had never asked the question. "I'll provide you with daily reports of Bashshar's progress, your grace." Her voice held no emotion.

What had happened between them? For the briefest of seconds, he knew that she'd sensed it, too. Dalton stepped back, suddenly needing to break away. "If you require anything, ask Ulger, the stable master." Dalton's voice held steady, despite his sudden unease. "Ulger has been instructed to tell the servants to protect your privacy."

Dalton opened the door and allowed her to pass in front of him. "I'll drive you to your cottage in the carriage. It's too dark for you to walk the long distance alone," he added, returning the bar across the latch. He watched the deep crimson strands of her hair shine like live coals when she walked beneath the lantern. She hurried through the long building until the main entrance came into view.

Outside, he handed her into the carriage. "I hope you found your quarters to your liking."

"Yes, thank you."

He noticed she was trembling. Was she suddenly afraid to be alone with him? Dalton wondered. Or was it his ear-

lier remark that at any hour, a member of the ton might enter the stables?

When they finally reached the cottage, he helped her down and bowed as gallantly as if she were debutante of the year. "Good night, Lady Alicia."

Before going inside, she waited until the carriage wheeled along the path and disappeared into the night. "Good night, your grace," she whispered when her breath finally returned.

The morning's sunlight bathed the snowy marble walls of the horse stables with gold rays. Alicia checked over her charge. Bashshar stood patiently, showing no sign of his past nervousness. Sensing only mild apprehension in the animal this morning, she felt pleased and relieved that the stallion was accepting her so readily.

Oats brimmed from the grain bucket, fresh hay and water had been carried inside and fed to the stallion. If no one could handle Bashshar except Dalton, that meant the duke must have performed the chores himself, leaving before daylight.

"So, you've already seen your master?" She grinned when Bashshar tossed his head. "Then you won't mind if I leave you for a bit." She smiled when the stallion hesitated, as though listening to her words. "I'll look in on you, later."

She moved at a snail's pace toward the door, doing nothing that might startle the animal and break the thin line of trust they had established.

Alicia found a shortcut through the woods to the cottage. The walk was shorter but, more important, the trail was more isolated from the chance meeting of strangers along the bridal path nearby. When she heard footsteps outside the cottage door, she peeked out the window. She was surprised to see a gentlewoman standing at the door with her

maid. The lady, a lovely, fair-haired woman, was dressed in a green riding costume and matching feathered bonnet.

"Good morning, Lady Alicia," the woman said when Alicia opened the door. "I'm Lady Olivia Seabrook, Dalton's sister."

Alicia invited her inside, then suddenly realized how she must look. "Forgive my appearance, my lady, but—"

"No need to apologize, my dear. You look lovely." The maid remained outside while Olivia removed her gloves and took a seat by the window. "Last night, my brother confided the circumstances of your visit." She smiled, and Alicia sensed that her kindness was sincere.

"Thank you, Lady Olivia. I believe I've made the beginning of a fragile truce with Bashshar."

"I understand that your duty is foremost to Bashshar, but I'll not let you spend all of your time in the stables." Olivia paused, as though expecting Alicia to object. "I was on my way to ride this morning. My favorite mount is Mischief, the high-spirited roan in the east wing of the stable. Why don't I have Mischief saddled for you, then you can join me on my ride? I'd like the chance for us to get to know each other."

"But I thought—"

"It's much too lovely a morning to waste inside." She smiled, revealing deep dimples, just like Dalton's.

"Thank you, Lady Olivia, but no. I'd rather remain out of the way of the other guests, if you don't mind."

"I thought we'd follow the secret little path I used to ride as a child." Olivia spoke as though she hadn't heard Alicia's protest. "I'll show you the view from where a waterfall spills into the pool overlooking the hills beyond."

Alicia knew it would be best to refuse, but having a chance to converse with Dalton's sister might be the perfect opportunity to learn more about him. The deep loneliness Alicia had perceived last night when he held her hand against his chest came as a shock to her. What she sensed

was in direct contrast to the shallow image Dalton portrayed. "Very well, Lady Olivia. I'll accept. But only a very short ride."

"Splendid!" Olivia clasped Alicia's hand. "I'll call the maid to come inside and help you change. While you're here, Marie will be your personal maid."

"Should I ask Marie to instruct the stable master to saddle our horses?"

Olivia chuckled. "Forgive me, Lady Alicia, but I've already done so."

While Alicia was changing into her riding habit, Olivia moved about the small cottage, staring in utter disbelief. "My brother must have used a London decorator. Everything is lovely," she said finally. She studied the elegant bedroom—the Belgian lace coverlet and curtains, the enormous porcelain bathtub. "I've never seen a more beautifully shaped tub!" Pale pink cabbage roses, made so popular by Empress Josephine, were painted along the border of the chamber walls.

The maid finished buttoning the tiny jet clasps along Alicia's jacket, then stepped back to allow Alicia room to see herself in the gilt-framed three-way mirror.

"You look lovely, my dear," Olivia exclaimed. "The Prussian blue suits your lovely auburn hair and dark eyes."

Alicia smiled at the compliment. She hadn't worn the habit since her coming out three years ago. Her smile faded with the memory. The maid placed the wide-brimmed hat atop Alicia's head and stepped back. "What thick, shiny hair. It's a shame to cover it," Marie said.

"Thank you," Alicia said, feeling pleased with the way she looked. Vanity was a sin, she reminded herself. Never had she cared about finery, but for a moment, she wondered what Dalton would think if he saw her dressed so becomingly.

She immediately drew back in self-censure. She cared nothing for what that man thought.

Half an hour later, Olivia's golden mare cantered easily beside Alicia's spirited filly. "Havencrest is one of the most beautiful estates I've ever seen," Alicia said finally. Besides immaculately groomed riding paths, the views from the verdant, rolling countryside were breathtaking.

"Havencrest has been in the family since the Tudors. When father died last year, Dalton inherited the estate along with the title." Olivia gave her a sideways glance. "My poor brother. As though he'll ever enjoy the titled responsibilities."

Alicia's curiosity rose. "Why not, my lady?" So far, she had learned very little about Olivia's brother. It was as though Olivia felt guarded to talk about him.

"Dalton is much too unsettled to enjoy the country life. Only Bashshar's injury keeps my brother here."

Of course, Alicia realized. How could she have forgotten what men of the ton were like. Gambling halls, racetracks and beautiful women. Olivia was right. Men like Dalton could never appreciate the pastoral beauty of Havencrest. Yet Dalton had seemed genuinely concerned about Bashshar. A thought struck her.

"Lady Olivia, does your brother plan to race Bashshar?"

Olivia raised a brow. "Bashshar's sire was an Arabian racer, bred to our English Thoroughbred." She paused. "My brother's dream was to see Bashshar win the Newmarket Classic this year." She sighed. "Now, there's little chance that will happen."

So that was the reason Dalton was so desperate for Bashshar to recover. He was concerned with the money and prestige that came with owning a racing champion. The knowledge somehow deflated her spirits.

"I believe Dalton said your family owns racing stock, Lady Alicia. Have you a racehorse entered in an upcoming heat?"

Alicia smiled, thinking of Jupiter, her first racing colt to come from their stable. "My two-year-old has promise. I'm hoping to enter him in the Newmarket Classic this year as well."

Olivia looked impressed. "I wish you the best." Before she could say more, the sound of galloping hooves hammered along the path. She looked up to see two riders galloping toward them. Tall, elegantly dressed, both men rode with the agility of experts. They gallantly brought their horses to the verge, allowing Alicia and Olivia the right away.

"Lord Theodore Clitheridge and Lord Templestone," Olivia greeted the men warmly before introducing Alicia to them.

Lord Clitheridge doffed his hat, staring at Alicia with a mixture of curiosity and appreciation. "My compliments to your father, Lady Alicia, for having such a lovely daughter."

Alicia smiled graciously, despite Lord Clitheridge's veiled hint that he knew of her damaged reputation by mentioning that he knew her father. No doubt he obliged himself not to give her the cut direct out of deference to Lady Olivia. Alicia would rather show ignorance to his innuendo than let him see her dismay.

The second man, Lord Templestone, was dressed in pink satin and lace at his neck and cuffs. Alicia thought he looked like an overstuffed boudoir pillow.

Templestone tipped his hat. "I've never met your sire, Lady Alicia, but your beauty and grace do him much honor."

Alicia thanked him. Beside her, Olivia chatted with ease. If she was aware of the men's intimation, she gave no sign. Although Alicia had yearned to ride, she should never have accepted Olivia's invitation. Those who hadn't known of her scandal would soon hear of it from those who knew.

She forced a brave smile and met the men's curious glances with confidence.

"Sorry to hear of Dalton's stallion's accident," Lord Templestone said to Olivia. "Bad thing, that."

"Bashshar is improving nicely," Olivia answered.

"Heard the horse took quite a beating." Templestone brushed at the sleeve of his riding jacket.

"You're misinformed." Olivia's smile exuded charm, but her voice held an edge that wasn't present before.

Lord Clitheridge looked as if he were going to say something when his attention was diverted to a man and woman racing across the green, directly toward them.

Alicia gazed at the riders. She felt a lump in her throat when she recognized Dalton, astride a pure white Arabian stallion. The lady riding beside him was perched sidesaddle atop a dun mare. Beneath the narrow-brimmed hat she wore, the woman's gold hair shone like a newly minted coin. As they approached, Alicia noticed the lady peer at her with growing interest.

"Sister, I see you've met Lady Alicia." Dalton made no move to introduce Alicia to his beautiful riding companion.

"Good morning, Elizabeth." Olivia glanced toward Alicia. "Have you met Lady Alicia Spencer?" she asked Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's perfect features froze into a mask of distaste. With undisguised rancor, she turned to Dalton. "Shall we take the upper path?"

Elizabeth's failure to acknowledge her, especially when Olivia had directly asked Elizabeth a question, was a cruel cut directed at Alicia.

Dalton's expression gave no notice, but Alicia thought she saw a flinty look in his blue gaze. "You've picked a lively mount, Lady Alicia. Mischief enjoys testing a new rider. I warn you, she's not as meek as she appears."

"Don't worry, your grace. Neither am I." Alicia refused to remain and subject herself to further abuse. She whirled

the spirited filly around. "Excuse me, please," she said to Olivia before she turned the mare in the direction of the stables.

Almost immediately, the sound of a horse galloping behind her took her attention.

"I'll race you back," Dalton called out to her.

"Dalton!" Elizabeth's voice charged with anger. "I'm your fiancée! You can't leave me here!"

Dalton's fiancée? Surprise and disappointment rushed over Alicia. For an engaged man to leave his partner alone while he charged off with another woman was the deepest insult—grave enough to endanger the engagement.

But what did she care? Dalton's Arabian was almost beside her mare. She leaned forward, urging Mischief with encouragement. Moments later, the mare easily took the lead.

Within seconds, Dalton's powerful beast galloped beside her again, but the light-footed Mischief had a head to be first. Spirit was everything, Alicia knew. Large, powerful horses might set a burst of endurance at the start, but like humans, a winning spirit was the key to heroic accomplishments.

Stately trees and low thickets rushed past in a green blur as they raced, their horses neck and neck. Surprised to hear her own peal of laughter amid the thundering hooves, she glanced a peek at Dalton.

His jet riding jacket fit his broad shoulders to perfection. Black, shiny leather boots molded to his muscled legs like a second skin. His rich baritone laughter rang through her thoughts. She couldn't remember when she felt so exhilarated.

The stable's long stone enclosure rose in the distance. Dalton's horse inched alongside of Mischief, preparing to take the lead.

Alicia longed to win; she had to win if she was going to

beat down the feeling that she was an outcast. She would win!

As they neared the west side of the stables, Dalton leaned over the saddle, easing into the lead. Just then, Alicia spotted the small cottage sitting to the left of the livery stable. If she were to veer to the right of the bungalow, then go behind the stables along the shorter path to the paddock entrance, she might beat Dalton, after all.

When they were within a hundred yards of the stable, Alicia urged her mount to the left. When Dalton glanced up to see where she was going, it was too late for him to follow. Alicia raced Mischief toward the bungalow. Passing the stable, she brought her mount along the side of the paddock.

Several grooms rushed toward her and helped her dismount. Her heart pounded in sweet satisfaction. A few seconds later, Dalton arrived on his stallion, and dismounted a few feet from her.

His mouth lifted in a crooked smile. "You win, Lady Alicia."

"And a fair win it was," she returned, waiting for his chiding to follow. Instead, he said nothing as he tossed the reins to a waiting groom.

Dalton would have won if she hadn't veered from the path, and his gallantry wasn't making her winning as satisfying as she'd hoped. It was almost as if he didn't care who won.

"Too bad we didn't place a wager," he offered finally, his heated gaze fixed on her. "I might have tried harder."

"Of course! How could I have forgotten that unless one bets, it's not worth doing?" She glared at him. "I should be returning to Bashshar."

"Dressed in such lovely finery?"

For the moment, she'd forgotten about her riding habit. A heat rose to her cheeks, and she wished he would leave. If only he had mentioned that he was engaged earlier.

But why should he? Dalton considered her nothing more than a stable hand, a nursemaid for his horse. Oh, why had she let Olivia talk her into leaving the stable and pretending to be someone she could never be?

Anger, frustration and something she didn't recognize flamed within her. She was a lady, even if she had been snubbed by the ton. "Yes, I'll change into something more suitable. If you'll excuse me—"

Dalton grabbed her by the shoulders and swung her to face him. "I don't know what possessed Elizabeth to act the way she did. Elizabeth and I aren't engaged."

"It's none of my concern." She brushed his hands from her shoulders.

"There's nothing between us, Alicia. I have no arrangement with Elizabeth. We're both free to do what we want."

"I didn't ask you for an explanation." Alicia stepped back, but he moved with her.

"We're not engaged." He took her hand.

She felt his warmth, so close. Much too close. She felt suddenly dizzy. "Please, let me go."

"It's important that you believe me."

"Oh, I see. Elizabeth is the liar and you're telling me the truth. Is that it?" The paddock fencing seemed to spin around her. She felt warm and light-headed when he looked at her in such an intimate way.

"I don't want you to think worse of me than you already do."

"I suggest you have this conversation with your lady love, not with me." Alicia tried to shake free of his hand, but he held her fast.

"Alicia, please—"

"Lady Alicia, if you please." They faced each other, the awkward silence adding to the void between them. Finally, he released her. She gathered her skirts and rushed from the paddock.

Her hands were still trembling when she dashed inside

the cottage and closed the door. She leaned against the smooth wood, her heart pounding. She squeezed her eyes shut. The handsome face of Dalton Warfield, the duke of Wexton, flooded her mind. His passionate eyes burned into her soul.

Dalton had looked so earnest, so trusting. *Elizabeth and I aren't engaged.*

Why should she care if Dalton was telling the truth? She opened her eyes to her own painful truth. She did care. God help her, but she wanted to believe him.

Chapter Four



Dalton gripped the reins of his mount with practiced control as he rode along the bridle path. Despite his outward appearance, he still felt shocked at Elizabeth for her behavior to Alicia. The sooner he found Elizabeth and settled the matter, once and for all, the sooner he could assure Alicia that she wouldn't have to put up with such tactless conduct again.

Elizabeth! What had provoked her to blurt out that she was his fiancée? In his mind, he could still see Alicia's surprise, then accusing look before she schooled her features behind an emotionless mask. He winced inwardly. No doubt she learned to mask the pain in her life since her fall from grace.

It was bad enough that Dalton's bargain with Alicia had thrust her amid the ton, but the poor woman wasn't used to Elizabeth's jealousy. No telling what lengths she was willing to go to make Alicia's life hell. Elizabeth's conduct toward Alicia was cruel, and he wouldn't permit such behavior at his estate.

Through the shrubbery up ahead, Dalton saw a flash of blue, then Elizabeth rode into view. His jaw clenched as he reined back and waited for her.

"I expect you came looking for me," she said when she rode alongside him. Her voice held none of the anger that flashed from her eyes. When he said nothing to deny it, she raised her chin in haughty censure.

"Dalton, I want an apology for your outrageous behavior this morning."

It took all of his control not to speak his mind. Instead, he remained silent, waiting for her to finish. She didn't disappoint him.

"Why is that scandalous woman here? Surely you must know that her kind aren't fit to be around respectable people."

"Respectable people don't lie about being engaged when they're not, Elizabeth. There'll be an apology, but it will be you who'll apologize to Lady Alicia."

Her eyebrows raised. "Why...she's your mistress!" She spit the accusation. Her horse skittered uneasily.

"Alicia is not my mistress. Although she is at Havencrest at my request."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "I usually find your attempts to shock the ton rather amusing, Dalton. But this time, you've gone too far." Her mount took several steps to the side. "Although we haven't officially announced our engagement, everyone knows that you and I will eventually marry. I know your mother expects the announcement before she leaves. I'll not be put off any longer."

Dalton felt as though he were dealing with a spoiled, willful child. "Elizabeth, please listen. I'm not going to repeat myself."

Elizabeth's green eyes glittered with anger, but she remained silent.

Beneath her outrage, he knew she felt hurt. How much of her pain was due to the hope of marrying his brother Drake, then losing him in the war? he wondered. "My dear Elizabeth, I've never led you on." His voice was gentle

but firm. "I'm not ready for marriage. To you or anyone. Now let's not speak of this again."

She glared at him, her pale skin mottled with blotches of red.

"I expect you to apologize to Lady Alicia in front of my sister and myself when we have tea, tomorrow afternoon in the garden."

Elizabeth's lips thinned. "Why are you doing this, Dalton? What possible pleasure do you receive—"

"I'll expect you to be there." Without another word, Dalton tipped his hat, and wheeled his horse back across the fields. He didn't have to look back to know that Elizabeth was cursing his name to hell and back.

"Her grace will see you now, my lady." The maid opened the door to the dowager duchess's bedroom as Elizabeth sailed past.

Mildred, the dowager duchess of Wexton glanced up from the writing correspondence spilled across her desk, her blue gaze taking in Elizabeth's riding habit. "My dear, what a pleasant surprise." Glancing above her spectacles, she added, "Ah, you've been riding, I see. Did Dalton accompany you?"

Elizabeth curtsied, then stood, her shoulders hunched. "Your grace, it's because of Dalton that I'm here. I'm so upset. I don't know what I am to do."

Mildred's smile faded and her thin, black brows arched with concern. With regal bearing, she rose from the desk and took a seat in the blue velvet chaise in front of the broad expanse of windows. "Come, sit down and tell me what troubles you." She patted the satin cushion beside her.

Elizabeth took the seat, then shook her head helplessly. "I—I really don't know how to tell you."

She could hear the older woman's loud sigh. "Just tell me what my son has done this time."

Elizabeth willed tears to her eyes. "Dalton has behaved in the most hurtful manner. He's embarrassed me in front of your daughter, all because of that frightful creature, Alicia Spencer."

Mildred's head lifted and she sat up straighter. "Who did you say?"

"Alicia Spencer." Elizabeth met the dowager's questioning gaze. "Certainly you remember the disgrace when she and Justin Sykes were found alone together at your London town house? It was the evening of the soiree that you held in my honor."

The older woman's mouth clenched sharply. "You must be mistaken, child. There's no way that woman could be here."

"Oh, but she is. She's here as Dalton's guest."

Mildred's blue eyes narrowed.

"I couldn't believe it, myself," Elizabeth said, "but there she was, riding with Lady Olivia, this morning. Obviously, she's Dalton's latest mistress, although he denied it, of course."

Mildred placed her hand at her throat. "Perhaps you only thought—"

"If you don't believe me, ask Lord Templestone."

The older woman stiffened. "Templestone knows of this?"

Elizabeth sniffed, satisfied to see the reaction she wanted.

"Yes, he and Lord Clitheridge."

Mildred rose unsteadily to her feet. "Go downstairs and wait for me in the drawing room, my dear. I need to be alone."

Elizabeth saw the dowager pale and a flicker of apprehension coursed through her. If Dalton's mother became ill or died, then who would control Dalton? Without the dowager, Dalton would never marry her. "Your grace, shall I call your maid?"

Mildred shook her head, then returned to her desk, lowering herself slowly into the chair. "I'm quite well, Elizabeth. I want a few minutes alone to think." She closed her eyes and put her fingers to her temples. "I'll be down shortly."

Reluctantly, Elizabeth turned to leave. Damn, this was not the reaction she had expected. She wanted to be included when the dowager made her plans. She left the room and quietly closed the door, then headed for the staircase.

Ah, but she could wait. She had waited this long. A few more minutes was a small price to pay.

For the next half hour, Elizabeth waited alone in the long, formal drawing room, trying not to feel dwarfed by the grandeur of the high-vaulted ceilings and magnificent artwork. Even as a child, when her mother had brought her to Havencrest to play with Olivia, Elizabeth had felt overwhelmed by the opulence of the room. Even then, she had hoped to marry Dalton and one day become the mistress of Havencrest. And she would. Dalton was a complicated man, but she knew how to bring him around. If only he would spend more time with her, she would use her feminine wiles to seduce him. Then he'd forget all about that worthless baggage, Alicia Spencer.

Footsteps echoed along the marble hall. Elizabeth turned and curtsied when the duchess entered the room.

"I've sent for Dalton." Mildred's chilly tone and rigid manner gave no hint to what she was feeling. "He'll join us shortly, then we'll get to the bottom of this matter, my dear." She strode toward the overstuffed chairs grouped in front of the fireplace.

Elizabeth smiled. "Thank you, your grace. I knew I could count on you."

The duchess sank into a chair. "Your mother was as dear to me as a sister." Her blue eyes darkened as she held

Elizabeth's gaze. "I want you to always feel you can count on me."

"Thank you, your grace." For the first time, Elizabeth felt greatly relieved.

"Now, while we wait for Dalton, I have a little surprise for you." She smiled, the color returning to her face.

"I love surprises!" Elizabeth clapped her hands with glee. "Please, tell me before Dalton gets here."

Mildred nodded. "I want you to look especially beautiful for the ball this weekend."

Elizabeth's curiosity rose. She had never seen the dowager as excited as she was now. Maybe she had planned to formally announce her engagement to Dalton.

"Please, your grace, tell me what it is."

"I want you to wear my diamond-and-ruby necklace. It was once owned by Marie Antoinette." She paused, as though waiting for Elizabeth's reaction.

Elizabeth forced a smile. "Thank you, your grace." She blurted. "I remember that you wore the diamonds last year at King George's Jubilee." She could care less. After all, once she married Dalton, the diamonds and more would be hers.

The dowager leaned back and studied her. "You can't hide your disappointment from me, Elizabeth. Now, why couldn't you be delighted to wear one of the most famous necklaces in the world?"

Tears flowed down Elizabeth's cheeks, and she left them for effect. "I'd hoped that the ball would end with the announcement of my engagement to Dalton."

Mildred's face tightened. "But my dear—"

"Every day, more and more titled, wealthy men present offers for me to my father. I don't know how long I can keep my father from marrying me off to a foreign prince—"

"Your father and I have an agreement, Elizabeth. You needn't worry on that account."

"But there can't be a wedding without a bridegroom."

The dowager eyed her with disapproval. "I want you to consider something very carefully, my dear."

Elizabeth lowered her head. "I don't understand—"

"Dalton is very strong-minded. He was so even as a child. He's a man you can't rush."

"I know, but—"

"Since Drake's death last year, Dalton has been moodier than ever. He was very close to his brother. I'm afraid that..." The duchess hesitated, her fingers working nervously over the large diamond-and-ruby ring on her finger.

Elizabeth glanced up uneasily. "Afraid of what?"

"That Dalton might leave England and return to the horrid war. I'm afraid that if any pressure is put upon him he might rejoin his outfit." She laced her fingers in her lap.

"He remains at Havencrest only because of his stallion accident." Her gaze drifted to the acres of green lawn outside the window. "In a way, I'm glad Bashshar was injured. It's kept my son at Havencrest longer than I ever thought possible." She regarded the younger woman with a warning look. "As a special favor to me, Elizabeth, I like you to be extremely patient with Dalton."

"But I don't see why—"

"I want nothing more than to see you and my son wed. Nothing could give me greater pleasure. And believe me, my dear, it will come to pass."

"Oh, how I want to believe that it will."

Mildred smiled. "Trust me. One day, you shall be the mistress of Wexton."

Before Elizabeth could speak, a sharp rap sounded at the door and the butler entered.

"I'm sorry, my lady, but we are unable to find his lordship. The stable master told William that his lordship had

gone hunting. He won't return until later this afternoon. Shall I have Ulger send a groom to the gaming field to find him, your grace?"

Mildred thought a moment, then shook her head. "No, the matter can wait until he returns."

Elizabeth felt a stab of disappointment. She glared at the lowager. "But the matter can't wait."

"That will be all, Henry." The dowager's voice betrayed no emotion when she dismissed the butler.

Elizabeth remained silent until the servant had left. "Time is running out, your grace. You must say something to Dalton. If our engagement isn't announced at the ball this Saturday, I'll become a laughingstock."

Mildred gave her a commanding look. Elizabeth shuddered under her scrutiny. After an uncomfortable pause, the lowager spoke. "I know my son better than you. We'll do nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Elizabeth recognized the same stubbornness in the dowager's calculating blue eyes that she had often seen in Dalton's.

"Very well, your grace." Elizabeth lowered her eyes and smiled demurely. *Maybe you think that you'll do nothing,* she mused, *but I know of something that will change your mind.*

Through the natural blind of dense oak leaves, Dalton watched the magnificent stag lift its head from the stream and listen. How many times had Dalton and his brother, Drake, watched the herd as they came to drink at the waterfall? As boys, they had loved the pursuit of the hunt. He and Drake would race each other to see who would first spot their prey. But since the war and Drake's death, Dalton had lost the stomach to kill any living thing. He even disliked having to read the monthly gamekeeper's reports that

tallied which of the weak trees the workers had cleared from the hunting fields.

The stag nibbled tender shoots from the low brambles Dalton sighed. He would love to spend the entire afternoon here in the peaceful glen, but he had important work to do. He turned and strode toward the sorrel gelding nearby.

Indeed, the brief respite in the silent woods had restored his good humor. Hopefully, Lady Alicia was in a more receptive mood, too. He needed to talk to her. He had sketched some designs for a round pen that could easily be built away from the stable yard. If Alicia approved the plan, the high-fenced pen would allow her the freedom to work with Bashshar, while protected from the unwelcome stares of his mother's guests.

When he approached the paddock, Dalton dismounted and walked toward the stable, handing the reins to a waiting groom. He was almost past the corner of the pavilion when he recognized Bashshar's loud whinny. He stopped and peered through the white-painted fence of the pavilion. Inside, in the center of the ring, Alicia stood like a statue, her arms at her sides. In one hand she held what looked like an old woolen scarf, hanging limply to the ground. A few feet away, Bashshar angrily pawed the earth.

Dalton watched with fascinated interest. She flicked the long scarf. Bashshar watched her warily as he moved along the opposite end of the enclosure, his bright eyes never wavering from her.

Dalton waited for Alicia to react again with the long scarf, to do anything; but instead, she remained immobile, facing the animal. Minutes passed, and Dalton finally realized that she was imitating Bashshar's movements—while holding the power position of center stage.

Bashshar knew it and didn't like it. He scratched the dirt, tossing his head in protest at this lovely woman who didn't

seem to be afraid of him. Bashshar refused to settle, his eyes warring with hers.

Whatever was going on, Dalton had no idea, but he couldn't look away. He watched transfixed as the powerful stallion played into her hand. When the horse appeared ready to rear, Dalton pushed open the gate and rushed inside. "Alicia, back away!"

Bashshar shook his head wildly, then kicked his hind legs in the air.

Alicia stepped back, then whirled to face Dalton. Her face was a study of silent rage as she slapped her hands on her hips. She glanced over her shoulder at the black stallion. As though satisfied the horse was all right, she strode determinedly toward Dalton, then shot past him.

"Wh-where are you going?" he asked as she strode from the ring. He took off after her. When they had left the paddock, she turned around to lock the gate. When she had slid the bolt through the latch, she rounded on him.

"If I am to make any progress with your stallion, you must not interrupt me."

"Interrupt? I was trying to save your life. See here, you don't seem to understand how dangerous that horse—"

"I know exactly what I'm doing!"

"No, you don't!" He found himself glaring down at her, arms akimbo, as she mocked him, exactly as she had done in the stable, the first night she arrived.

"Come, Lady Alicia," he said, peering around to see if anyone was watching. "I would like a few words with you." He took a deep, unsteady breath, then took her elbow, leading her to the bench inside the high arbor of roses he knew would be vacant this time of day. Most of the female guests would be napping before dinner, and the men were either at billiards, whist or shooting skeet. The rose garden would be the perfect place to explain the rules to this recalcitrant wench.

Alicia said nothing as he hurried her along and stood while she took a seat on the curved Italian marble bench.

"Well?" She glared up at him in such a fierce attempt to unnerve him, he almost laughed.

"Have you forgotten the orders that I already gave you?"

Alicia took a deep breath. "Your grace, I've dealt with injured animals before. But I can't help Bashshar if I can't win his confidence. Now if you continue to interfere when I—"

"Bashshar is a high-strung animal. He's a one-man horse, and to expect to work with him without my presence is simply foolish."

She took another deep breath, and Dalton was becoming more than a little irritated with his immediate reaction to her. "You are his master," Alicia said, the sun catching the fiery glints in her hair. She leaned her face into the sun, reminding him of a pink blush tulip opening to the dawn.

"I have no wish to infringe upon your mastery with your horse. But Bashshar must come to trust me. Trust me completely. And it will occur more quickly if I am the only one he sees. Not the stable boys, or the grooms or even the stable master. That is why I'm asking you to refrain from interrupting our sessions while I'm working with Bashshar."

Dalton could only stare at her. Didn't she know that men quivered in their boots when addressing him? Didn't she know that she was breaking every civilized rule to address him with such audacity? Damn, she was giving him orders like they were equals.

She looked so small, so helpless, sitting before him. He remembered Elizabeth's hurtful comments earlier and how hard Alicia had tried to cover up the pain he knew she felt. An overpowering need to protect her shot through him.

"You must promise me you won't take chances again with Bashshar."

She tilted her head to the side. "I'll make you an offer."

He almost laughed. Damn! She'd make him an offer? He was the duke of Wexton, and she would make him an offer? Her dark eyes twinkled, and he could only wonder what she had in mind.

"Very well, what is your offer?"

Her slight smile hinted that she thought she was making progress, and the thought gave him a surprised spark of pleasure.

"I won't take unnecessary chances," she said carefully, "if you promise me one thing."

He eyed her warily. "Which is...?"

Her mouth turned up in a bow as she studied him, as though judging how best to begin. "I want you to promise me that you won't have any contact with Bashshar for...four weeks."

His mouth dropped open. "What the—"

"And I promise to be extremely prudent in my future actions with your horse."

"Four weeks? That's absurd!" Dalton stepped back. "First, Bashshar won't allow you to bring him food and water to his stall." Satisfied that he had won the argument so easily, he chuckled. "So you see, I can't remain away from him."

Alicia shook her head. "I will feed and water him."

"Bashshar won't let you."

"Bashshar will go hungry until he does." Her words were said without sarcasm, merely as a statement of fact.

"You'd really let him go hungry?"

She smiled. "Bashshar is too smart to go hungry. He'll come around, and I'll gain his trust in the bargain." Alicia lifted her chin. "You know there's wisdom behind my technique." Her smile widened, revealing a small dimple

at the side of her enchanting mouth. He wondered, for a fraction of a second, what it would be like to kiss that adorable mark.

"Well, your grace?"

Dalton drew his thoughts away from her mouth. "Ah, well...no! No, I won't allow it, and that's final."

"Very well." She rose to her feet. "If you'll instruct the stable master to send a groom for my trunk, I'll pack while a carriage is made ready and the horses are hitched. If I leave before dark, I should be at Marston Heath by morning."

"What the devil—?"

Alicia ignored him as she trudged past the fountains and headed along the green toward the stables.

"See here, you gave your word." Dalton's long strides easily kept up with her.

Alicia stared straight ahead, her stride never wavering.

"Your father will be most distressed," Dalton added.

She marched evenly, her arms ramrod straight at her sides.

When they reached the paddock door, Dalton caught her elbow and spun her around to face him. "You are the most stubborn woman...." His words faded as he stared into her large, warm brown eyes, filled with laughter.

"You're a vixen, Lady Alicia Spencer." A beautiful, strong-minded young woman, one like he had never met before. "Very well. Four weeks, but not a day longer."

Her eyelashes lowered, then swept up as she gazed into his eyes. "Thank you," she said simply.

He expected some sign of her win, like the smugness she had shown earlier when she had won the race to the barn by diverting the way back to the stables. She was so unlike the other women he had known. Unspoiled, fresh, she had a natural grace that came from an inner wholesomeness that he found so appealing. For an incredible instant, he wanted

to gaze into her lovely eyes forever. He felt mesmerized by her. Damn, but she *was* a vixen, a tempting siren who could cast spells upon men and beasts.

With an incredible effort, he stepped sideways to let her pass. Then an idea struck him and he touched her shoulder.

"If I remain hidden," he said, his voice hoarse, "will you allow me to watch you train Bashshar?"

She smiled as though considering his request. "Absolutely not," she said, opening the gate bolt and strolling inside the paddock.

He heard Bashshar whinny as she entered, and Dalton realized, for the first time since the accident, the stallion had his thoughts on something other than the explosion of gunfire that had terrified him.

For that, Dalton owed Alicia a great deal.

Chapter Five



A few minutes before midnight of the following evening, Alicia stared at the full moon through the bedroom windows above her bed. The silver light cast lacy shadows across the rumpled silk sheets. Suddenly, the clock above the mantel struck midnight. For the past three hours she had tossed and turned, unable to sleep, the unbidden face of Dalton Warfield, the duke of Wexton, haunting her.

She buried her head beneath the pillow. In spite of her busy schedule, thoughts of him had intruded into her daydreams. What was the matter with her?

Through the open window, the faint strains of a waltz floated from the manor ballroom, feeding her imagination. She could almost feel Dalton's right hand at her waist, her fingers pressing lightly at his broad shoulder as he held her in his arms and led her in step to the music. Her blood soared with the thought.

She saw herself dressed in a low-cut gown of shimmery white chiffon, a striking contrast to Dalton's dark good looks. They would glide across the ballroom, whirling to the music as the guests stood in awe of the beautiful couple waltzing before them.

"You don't belong here!" screamed a shrill voice. The crowd parted and the dowager duchess scowled down from

her throne, thumping her diamond-studded cane as the room fell into a deafening silence.

Alicia bolted upright in bed, her heart hammering. She glanced about the moonlit room, then finally caught her breath. Her mother always said that moonglow could drive a person crazy. Thick draperies had kept away the lunar rays at Marston Heath windows. As a child, Alicia had rebelliously thrown open the shades and basked in the moonlight after her mother had carefully shuttered the windows for the night.

Maybe her mother had been right, and Alicia now suffered from sheer lunacy. What other reason could there be for her dreaming of Wexton?

She sighed as she ran a hand through her tousled hair. She had suffered enough. Moonlight shone bright enough for her to go horseback riding. The idea lifted her spirits. She rose from her bed and dressed hastily in the moonlight. A lit candle might wake Marie, the young French maid, sleeping in the next room. Olivia had insisted the girl remain with her in the cottage and tend to her every need.

When Alicia had finished dressing, she brushed her thick, waist-length hair, securing the long curls with a green ribbon. Quietly, she tiptoed outside and made her way along the cottage path to the tall, neatly clipped boxwood that sheltered the rose garden.

When she reached the arbor, she paused to stare at the golden glow coming from the manor. A thousand candles must be burning from the hundreds of windows. She felt like a spy. The thought was frightening, yet strangely exciting. She dare not venture any farther, least she stumble upon a wayward guest.

She smoothed her hand along the empire neckline of the high-waisted jade gown. At least Alicia wouldn't call attention to herself if one of the houseguests were to come upon her—that is, if they didn't already know who she was.

Alicia ducked into the stable and hurried to Cinnamon

Rose's stall. The frisky mare tossed its head in greeting. When she finished saddling the horse, she stepped up to the mounting block and arranged herself on the sidesaddle. Ten minutes later, she was pacing the animal into an easy canter, heading toward the open fields.

What a glorious night! The full moon rode high in the sky, casting upon the earth almost daylight brightness. The wind blew through her hair, whipping her face with cool, clover-scented air. Horses and riding had always calmed her spirit, and hopefully a night ride, if only for the moment, might block the painful fact that she didn't belong with the beautiful people twirling beneath the crystal chandeliers.

When Alicia had returned from her ride, the sound of hurried footsteps caused her to duck behind the boxwood hedge. She recognized Lady Olivia rushing along the path that led to the sheltered trees in front of Alicia's cottage. "Lady Olivia, what's the matter?"

Olivia started, then turned toward her. "Oh, Lady Alicia, I'm looking for Dalton. By chance, have you seen him?"

"Why, no. I thought he was at the ball."

Olivia shook her head, her brows furrowed with concern. "No, he hasn't been seen since this morning." She wrung her hands. "Something dreadful has happened, and I must find him."

The thought that Dalton was with Elizabeth came to Alicia's mind. "Have you asked Elizabeth?"

Olivia's breath quickened. "I'm afraid Elizabeth is in no condition to answer any questions." Olivia glanced around as if she were afraid to be overheard, then she stepped toward Alicia. "Elizabeth embarrassed herself this evening with the earl of Rothbury. Mother is frantic and determined that Dalton announce his engagement to Elizabeth, before news of this becomes known."

"Elizabeth embarrassed herself?"

Olivia's face looked pale in the moonlight. "I think she is only trying to make Dalton jealous. But she and Lord Rothbury were drinking. Thankfully, Lord Templestone found them before anyone else saw them. He notified Mother." Olivia paused. "Oh, my dear, forgive me for my sensitivity. This news must remind you of..."

Alicia was touched by Olivia's compassion. "It's quite all right, Lady Olivia." She swallowed, realizing that Olivia, as well as the other members of the ton, knew the embarrassing details. "Then Dalton will marry Elizabeth?"

Olivia shook her head. "No, he mustn't! I have to alert Dalton before our mother finds him."

"I don't understand—"

"I don't have time now to explain it to you, Alicia. Please help me find my brother."

"Of course." Alicia took Olivia's arm and urged her toward the stable. "Let's ask the stable master if a horse has saddled for Dalton."

"I've already asked Ulger. He said Dalton usually saddles his own mount. Penn said the sorrel that he favors is missing from the stable." Olivia's forehead wrinkled in thought. "Oh, where can he be this time of night?"

"Who are you looking for?" Dalton's deep voice caused Alicia and Olivia to gasp in surprise. He stepped from the shadows, leading the sorrel beside him.

Relief welled within Alicia as she drank in the sight of him. Dalton was dressed in a royal-blue riding clothes. The moonlight gave a blue-black sheen to his hair.

"Dalton," Olivia cried, clasping her hands. "Lord Templestone found Elizabeth with the earl of Rothbury. She'd drank too much and caused a great scene. Thankfully, Templestone can be trusted, but Mother is determined that you announce your engagement to her before the ton hears of it."

Dalton glanced at Alicia, then turned his attention to his sister. "Is Mother still at the ball?"

"You mustn't go to her!" Olivia caught herself and lowered her voice. "Not until we think of some way for you to—"

"My dear little sister, don't worry about me." He smiled at her with such tenderness that Alicia was caught off guard by his compassion. "Why don't you stay with Lady Alicia in her cottage while I'm gone? I'll return as soon as I speak to Mother."

Before Olivia could object, Dalton stepped behind the hedge and was gone. Alicia forced back the sudden feelings of dread that threatened to engulf her. "Come, Olivia. We'll have a cup of tea while we wait."

Couples strolled along the moonlit gardens and the wide veranda leading to the French doors of the ballroom. Dalton climbed the stone steps and moved past the throngs of people who would linger until dawn. His gaze met Sir John Oxley, his solicitor, who immediately moved toward him.

"Enjoying yourself this evening, Sir John?" Dalton smiled at the tightly pinched face of the serious old man whose family of solicitors had served the duke's family for generations.

"Your grace, I must have a word—"

"I know, John." Dalton kept walking toward the staircase. "Where is the dowager duchess?"

The solicitor hurried to keep up with Dalton's long strides. "She's taken to her bed, your grace. The doctor has been called."

"For mother or for Elizabeth?" Dalton didn't try to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

Sir John's mouth tightened as they ascended the staircase. "Then you've heard about Lady Elizabeth?"

Dalton raised a brow. "Isn't that exactly what the lady had in mind?"

Sir John was out of breath when they reached the third

for landing. "It would be...in everyone's best interest...if this matter remained secret," he said finally.

A groom stood at attention at the front of the hall. Dalton rode to the double doors of his mother's suite and locked.

Moments later, a maid opened the door. She gave a shy smile when she saw Dalton. "I'll tell her ladyship that you're here, your grace."

Dalton returned her smile, then glanced down at Sir John. "Wait for me here," he said. "This won't take long."

Before the solicitor could answer, the maid returned, and Dalton was ushered into the duchess's suite.

His mother was propped up in the French chaise where she often greeted visitors. Two candelabras flickered nearby. She settled back against the satin headrest, her eyes closed. Several maids scurried about the room.

"I'd like to speak to my mother alone," he said, pulling a chair beside the chaise. The startled maids glanced up, then bustled from the room.

When he sat down, the dowager opened her eyes. "I asked Sir John to be here, too."

"He's waiting outside. Now, Mother, what is so important that this couldn't wait until morning?"

She sat up and stared daggers at him. "How could you bring that Spencer trollop to Havencrest?"

"Lady Alicia Spencer is no trollop, my dear."

"I was there when she was found with your despicable friend, Justin Sykes in his guest room at our London townhouse. She's a trollop, and I will never forgive you for bringing her here."

"May I remind you that I'm of legal age, Mother. I don't need your approval for anything."

"Don't be insolent with me, Dalton."

"I'm simply providing you with the truth." He leaned back and crossed his legs. "As for the rumor about Lady

Alicia, I know that Sykes prefers experienced married women to green girls. And he's much too clever to be caught."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Really, Dalton, you care for no one but yourself! Poor Elizabeth was tormented when she told me about meeting that Jezebel. How could you parade your mistress—"

"Lady Alicia is not my mistress."

She narrowed her eyes. "I really don't care if she is or not." Her voice was low and menacing. "You're totally to blame for what happened to Elizabeth. You've ignored her far too long. The poor girl was only trying to get your attention—"

"I heard she got drunk with Rothbury and that Templestone found her. What has this got to do with me?"

She took a deep breath. "Elizabeth was beside herself over your outrageous behavior with that woman, and she...well, she apparently tried to make you jealous. Rothbury plied her with drink, and..." She shook her head. "Luckily, Templestone found her and hid her away before anyone saw her. There's no telling what might have happened, and it's all your fault."

He shrugged. "I would think Elizabeth could outdrink old Rothbury any day, and I would also think you should be having this conversation about marriage with him."

Her eyes hardened with outrage. "Rothbury, be damned. Elizabeth comes with a sizeable dowry, and her family lives on the adjoining property to Havencrest. You *will* marry Elizabeth. It's time you came to your senses and realized it."

He shrugged. "Elizabeth enjoys playing the field and she knows that I could care less whom she beds. But she knows that I'll never marry her."

"That's untrue. Elizabeth is crushed that you care so little for her. She wants to marry you, and so she shall. I'll have no more foolish episodes with Elizabeth trying to

make you jealous. This indifference of yours must stop, once and for all."

He leaned back, studying her fury. It wasn't like Elizabeth to do something to irritate the dowager duchess. Yet there was no doubt that his mother was infuriated.

"Next week will be the last ball of the season," the dowager said, "before the ton leaves for grouse hunting in Scotland. You will announce your engagement to Elizabeth at the ball, or I will announce it for you." She closed her fan with a snap.

Dalton clicked his heels and bowed low. "I believe you have just wasted your time and mine, dear mother. You obviously have not heard a word I said. I will not marry Elizabeth. Now, or ever. If you'll excuse me?" He turned to leave.

The dowager stood and stamped her foot. "Why didn't God take you instead of Drake?"

Dalton stopped in his tracks. He didn't turn around.

Her voice lowered in anguish. "Haven't I been punished enough, without you behaving like some hell-bent—?" Her voice broke, then she recovered. "I know you've hated me even since you were a lad and found me with George—"

Dalton turned around and met her gaze. For the past twenty years, he had never mentioned to anyone about that afternoon he had rushed upstairs to tell his mother that his horse had finally foaled a healthy colt. What he saw when he opened the door and stood in this very room changed his life forever.

"I don't hate you, Mother. I feel nothing for you."

Her lips quivered. "You feel nothing for anyone. Drake was so very different."

"Yes, Drake was all the things I never was, Mother." He felt an empty wrench in his gut. "And no one misses him more than I do."

"If Drake had lived, he would have married Elizabeth—"

"He deserved better. Did you know that Elizabeth tried to seduce me just before Drake and I left for Spain—"

"I don't believe it."

He smiled. "Oh, yes, you do. Because deep down you know what Elizabeth is like. She knew that Drake was hopelessly in love with her, just as my father was blindly in love with you. When I refused Elizabeth, it only encouraged her. Too bad Uncle George didn't have more self-control."

"Dalton, it's not the same for women as it is for men. I was in love with George before I married your father. But your father was the oldest, and I would have been a fool not to marry him."

"Thank God my father never knew of your infidelity. And Drake never knew of Elizabeth's true nature, either."

"Do you think you're any better, carrying on with that Spencer woman?"

He took a breath. "You aren't worthy to speak her name."

"Do what you want with her. But if you're indiscreet, you'll destroy your precious father's name. You wouldn't want that, now would you?" She smiled, knowing she had struck a resonant chord. "You're almost thirty and five, Dalton," she added. "Like it or not, it's time you had an heir."

"Mother, let's put an end to this feuding. I promise to be at the ball."

The dowager stiffened and studied him warily. "You mean that you've changed your mind?"

"Yes. You've convinced me it's time I marry."

"You'll...announce your engagement?"

Dalton smiled, enjoying the incredulous look on his mother's face. "I'll announce my engagement, arm in arm with my betrothed, for all the world to see, Mother, dear." His smile widened. "I promise to make it an evening you'll never forget."

She stared at him in astonishment. "No further arguments?"

He bent to kiss her hand. "None whatsoever."

"Very well, Dalton."

He bowed again with a flourish, then left the room.

Sir John jumped to his feet when the duke appeared.

"Come, Sir John, we have work to do. Bring your papers and ink pot and follow me."

"Of course, your grace."

By the time Dalton's carriage arrived in front of Alicia's cottage, he couldn't wait to see the look on Alicia's face when he proposed marriage to her.

At the sound of the carriage outside the cottage, Alicia jumped to her feet and ran to the door before Dalton had a chance to knock. Olivia, curled up on the sofa by the hearth, leaned forward, eager to hear what her brother had to say.

"I'd like a few minutes alone with Lady Alicia," Dalton said to his sister. He turned to Alicia. "Would you step outside into the garden with me?"

Olivia sat upright. "Dalton, it's not proper for her to go with you, unchaperoned." She stood, clutching her wrap to her. "I'll go with you."

Dalton opened the door and Alicia joined him outside. "Why don't you chaperon by watching us from the door?" he suggested with a wink.

Olivia's mouth twitched. "Very well, Brother."

Alicia wanted to ask him what his mother had said, but she knew that Dalton would tell her only what he wanted her to know. She strode beside him until they came to the marble bench. He withdrew a handkerchief and wiped the dew from the seat before she sat down.

He remained standing beside her. "Tell me, Lady Alicia. Have you been happy during your short stay with us?"

She stared. "I—I beg your pardon. I've been here barely a week."

"That's long enough to determine if Havencrest suits you."

"Well, the estate is most beautiful, but I've only seen a small part of it."

"Yes, of course. Forgive my awkward question. Then what do you think of me?"

Alicia was dumbfounded. "You?" She couldn't answer him. "It's quite chilly, your grace, and it's very late. I—"

"Forgive me, again, Lady Alicia. I'm putting this very badly." He took a deep breath of the night air. "Oh, damn. Might as well come right out with it." He turned to her and took her hand. "Lady Alicia, I want to marry you."

She jerked her hand away and stared as though he'd been struck foolish. "If this is a joke—"

"I'm deadly serious." His blue-eyed gaze met her eyes, and she knew he was sincere. "If you married me, your little sisters would have the funds to marry well. Marston Heath could be restored to the former glory of when your grandfather built it. Your parents wouldn't have to worry for money in their old age, and you would have anything money can buy."

"And what would you gain if we were to marry?"

His gaze swept over her hair, her face, her bodice, and she shivered under his bold perusal. "It's time I marry. I must have an heir. I won't hold you to any terms except that you bear me an heir. Once my son is born—"

"What if I don't bear you a son? Will you chop off my head as King Henry did to Anne Boleyn?"

He smiled lazily. "I believe Henry's queen was also accused of adultery. I expect you to be faithful to me until our first son is born, regardless of how long that might be."

She blushed, wishing she had remained quiet.

"Don't worry, my pet. After you bear a son, you'll be free to return to Marston Heath and never see me again."

I'll provide an allowance for you, your family and your estate.

"A marriage of convenience," she said softly.

"Exactly."

"I—I'm certain my father will be happy to agree." She didn't know what to say; she was still speechless.

"We'll announce our engagement at the ball in three days."

Alicia lifted her head as the reality dawned upon her. "Your mother, the dowager duchess...what will she say?"

A slight smile curled Dalton's mouth. "I choose my bride. My mother has no say in the matter."

Suddenly Alicia realized why Dalton wanted to marry her. "You want to shock your mother, and you'll marry me to do it." She stood up. "Well, I won't be your bad joke. You can find some other malcontent to marry." She turned to leave but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her around to face him.

"Alicia, wait. If you marry me, it's the answer to all of your problems."

"True, you'll solve my financial problems, but life with your mother and her friends would be a living hell."

"My mother and her friends will be far away from us. In several weeks she'll be leaving for our castle in Scotland. You would never have to see her if you chose. You can be alone with only the horses, if that's what you want." A slow grin spread his lips. "Of course, you'll have to see me occasionally," he said dryly.

She ignored his remark. "It's true I've grown quite fond of Bashshar, Cinnamon Rose and the other horses."

He smiled. "I'll buy you your own stable of horses, whatever your heart desires."

She looked up at him in the moonlight. *What about love?* she wanted to ask, but she already knew the answer. Was he capable of love? she wondered. He cared deeply for his horses, and she sensed a protectiveness toward his sister,

Olivia. But was that responsibility? She sensed that he could turn an icy shell to the world if he so chose. Could he grow to care for anyone but himself?

He took her hands into his warm grasp. "Say yes, Alicia."

She wanted to run, to race into the darkness and never look back. "I—I'd like to think about it."

"There's no time. Say yes, and we'll tell Olivia." He pulled her along the garden path. "Marry me, Alicia."

"What about Elizabeth? Don't you have feelings for her?"

He stopped. "Elizabeth is still a child. She was to become engaged to my brother, Drake. Before her coming out, she made a feverish confession of love for me. I refused, of course. My brother Drake was smitten over her. I adored my brother, but Elizabeth is too young to know what she really wants. She only thinks herself in love with me."

"She obviously wishes that you and she—"

"If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

For a fleeting moment, she felt sorry for Elizabeth. "Have you told her that you're planning to ask for my hand?"

"She'll find out soon enough." He smiled that charming smile she was certain had always gotten Dalton whatever he wanted.

She sighed. "I'll be free to return to Marston Heath when I am with child?"

"Of course, my dear." The endearment caused a cold shiver to run up her spine. *My dear!* A hollow term that meant nothing.

What Dalton said was true—marriage to him would solve all her problems. Her father would be delighted. Her sisters would marry well. Kimbra would be sixteen in two years, and, with proper backing, could be the toast of the London Season. Lyssa would follow in her footsteps. Her

mother would be able to restore Marston Heath to its original beauty.

“Very well, Dalton. I’ll marry you.”

“Very good. There’s one more thing I must know. Please forgive me if you find this subject distressing, but I’d really like to hear your answer in your own words.”

Her eyes rounded with wariness. “Of course. What is it?”

He glanced across the moonlit gardens, now deep with shadow. “When we first met, you insinuated that I had knowledge of what my family did to you during your debut into Society...”

Her mouth firmed into a tight line.

“It was only later, when I inquired of my sister about the episode that I learned what had transpired that night—”

“And what, your grace, do you think transpired?”

He heard the pain in her voice and the knot of tension tightened in his chest. “I was told that you were found with Justin Sykes in his bedchamber, alone.”

She stiffened. “Yes. Your mother and her friends found me there, after she had asked me to retrieve her shawl from that very room. But when I opened the door, I found that the room was not your mother’s but already occupied by Mr. Sykes, who was deep in his cups, asleep in bed. When I realized my mistake and turned to leave, your mother and her friends had already burst into the room, accusing us of all kinds of things.” Her face paled with the memory. “I had never met Mr. Sykes before in all my life.”

“Then you aren’t in love with him?”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Of course not.”

Justin Sykes was a handsome rogue, but Dalton also knew that many women were attracted to rakes like him. Dalton wanted to believe her, but maybe she was too proud to admit that she had feelings for the charming Mr. Sykes.

She studied him, and she must have guessed what he was thinking. “If I had been in love with Mr. Sykes, I

would have married him. He offered for me, acting quite honorably about the matter, considering he was set up, as I was."

Dalton raised a dark brow. "Why did you refuse to marry Sykes?"

"Because I didn't want to marry him."

"And your father didn't insist?"

"Yes, but I held my ground."

Dalton rubbed his chin. "Do you know why my mother would have arranged such a scandal?"

She gazed up at him with large brown eyes, trusting and vulnerable. "No. I've often wondered why she hated me so."

He realized what a threat this lovely, innocent young woman must have been to his mother's plans for Elizabeth to marry Drake. What better way to get rid of the competition than to ruin this lovely young girl from the start.

"My mother was sponsoring Elizabeth that season, and I heard that you were the most serious competition. It's a terrible thing to accuse one's own mother, but—" he smiled "—I'm very sorry you were hurt."

She shook her head. "What's done is done. Nothing is gained by looking back."

"I agree." He kissed her hand. "Wait here while I call my solicitor." Dalton stepped onto the path and strode to the horse and carriage parked in the distance. Within a few minutes, he returned with a short, elderly man hobbling beside him.

"Come, Sir John," Dalton said. "Let's go inside and sign the documents you brought while we give my sister the good news."

Alicia noticed that her hand was shaking when she accepted Dalton's offered arm as she went with him into the small cottage where Olivia stood waiting at the front door.

If this was the answer to all her problems, then why did she feel as though she were signing a pact with the devil?

Chapter Six



Olivia put her hand to her throat. "Dalton! You must be mad!" She glanced at Alicia. "Oh, my dear, I didn't mean that he was mad because..." Her cheeks blushed. "Oh, my dear! That's not what I meant at all."

Alicia carefully schooled her features to reveal none of the surprise, skepticism or fear she felt. "It's quite a shock, I know," Alicia said. *To discover that your esteemed brother is marrying a jaded woman...* She took a seat and fought to keep her composure.

Dalton strode back and forth in front of the fireplace, his large frame dwarfing the small sitting room. The solicitor perched on the farthest chair in the corner; the ink pot teetered inside the leather case on his lap while he scribbled notes with his pen.

"First, the wedding announcement!" Dalton waved a hand to Sir John. "Puff it off to the papers, the *Times*, the *Morning Post* and the *Gazette*. And I'll need to obtain a special license from the archbishop."

Olivia eyed her brother doubtfully. "Dalton, you'll have to go to London to meet with the minister—"

"We'll not be wed in London. The chapel at Havencrest will do. Alicia and I can't leave Bashshar yet. The wedding will take place in two weeks."

"Two weeks!" Olivia laughed. "Impossible, brother. Six months would not be long enough to—"

"Nonsense," he snapped. "What needs to be done?"

Olivia took a deep breath. "Alicia must go to Paris and be fitted for her gown, trousseau, plus a complete wardrobe—"

"Send to Paris for the modistes to come here. Alicia needs to remain at Havencrest because of Bashshar's training."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "There still won't be time to make her gown. Plus the flowers, the invitations, the food—"

"That's what servants are for. Hire another hundred seamstresses, cooks, butlers, grooms, whatever you need." He smiled as though enjoying himself. "Now what's left?"

Olivia closed her eyes and laughed. "Oh, Dalton, you'll never understand."

He stopped and leaned against the mantel. "What don't I understand?"

Olivia shot a knowing glance to Alicia. "It will take weeks to interview new help and to train them—"

"Send for the staff we already have at our estate in Scotland. Bring the servants from the London town house, the Irish castle and the lake country estate." Dalton smiled, his face beaming with smug self-satisfaction. "What else needs to be done?"

Alicia squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "Surely you have not forgotten, your grace," she said in a soft voice. "I am not of legal age, but only ten and nine. You must ask my father for my hand." The very idea that her father would refuse a duke as a bridegroom was ludicrous, yet she felt slighted and embarrassed that Dalton would fail to even consider the ritual.

The error was not lost on Olivia. She dropped her gaze to her lap and sat in an uncomfortable silence. Sir John's

hand stilled. The lengthening quiet accentuated Alicia's feeling of flustered awkwardness.

Dalton's smile faded. "Of course. Forgive me, Alicia. I'll leave at sunup for Marston Heath to ask your father for his permission." His gaze locked with hers. "And I'll ask your parents and sisters to join us immediately." He waved a hand to the solicitor, whose right hand scratched furiously across the parchment.

"Your family will remain here until the wedding," Dalton added, glancing at the ceiling as he spoke. "We'll outfit the entire family—"

"But—" Alicia interrupted. She could no longer sit idly by and watch what was happening. "I don't want a large wedding."

"Of course you want a large wedding," Dalton returned. "Every bride wants a large wedding." He glanced at his sister as though asking for affirmation.

"Olivia, find something suitable for Alicia to wear to the ball this weekend. Something white to go with Grandmother's diamond-and-ruby necklace."

"Please, I don't like to wear jewels," Alicia pleaded. "It's so...so ostentatious."

Dalton's jaw dropped. "Of course diamonds and rubies are ostentatious. You're going to be a duchess."

If Olivia was surprised, she didn't show it. "Dalton, it's almost three o'clock in the morning. If we don't get some sleep, we'll be too tired to plan the wedding."

Dalton turned to Olivia and Alicia. "I'm sorry, please forgive me. But it's not every night that a man becomes betrothed." He smiled. "Come, Olivia. I'll drive you back to the manor."

Olivia rose and drew her wrap around herself. Turning to Alicia, she bent down and brushed her cheek. "Best wishes, my dear. May I be the first to welcome you into the family."

Alicia's knees felt like jelly when she rose and made her

way to the doorway to watch them leave. She didn't want a large wedding. If she was honest, she didn't want a wedding at all, especially to a powerful man like Dalton. She would be considered a toad eater, the term used for a poor female in a great family. She'd be subjected to putting up with indignities, as distasteful as if she were swallowing toads.

But she couldn't be selfish. She had to go through with this charade for her family. Her parents were getting older, her sisters would never marry well unless they had a successful coming out. She would never have another opportunity to marry so well. She had to marry the duke of Wex-ton and there was very little she had to say about it.

She watched Dalton help Olivia into the carriage. Above the thick grove of chestnut trees, the golden glow from the manor house could still be seen. By week's end, Alicia would be at the ball with Dalton, facing the dowager duchess.

Alicia's heart pounded with dread. Heaven help her!

The next morning, a leaden sky and a fine mist greeted Alicia as she led Bashshar from the stable along the secluded path toward the pavilion. The isolated area surrounded by trees was the perfect place to train the animal since Dalton had agreed to allow her free rein with the stallion.

Bashshar whinnied and tossed back his head in stubborn challenge, tugging on his lead as though warning her that he was eagerly ready to test her patience this morning. Instead of her usual soothing words, Alicia ignored the horse as she walked beside him, her mind deep in thought.

The gloomy weather matched her mood. For the past half hour, try as she might, she couldn't think of anything except the horror of what she would face at the ball this week-end.

The horse seemed to sense her mood. He watched her

arily as she led him into the ring, unhooked his lead, then took her place in the center of the circle.

Bashshar pawed the ground as she picked up the long mottled scarf that she used to keep him at bay. The same scarf her grandfather had used to train colts.

She swallowed back a lump of tears. To restore Marston Heath, her mother's childhood estate, to the splendor it was when her parents had married was a wish Alicia had never dared dream. For the last twenty-one years of his marriage, her father's drinking and gambling had drained all profit from Marston Heath, the estate he had received as his wife's dowry. Besides the loss of income, he had made no repairs or improvements on the property, with the exception of the gardens that the women and small staff tended.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as her heart filled with hope. She could restore her mother's childhood estate to the grandeur it was when her grandfather built it. Yes, the dream would become possible when she married Wexton.

She glanced at Bashshar, who suspiciously eyed her from the far side of the ring. He whinnied and tossed his massive black head, as though trying to gain her attention.

She ignored him, lowering her head and breathing in the refreshing cool mist. She shut her eyes, giving in to the forbidden image that clouded her mind. Dalton, the duke of Wexton. One of the most handsome, wealthiest men in Europe. He could marry royalty if he chose. But he chose her. He still couldn't quite believe it.

He was arrogant, pompous, superior, certainly, yet Dalton possessed another side that was strangely confusing. Despite his wild, willful nature, he displayed a gentleness with Bashshar, and he genuinely seemed to care for his sister, Olivia.

Bashshar whinnied, forcing her mind back to the business at hand. She flicked the scarf on the ground, watching the stallion's reaction. The horse lifted his head, his eyes never leaving hers.

But there was a dark side to Dalton. What sort of man would marry a social outcast just to irritate his mother? She swore under her breath. It was no use. She couldn't concentrate.

Raindrops began to pound her face and Alicia lowered her head, her palms outward. "What sort of man is the master of yours, Bashshar? You trust your master. You obey this man. One moment Dalton is the most disdainful of men, and the next, he can be so caring and tender it nearly breaks my heart. What manner of beast behaves so peculiarly?"

Hot tears mingled with the cool rain upon her face as the droplets fell from the heavens in earnest. No, Dalton didn't want her as a wife. He wanted a disgrace, an example of such loathsome disgust that she would forever be the wedge between his mother and himself.

Her stomach rolled with the knowledge. Yet she couldn't afford to throw his offer back in his face, no matter how much she longed to. Dear God, this was worse than her original shame, of which she had been an innocent party. Now, she had accepted the duke without a second thought. For this disgrace, she had no one to blame but herself.

Alicia stood for the longest time, head bent, eyes closed, enveloped in the unrelenting rain. Suddenly, she felt a soft bristly touch in her right palm. She opened her eyes to see Bashshar, standing beside her. She froze, unable to believe that the horse had willingly come to her.

Bashshar's glorious black nose nuzzled her fingers again. His tail whisked back and forth and his ears pointed toward her. Tears of happiness welled in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks.

"Bashshar, you darling," she murmured, reaching to caress his massive head. With gentle strokes, she crooned softly as she rubbed the wet, satiny hair along his neck. She felt his skin quiver beneath her touch. He stood still.

ensing her misery, as if trying to comfort her. She buried her head into his strong, muscled neck.

"You sensed my heartache, and you willingly put aside your fear to comfort me." She blinked back fresh tears. With her arms wrapped around his strong neck, she let the tears flow, and for the first time in a long while, she allowed herself to feel the deep unhappiness within her heart.

A fine mist covered London as the ebony coach and six rattled along the cobblestones of Regent Street. Although she had been traveling for three days, Dalton felt exhilarated that everything was going according to plan.

His thoughts returned to the first leg of his travels, and he frowned as he thought of the reaction of Alicia's father. That part of the trip had been as vexing as it had been expensive. Neal Spencer had insisted upon a handsome pension for himself, explaining that Alicia's gift with animals provided the bulk of the family income. If she left, the family must be compensated. Damn, the man was an irreparable bastard.

Dalton wasn't surprised that Alicia was the economical backbone of the family. But by the run-down look of Marston Heath, Spencer spent more money on cards than estate planning.

He swore under his breath. How could a selfish man like Spencer sire such an unselfish woman as Alicia? The admission surprised Dalton. He couldn't deny that beneath Alicia's stubborn pride was a kind, generous nature. With the exception of his sister, Dalton found generosity a rarity among the women he had known.

When the driver brought the horses to a stop in front of the three-story Georgian townhouse on Hampton Lane, Dalton stepped from the carriage, and dashed up the walk before the coach footman had a chance to alight. Dalton rapped on the bronze door knocker and waited for Ladyresham's butler.

"Evening, Holmes," Dalton shouted to the deaf, stooped-shouldered servant who answered the door. "Is Sykes upstairs?"

"Wh-why, yes, your grace, but—" his eyes rounded with surprise "—but...he's...he's—"

"It's quite all right, Holmes. I'll take complete responsibility," Dalton yelled over his shoulder to the white-haired servant. "I'll show myself upstairs."

Holmes stood slack-jawed as he watched Dalton's long strides take the marble steps two at a time until he reached the top of the staircase. When Dalton approached Lady Fresham's suite, he tapped on the door.

"Justin? It's Dalton. I need to see you, post haste."

Inside the suite, a voluptuous red-haired woman pulled the silk sheet over her breasts and scowled at the dark handsome man lying beside her.

A sardonic smile spread across Justin's deeply tanned face. "Dalton, is that you?" He sat up and pulled on his breeches. "Come in, don't stand on ceremony."

Dalton opened the door and stepped into the darkened room. Maroon velvet drapes covered the front windows and the only light came from the low fire crackling in the marble fireplace. The beautiful woman reclining against the plump pillows on the huge canopied bed smiled seductively at him.

Dalton winked at her. "Celia, you're a feast to behold my lovely," he lied, strolling toward the bed. "And if this wasn't an emergency, I would never have intruded."

"Yes you would have," Justin said. His devilish grin flashed white teeth against his sun-bronzed face.

Celia swept her long hair over her shoulder. "It's been a long time, darling," she said to Dalton. "Much too long. But now that you're here, why don't you join us?" she cooed.

For some unknown reason, the idea of making love to the woman seemed unappealing. But he didn't want to hurt

the lady's feelings. Dalton smiled lazily. "Only an urgent matter would force me away from your enticing invitation, my sweet."

Celia's green eyes glittered with self-satisfaction, her pride having been restored. She rewarded him with a dazzling smile, her gaze boldly raking over him with unabashed admiration.

Justin donned his shirt and strode to the full-length mirror to tie his neck cloth. "What's so urgent, ol' chap, that leaves you no time for Celia?" He scowled suddenly, his fingers paused in the middle of the lacy knot at his throat. "Don't tell me a jealous husband has challenged you to a duel, and you want me to be your second?"

Dalton threw back his head and laughed. "God, no. But I would serve you right if I did. I remember the last time I was your second when Lord Kingsley found you with his new wife." He shook his head. "When you aimed at Kingsley, you were so drunk you almost shot me."

"I was only pretending to be drunk. I knew you were a better shot than Kingsley, and a damn better shot than I am." His deeply tanned fingers returned to his lace cravat. "You're not still angry about that little adventure, are you?"

Dalton smiled. "No, but I'm certain Kingsley hasn't forgotten, you scoundrel. You were lucky his gun discharged so soon, and you were able to walk away with your honor."

Celia yawned, obviously bored. She propped herself on the elbow. "When will you be returning to me, Justin?"

Justin sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his left boot. "Good question. How long will this little favor take, Dalton?"

"Only a few days."

"A few days!" Justin stood up, one boot in his hand. "Just what are you getting me into, old friend?"

"I'll explain later. But you'll be back in London in no

time." He waved a parting salute to Celia as he went to the door.

Celia's bottom lip pouted into a pretty bow.

Justin buttoned up his waistcoat and donned his jacket as he crossed the room. "Very well, ol' man. This will clear me of anything I owe you for helping me out with ol' Kingsley." Justin turned to Celia and blew her a parting kiss. "Save my place, sweetheart. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Justin scowled at Dalton as they strode from the room. "This had better be important, Dalton. Celia's husband is grouse hunting in Scotland and won't be back for another week. We both know the lady doesn't like to sleep alone for very long."

Dalton smiled as they took to the stairs. "I'll explain in the carriage. For now, let me say that I want you to do me a very important favor."

"Hmm. Knowing you, I'd say that the favor concerns a horse or a woman." Justin raised a black brow, considering. "Since you own the most impressive stable in all of England, I'd guess your problem has to do with a woman." His mouth quirked while awaiting the answer.

Dalton chuckled. "You're right. I'm getting married and I need your help."

"I never thought I'd hear you ask for my help in *that* department!"

Dalton grinned. "No, it's Elizabeth with whom I need your help."

Justin's dark eyes glittered knowingly. "So Elizabeth has finally dropped the matrimonial noose around your neck, eh?"

"No, I'm marrying someone else, and I need you to keep Elizabeth occupied, shall we say, while I announce my engagement later tonight."

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Holmes stood waiting with a cane, top hat and gloves. "Thank you,

olmes," Justin said, taking the articles and slipping the
d servant a glittering coin.

When they settled back inside the waiting carriage, Justin
ked, "Of all your other useless friends, ol' chap, why am
he one you've honored to assist you with Elizabeth? She
d I have nothing but mutual dislike for each other, as
ou well know."

"I want you to keep Elizabeth occupied during the ball
hen my marriage is announced. I have no wish to publicly
humiliate her, and when she hears that my marriage plans
on't include her, I'm afraid all hell will break loose."

"I'd rather face ol' Kingsley with loaded pistols at dawn
an Elizabeth!"

"That's because Elizabeth is a better shot than you are,"
e said, chuckling. He grinned at Justin's glaring look.
Before I explain, do you remember several years ago be-
g involved in a scandal concerning a young lady? It oc-
curred at my mother's London town house and the lady's
ame was—"

"Alicia Spencer," Justin finished. A glint brightened his
ark eyes. "She was a lady no man would easily forget."
Dalton waited, carefully phrasing his next question.
What do you remember about the incident?"

Justin's eyes hardened. "I hope you won't take offense,
' chap, but—" he cleared his throat "—I don't like to
peak unkindly of anyone's mother, but...I believe your
ear mum set up that poor girl."

"That's what Lady Alicia claims."

"It was at a soiree held at your mother's London town
house," Justin began. "The Season had just started, and
rake and I had more than a few drinks as we looked over
e new crop of properties for the year. Drake had been
voiding your mother all evening. He said that she had been
gging him to propose to Elizabeth, but Drake said he was
no hurry. He and I and every other male couldn't keep
ur eyes from this lovely new creature who had just arrived.

"She was Alicia Spencer, the daughter of a baron, but no one knew much about her family. Her grandmother had brought her out, and the older woman had been quite something in her day, from what the wags said." Justin grabbed the hand strap when the carriage veered sharply around a curve.

"Anyway, Drake won the first dance with Lady Alicia much to Elizabeth's and your mother's ire. Lady Alicia's dance card filled faster than I can drink a hogshead of ale. With so many more worthy lads than myself claiming to dance with her, I took solace in my cups. Later, I staggered off to sleep it off.

"The next thing I knew, this commotion woke me up from the sleep of the damned. I remember your mother leaning over my head and her white-haired cronies shrieking like vultures. Poor Lady Alicia. She was helpless against them. Even in my fogged condition, I can still remember her lovely face. Exquisite, she was. I've often wondered what happened to her."

Dalton smiled. *She still is*, he thought. He glanced to the man sitting across from him. "The lady thinks my mother deliberately sent her to your room, which my mother later denied, and that you did nothing to Alicia."

In the soft light of the coach lamp, Justin's expression turned serious as he stared at him. The only sounds were the horses' hooves pounding the cobbles and the creak of harness. "I didn't touch her, Dalton."

"I believe you."

Justin's features relaxed. "Afterward, all hell broke out. Poor girl. I even offered her marriage, thinking that would satisfy the vultures, but she would have none of it." Justin shook his head. "Lady Alicia and the rest of her family left straight away for home." Justin leaned back against the velvet squabs, his eyes shuttered by his straight eyelashes. "It's my guess that your mother set up Lady Alicia to keep her out of the running. Your mum didn't want Drake to

think twice about proposing to Elizabeth." His gaze drifted outside the carriage window. Then he glanced back at Dalton. "So tell me, why are you so interested?"

"I'm going to marry her."

"I wish I could have seen your mother's face when you dropped that bit of news!"

Dalton grinned. "She doesn't know yet. In fact, she thinks I'm announcing my engagement to Elizabeth tonight." He shot Justin a knowing look. "That's where you come in, my friend."

"Aha!" Justin's dark eyes twinkled. "Yes, I'm going to enjoy this," he said, leaning back with a smile. "I'm going to enjoy this little adventure very much."

The carriage clattered along the country road the last few miles in good speed, despite the drenching rain that had persisted and showed no hint of subsiding. Dalton listened to Justin's soft snoring as the coach rattled across the stone bridge over the winding river that bordered the north boundary of Havencrest. He was eager to be home.

He was eager to see Alicia. The thought gave him a start of surprise, which he quickly pushed back. Of course he was impatient to see her. She was eager for the news he brought from her father. She would be relieved to hear that her family was well and looking forward to visiting her at Havencrest.

Who was he kidding? He wanted to see Alicia because he hadn't been able to forget how she looked the last time he had seen her, standing in the garden after she had agreed to marry him. In her low-cut jade silk gown, she was as appealing as a temptress, standing in the moonlit garden with her thick reddish-brown hair tumbling over her shoulders.

But beneath her proud demeanor, hurtful pride blazed from her dark eyes. He had wanted to reassure her, comfort

her and convince her that she had nothing to fear once they were married.

Alicia had suffered the indignities of the damned because of his mother. And if his plan worked, Alicia never would feel inferior to the ton again.

If his plan worked. He rejected the negative thought immediately. Of course it would work. He wouldn't permit any nagging doubt to darken his mood like the storm clouds above. But he couldn't brush away his hint of conscience. Alicia might never forgive him if she truly believed that he was marrying her just to avenge his mother. For if she did, he realized, she might think of him as no better than her father.

"This will be your suite," Olivia said to Alicia as she glided into the huge room carpeted in robin's egg blue. "My rooms are across the hall." She smiled over her shoulder. "I've always wanted to have a sister."

Alicia stared, transfixed at the splendor of the magnificent room. The bed was larger than her entire bedchamber at Marston Heath, she thought with a nervous giggle.

Olivia swept open another door and went inside a large mirrored alcove. "This is your dressing room, and opposite is your sitting room, and here," she said, crossing the room and opening another door, "is a small bedroom for the maid." She whirled around the room. "I must warn you, this suite faces east. You will be awakened by sunlight. I enjoy sleeping late in the morning," she said with a smile.

Alicia forced herself to step inside the room. Her slippers sank into the thick carpet. "I've never seen such a luxurious suite," she said, gazing around the delicate blue silk wall covering, the exact shade that matched the carpeting. When she glanced back at Olivia, she was aware of her bold scrutiny.

"Are you having second thoughts about marrying my brother?" Olivia's oval face was serious.

"Wh-why, no. Why would I?" Alicia hoped her voice didn't betray her true feelings. She felt uncomfortable and, for a moment, wished that she had remained in her cottage instead of being persuaded to prepare for the ball at the manor.

Olivia tilted her head in thought. "I believe every woman wants to be in love when she marries." Her hand pressed against her temple. "I know you haven't had time to come to know Dalton, but once you do, I think you both might suit very well."

"Your brother and I have a marriage of convenience—"

"I know what my brother said." Olivia sat down on a small sofa, her silk skirt draped becomingly around her. "But Dalton has never known love. Oh, there have been women." Olivia drew her hand to her mouth. "Forgive me, my dear." Her cheeks pinked becomingly. "I didn't mean to shock you."

Curiosity gave way to pretense. "I understand that Dalton and Elizabeth have...I believe he called it an understanding."

"Posh! There was no understanding!" Olivia waved her hand. "I don't know why, but Dalton abhors Elizabeth." She smiled, showing dimples so like her brother. "I've always hoped that once Dalton finds love, it might mend what troubles him."

Alicia looked up. "And what troubles your brother?"

Olivia shook her blond curls. "As long as I can remember, Dalton has been withdrawn, even among a crush of people. He so loved our father, and our uncle George. When Uncle George died in the war, I was too young to remember, but I think Dalton always missed him. Our father was gone a great deal. Last year, father died. We had already lost a brother." Her voice trailed off. "So many sad things." Olivia bit down on her lip, then sat up suddenly.

“Enough sad tales. It’s time we prepared for the ball.” She jumped to her feet. “Oh, Alicia. When the maids finish dressing you, you’ll be the most beautiful lady at the ball. We’ll begin by drawing your bath.”

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Chapter Seven



By the time Dalton raced up the back stairs to his suite at Havencrest, it was well past midnight. He knew his mother would be furious that he had not been at her side to receive their guests, but his absence couldn't be helped. He had to make certain that Elizabeth had left the ball by the time his engagement to Alicia would be announced.

He quashed an inner jolt of conscience when he remembered Elizabeth's eager response, a short while ago, to his carefully worded invitation to meet him. He had felt like a scoundrel as he hid in the garden and watched her dash along the moonlit path on her way to the carriage house. He could almost see her face, flushed with anticipation to meet him secretly in his coach. A pang of guilt knifed through him as he imagined her shock and sense of betrayal when she found it was Justin who waited for her.

Damn, what choice did he have? Justin could be trusted to be discreet, and if everything went according to plan, Elizabeth's reputation wouldn't be sullied.

But when the coach with Justin and Elizabeth had finally wheeled past with Ulger driving the spirited horses, Dalton had felt no sense of relief. If only she might forgive him some day. Dalton quelled another surge of conscience. He was entering into this deceit for Elizabeth's own good, he

reminded himself. This was the only way to protect her from the embarrassment of witnessing his engagement to Alicia. Now, if only the rest of his plan would go as smoothly.

When Dalton arrived in his suite, his evening clothes had already been laid out by his valet, who was now preparing Dalton's bath. "Send word to my sister's maid that I've just now returned, Ives."

The valet lifted his head from the task of filling hot water into the copper tub. "Lady Olivia had requested that I ask the stable master to inform her as soon as your coach arrived, your grace. I took it upon myself to follow her instructions."

"Excellent." Dalton smiled, feeling a surge of relief. He was worried about Alicia, but no one was better suited to watch over her than his sister. No doubt Olivia was hovering over Alicia like a mother hen. This was one time he had to agree with his sister. The dowager and her cronies would make short work of Alicia if they had any inkling she would be attending the ball.

He strode to the rosewood desk and took out a sheet of stationery, then scribbled a note. "As soon as you're through here, take this to Lady Alicia, and make certain she receives it." He folded the letter and sealed it with red wax, then placed it on the desk before undressing and stepping into the tub.

The steaming water lapped around his shoulders as he leaned back, inhaling the hint of sandalwood that Ives had poured into the bath. Without being told, his valet splashed brandy into a large crystal snifter and placed the drink on a silver tray on the sideboard within Dalton's reach.

"Thank you, Ives," he said, swirling the amber liquid, then inhaling the fruity bouquet. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

"This morning at breakfast, I heard Lord Templestone ask her ladyship if you would be dining this evening." Ives

picked up Dalton's discarded riding clothes and hung them in the anteroom where a maid would later clean and press them.

Dalton felt a knot tighten in his stomach. Templestone was a widower—a bounder whose past marriages had made him wealthy. He took a sip of brandy. "What did my mother tell him?"

Ives had picked up one of Dalton's boots and was brushing the mud from the leather. "I heard her say that you would be announcing your engagement at the ball this evening, your grace."

Dalton's mouth curled faintly. "What did Templestone say?"

Ives kept his gaze on his work. "He said that the day you announce your engagement, your grace, is the day pigs fly."

Dalton chuckled. "Too bad I wasn't there to see my mother's reaction."

Ives's face conveyed no emotion. "Yes, your grace."

Dalton wondered if Templestone would be leaving for Scotland with his mother's friends. Then he reminded himself that it was none of his business. "That will be all, Ives. I'll dress myself."

"Yes, your grace." Ives carried the riding boots under his arm and picked up the note for Alicia before he left the room.

I can't go through with this! Wrapped in a pink silk dressing gown, Alicia bit her inner lip and stared in the mirror at the pale image of herself. Marie, Olivia's maid, had dressed Alicia's hair in the latest fashion. She had drawn Alicia's hair straight back, then pulled her thick, auburn curls atop her head in a coil secured by a rope of pearls.

Alicia's brown eyes appeared gigantic in her small, oval face. She closed her eyes, her throat tight as the premoni-

tion of dread almost suffocated her. *I can't go through with this. I can't go through with this*, Alicia repeated as another roll of panic surged through her. She was a fool to have accepted Dalton's proposal, and a bigger fool to think the ton wouldn't have her tossed from the ballroom, like a mangy dog begging for scraps.

"Alicia, dear," Olivia said as she glided into the room. She was dressed in a high-waisted blue chiffon gown that matched her eyes. Blue eyes so like Dalton's.

Olivia clapped her hands when she saw Alicia. "Marie, you have outdone yourself!"

"Lady Alicia has hair that shines like polished silk," Marie said in her lilting French accent.

"I can hardly wait to see Dalton's face when he sees you." Olivia swept her hand to her cheek. "Oh, before I forget, this message just arrived for you, Alicia. The groom instructed me to give it to you directly." She handed the folded parchment to her with white-gloved hands.

Alicia took the note with trembling fingers, broke open the red seal, and began to read.

"My dear Alicia, Try not to worry. I'll be with you every step of the way. Your devoted servant, Dalton."

Alicia swallowed the lump in her throat and crumpled the note. Try not to worry? What did Dalton know of worry? He would relish the thought of upsetting his mother and her friends. But it wouldn't be Dalton who would be whispered about and ridiculed. She closed her eyes against the fright she saw reflected in her face in the mirror.

Dear God, where would she find the strength to get through this agonizing ordeal?

Not to worry, indeed!

When Dalton had finished dressing, he summoned a footman to tell Olivia that he would be waiting downstairs. As he made his way down the curved staircase to the second-floor ballroom, the strains of a lively country dance drifted

up to meet him. He nodded briefly to several groups of landies, who stood alongside the refreshment table ogling the dancers in the nearby ballroom.

Dalton's anxiety for Alicia increased. She must be going through a dozen hells this day. If only his mother reacted to the marriage announcement as he hoped, all will be well. If not, perhaps Alicia may never forgive him.

Dalton made his way to where a groom was sitting at the servant's alcove. "Take a message to Lady Olivia's suite and tell her—"

"I'm here, Brother." Olivia rushed toward him, her blond ringlets brushing her creamy shoulders. "Oh, Dalton. I'm so glad I found you." Her cheeks were flushed and she was out of breath. "Poor Alicia, she's a bundle of nerves, and I can't say that I blame her." She drew her brows together. "I don't know if she'll be able to come downstairs."

A mixture of guilt and dread flashed through him. "Where is she now?" he asked smoothly, masking his concern.

"In my suite." Her blue eyes rounded with worry. "I think you had better call this off before it's too late."

Before he could answer, a low hush drew his attention to the top of the stairs. Floating down the marble stairway was the most elegant young woman he had ever seen. His breath caught when he realized she was Alicia. Gowned in a low-cut creation of white silk embroidered with silver, she was exquisite. Soft folds of fabric hugged her feminine curves with each step she took. Shining curls framed her radiant face, her long hair coiled atop her head in a crown of pearls. She drifted down the stairs with the natural born grace of a queen.

"Who is she?" echoed the growing crowd of male admirers as they gathered around Dalton at the foot of the stairway.

Alicia's dark-brown eyes met his and he gave her a lazy

smile, his heart bursting with pride as she descended the bottom step to stand before him. He couldn't take his eyes from her.

"She is Lady Alicia Spencer," Dalton said in a booming voice. He took both of her long-white-gloved hands in his. "My future bride," he added proudly.

"You're a lucky man, Dalton," Olivia's husband, Robert Seabrook said. He stood beside his wife. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, Robert," he said, drinking in the sight of Alicia. He saw her take a steadying breath. Through the silk of her gloves, her fingers felt like ice, and he realized how terrified she really was. He felt her tremble, yet her dazzling smile never faltered.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, and her eyes danced with pleasure as she fell in step beside him on their way to the ballroom. He wondered if she had any idea the effect she was having on every male in the room, then decided she was far too innocent to know.

Her brown eyes, fringed with thick lashes, twinkled up at him. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn she was enjoying this. He couldn't help admire her ease under pressure.

"Congratulations, Dalton," Lord Theodore Clitheridge said, then bowed to Alicia. "And my best wishes for your happiness, my lady."

Dalton recognized Lord Teddy, one of the leaders of the racing crowd, known for their love of fast horses and beautiful women. Teddy had been riding with Templestone and witnessed Elizabeth's cut direct to Alicia.

Before Dalton could say anything, Alicia answered him with a dazzling smile. "Lord Clitheridge, how very kind of you."

Lord Teddy's eyes brightened, as though surprised or pleased that she remembered his name. Dalton felt a re-

newed sense of pride in this well-bred, charming woman who would be his wife.

"Excuse us, Teddy," Dalton interjected, then turned to Alicia. "Come, my dear. The orchestra is playing a country dance. May I have the honor?"

She nodded, and he swept her into his arms. "Look only at me," he whispered, as they twirled among the other couples. He was mesmerized by the way the candlelight from the overhead globes enhanced her high cheekbones and delicate, upturned nose. Soft ringlets bounced around her face as they stepped to the music. They circled the room, and he became conscious of the staring couples and the growing murmur of voices as they glided across the polished floor. Questions were being asked throughout the crush of guests as the other dancers stepped back and joined the hundreds of onlookers. Within minutes, he and Alicia were the only couple on the floor.

"You're enchanting," he said, meaning so much more. He couldn't take his eyes from her. Her cheeks flushed becomingly.

How had she changed? Or had she always been this bewitching? She smiled at him, and he realized that she carried herself with a certain air, a certain confidence that he hadn't noticed before.

The music ended too soon, and he felt a jolt of disappointment. Only when they left the dance floor and Olivia and Robert approached them did he pull his gaze from her face.

He vaguely remembered the exchange of small talk as others joined their circle. He felt mesmerized by the natural sincerity and innocence that radiated from her.

"I think you should make the announcement now," Olivia whispered to him. She and Robert stood by his side, and Dalton realized that by doing so, they were willing to suffer the social consequences with him if the dowager duchess were to create a scene when she heard the news.

He felt a rush of appreciation for such loyalty. Dalton turned to his brother-in-law. "Are you certain you know what you're doing, Robert? There's still time for you and Olivia to leave."

Robert's dark-gray eyes glittered with unmistakable loyalty. "We'll stand by you and Lady Alicia," Robert said proudly, then smiled warmly at his wife. "What are friends for, eh, darling?"

Olivia grinned, then caught Alicia's gaze. "We'll be here, beside you, my dear." Her eyes fixed with Dalton's. "But you best hurry, Brother. Mother is looking our way."

Dalton glanced her way. Surrounded by some of the most influential ton, the dowager sat regally in the corner, the color drained from her face as she stared at him. Her white-knuckled fingers gripped the diamond-studded handle of her cane.

The orchestra finished the last strains of a lively tune, and the couples were leaving the floor. Dalton took Alicia's hand and led her to the center of the room. When he had everyone's attention, he said in a booming voice, "It is my privilege this evening, to announce my engagement of marriage to this lovely young woman, Lady Alicia Spencer."

After a few moments of surprised gasps, the assembly broke into muted, polite applause as Dalton kissed Alicia's hand. Her face was frozen into a smile.

Several couples to their left swept in front of them, bowing and curtsying, then offering their best wishes. "A more beautiful and charming lady I have never met," said Lord Teddy, as he escorted Great-Aunt Mary to their side.

Dalton winked at Alicia as she glowed with the compliment. Great-Aunt Mary, dressed in a purple chiffon gown shot with gold, curtsied. "My dear," she drawled to Alicia. "I'm so happy to welcome you into the family."

Dalton sighed inwardly. Great-Aunt Mary had been present when Alicia was found with Justin Sykes. To have the

eldest of the family grant approval was a major coup. Now if only his mother...

Olivia and Robert followed with their good wishes. Dalton and Alicia thanked them. An awkward silence followed when all eyes turned toward the dowager duchess. Minutes passed, and the hush became deafening as Dalton waited for his mother to decide what to do. He squeezed Alicia's hand in encouragement, but he couldn't help wonder if he had made a tragic mistake. With one brief lift of her regal head, his mother could ruin the evening and destroy the innocent young woman at his side.

Finally, the dowager drew herself up with stony dignity and rose to her feet. Templestone stepped forward and offered his arm, which she accepted. Slowly, with her head high, the dowager and Templestone stepped forward. Her mouth pressed into a hard line. When she came within ten feet of Alicia, she paused, then held up a monocle to her eye and stared at her.

Alicia's smile remained intact as her brown eyes fixed upon the older woman who had wronged her so unfairly.

The dowager glanced at Olivia and Robert, who stood beaming beside Alicia, then at her formidable sister-in-law, Great-Aunt Mary, and Lord Teddy beside her. Aunt Mary arched a delicate brow in challenge, her eyes daring the dowager to snub Alicia after Mary had graciously awarded her approval.

Dalton could almost hear his mother weighing whether it was worth it or not to cut Alicia and offend one of the oldest and most respected members of the ton.

Leaning heavily on Templestone's arm, the dowager took an unsteady breath, and Dalton wondered if it was possible that his mother was at a loss for words. Finally, she turned to face Alicia. "Welcome, Miss Spencer." Her pleasant voice held none of the animosity so apparent in her face. She shot Dalton a this-matter-is-far-from-over look, then left, not waiting for a reply.

Alicia dropped into a curtsy, then took her place beside Dalton as Templestone led his mother back to her seat.

Dalton realized his brow was beaded in cold sweat. He daubed at his face with a snowy handkerchief, then pressed his hand against Alicia's waist. "Good show," he whispered to her. Her eyes twinkled when she looked up at him with a confident smile.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?" Lord Teddy asked, offering Alicia his arm. She blushed becomingly as she accepted.

Dalton felt a jolt of pride as he watched her return to the dance floor. Every male eye was upon Alicia as she followed the earl's lead, executing the intricate turns with practiced grace.

"I have a message for you," Robert said. "Your mother requests your presence," he finished, his gray eyes sympathetic.

Dalton glanced over his shoulder to where the dowager sat, glowering at them. "Thank you, Robert. If you'll excuse me."

Dalton made his way around the ballroom, members of the ton extending their best wishes to him and his future bride. When he reached his mother, she took his arm and silently led him toward the veranda. When they were alone, she rounded on him.

"Where is Elizabeth? Her maid said that she left the ball after receiving a note from you."

"She's spending the evening in the gamekeeper's cottage with Justin Sykes." He watched the dowager's mouth open in disbelief.

"I believe turnabout is fair play. After all, it was with Sykes that you ruined Lady Alicia's bow to society, was it not?"

"How could you!"

"I did Elizabeth a favor in not witnessing my engage-

ment to Lady Alicia. I would think you would applaud my gallantry."

"You're not amusing, Dalton." Her blue eyes blazed with contempt. "You won't get away with this—"

"If you try to prevent the engagement, I'll personally see that Elizabeth is ruined. You see, there are credible witnesses to Elizabeth's romantic evening with Sykes, and they'll come forward with proof if I ask them. If you want Elizabeth's reputation to remain unsullied, you will do nothing to harm Alicia. Do we understand each other?"

"You are contemptible!"

He bowed. "Thank you. I was taught by an expert."

Her eyes narrowed with fury. "Very well, Dalton. But I refuse to dignify your wedding with my presence." His mother pounded her cane, then turned and marched off, her heels clacking on the stone terrace.

Despite his words, Dalton felt no satisfaction from what he had done. If his mother refused to attend the wedding, Alicia might be terribly offended. But his mother had given him no choice. If only Alicia would understand.

The orchestra began to play a lively polka, and Dalton returned to the ballroom to find Alicia. A crowd of gentlemen circled around her, intent on filling her dance card. She smiled when he came beside her.

"I—I would like some air, pl-please," she said. Dalton took her arm to rescue her.

"Excuse us, gentlemen. The lady would like some air."

Outside on the veranda, Alicia turned to him. She noticed his teeth flash white against his sun-bronzed face as he smiled down at her. She felt his warm fingers through her silk-covered elbow as he led her past the smiling couples, all offering their congratulations and best wishes.

When they reached a secluded section of the veranda, she took several deep gulps of cool night air. She felt his hands upon her shoulders, then he turned her to face him.

In the moonlight, Dalton looked breathtakingly attractive

in the black evening jacket and waistcoat that accented his broad shoulders. Ruby shirt studs winked at his wrists. His long, muscular legs appeared elegant in the fitted breeches and high black boots. His white ruffled shirt with the lacy cravat contrasted sharply with his black hair and dark handsomeness. His skin held the faint masculine scent of brandy and sandalwood. The way his blue eyes gazed down at her gave her a thrill of something between alarm and excitement.

"I'm very proud of you," he whispered, his hands brushing the bare, sensitive skin above the tops of her long gloves.

Her mind fought to think of something that would keep her thoughts from the unexpected warmth that spiraled through her.

"I was expecting to see Elizabeth at the ball."

A strange look crossed Dalton's face. "Perhaps she was embarrassed by her indiscreet behavior with Lord Rothbury."

"Oh?" She was aware of his bold perusal. She tried to keep her thoughts on the conversation. "I wondered if perhaps she had not wanted to be present when our engagement was announced." She searched his face for some hint that her concern was valid, but his thoughts were carefully concealed beneath that handsome smile, once again.

"I thought my mother was most gracious," he said as she was about to speak again.

"You don't believe for a moment that your mother approves of me, do you?"

His jaw tightened. "My mother might surprise you, but let's not talk of her this evening." His voice turned husky and his vibrant blue eyes captured her mouth with a smoldering gaze.

He was going to kiss her. Suddenly shy, she started to turn away. "Olivia will wonder what happened to me—"

"Alicia..." Dalton pulled her closer. His eyelids slanted

down, shading his pupils with thick black lashes. "Don't be afraid of me."

"I—I'm not afraid," she said too quickly. "I'm not afraid of you," she repeated, needing to reassure herself.

Dalton cupped her face between his hands. "Alicia, then what are you afraid of?"

Her eyelids fluttered shut. *I'm afraid I might fall in love with you.* She gasped at the truth. Yes, she had known the truth when she had first met Dalton at Marston Heath, the day he had brought her Cinnamon Rose. She could easily fall in love with this dangerously alluring man. And once she did, he would break her heart when he left her. And leave her he would, when their marriage arrangement was completed.

"Look at me." Dalton's voice was a hoarse whisper.

Refusing to obey him would only prove that she was afraid. Her eyes met his, and the heat of desire reflected in his blue gaze took her breath away.

His lips slanted over hers. Her heart pounded in her breast as his arms cradled her against him. She felt the stiff ruffles of his shirt through the silk covering her sensitive breasts as he held her closer and deepened their kiss. His warm breath mingled with hers. She parted her lips, and his mouth claimed hers with hungry urgency.

She raised her arms around his neck while his hands shifted down her back and along her hips. Tingles of desire curled down her spine. His hands lowered, her eyes opened and she pulled back. "Pl-please stop." Her whisper was thick with desire.

"We're engaged, my dear." His eyes held a dangerous glint. "Certainly you know what goes on between a husband and wife?"

"I'm not your wife yet," she said, pushing him away. Her chest tightened, realizing she really didn't want to leave. She stepped back, straightening her gown. "Dinner

will be announced soon. They'll expect us to make our appearance."

"We can do anything we wish," he said teasingly, capturing her hand again.

"Of course you can. You're the duke. It is I whom the ton will scrutinize under their quizzing glasses."

"You have a point." He caught her arm and led her from the veranda. "Very well, my dear. But later..." His eyes held that smouldering look that caused her pulse to hammer.

She bravely returned his smile as he led her toward the ballroom where she would be facing the dowager duchess and her friends again. But if she had remained on the veranda with Dalton, she would be facing her own inner demons. She had met her enemies and had faced them down. That she could do again.

But Dalton was another matter.

Chapter Eight



Alicia had barely slipped out of her ball gown when the first rays of sunlight sliced through the opening between the velvet drapes, slanting gold across the blue satin bedspread. "Please open the drapes, Marie. I love to see the sky at dawn."

"*Mon Dieu*, my lady," Marie said, arranging the discarded ball gown on an embroidered silk hanger. "If I do, you'll never sleep with the room full of sunlight."

Alicia sighed. "I'm not the least bit sleepy." How could she explain to Marie that she felt much too exhilarated to lie down? She wanted to be alone with her thoughts. In her mind, she could still hear the lilting music, see Dalton's handsome face smiling down at her as they danced. No, she didn't want to waste a moment of this glorious feeling with sleep.

"I must see to Bashshar," Alicia said instead. She knew the guests from last night's ball would be asleep by now. The stables and riding paths would be deserted. Now was the perfect time to work with Bashshar.

Marie tilted her head, her black curls dancing beneath her frilly cap. "Ah, then I will fetch your riding habit." The maid stifled a yawn. "Do you wish the blue or the brown?"

"Neither. I'll wear my usual attire, and I can dress myself." Alicia hoped Marie wouldn't inquire which gown that might be. There was no way the French maid would understand why a lady would want to dress in breeches and a loose-fitting shirt.

Alicia sat at the dressing table and began to remove the pins from her hair. In the mirror, she could see Marie's look of shock.

"My lady, that is for me to do." Marie dashed to her side and carefully removed the pins and pearls from Alicia's hair. As the maid chatted, Alicia's thoughts kept wandering back over the glorious events of last night. Her body tingled as she remembered how hard and strong Dalton's arms felt when he held her, when he kissed her....

"...pile your hair or pull it back with a ribbon?" Marie's accented voice ended with a question.

Caught daydreaming, Alicia blinked. In the mirror, she saw her thick, heavy hair cascading to her waist. "I—I'll braid it myself, Marie. Thank you. Now, I insist you leave and get some rest."

Marie yawned again. "Very well, my lady." She curtsied, then left for the maid's quarters in the adjoining anteroom.

With practiced fingers, Alicia wove her wavy hair into one long braid down her back. She smiled, invigorated by the memory of Dalton's proud gaze at her triumph. Who would have thought she could enjoy herself with Dalton's mother and her friends in the same room? Yet she had, thanks to Dalton.

After the maid left, Alicia changed into the cotton shirt and leather breeches. She pulled on her boots, then tiptoed down the back stairs through the gardens toward the stables.

When she entered Bashshar's stall, the stallion tossed his majestic head in welcome. "Good morning, beauty," she said, patting the stallion's black satiny neck. He nuzzled

under her arm while she snapped the lead to his halter. When she led him into the paddock, the horse suddenly whinnied nervously, tossing his head.

Alicia glanced around, but no one was there. She felt disheartened. For the past few days, she had been able to move the horse into the open paddock without the stallion reacting in panic. Just then, a cloaked figure, wearing a maroon cape and hood, slipped around the side of the stable into view.

At first Alicia was relieved to see a logical reason for Bashshar's alarm, but when the woman threw back the woolen hood, Alicia recognized Elizabeth. Her mouth looked hard in her unsmiling face.

Elizabeth scowled. "I have something I wish to say to you," she said, her voice shrill.

Bashshar tossed his head as though he might rear. Alicia wasn't certain she could control the animal. "Easy, love," she crooned softly, stroking the animal's neck. She turned toward Elizabeth. "Please, step back, Elizabeth, so I can put Bashshar back in his stall, then we can talk."

"There's no need," she answered. "I'm not afraid of him."

Bashshar's ears flattened, his eyes were ringed in white. "You should be," Alicia said, her voice even despite her concern. "I can't handle the horse if you don't step out of his line of vision. Get back, I say."

"Not until I've said what I came here to say." Elizabeth's neck fasteners loosened on her cape, opening to reveal a lime-green gown of tissue chiffon. It appeared she was still wearing her ball gown from last night.

Alicia clenched her fingers beneath Bashshar's halter and stroked his neck. "Very well, but speak in an even, low voice."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "You'll not give me orders."

Bashshar tossed his head, almost lifting Alicia with him.

"You might marry Dalton, but you'll never keep him. Everyone knows Dalton enjoys his little jokes, but choosing a stable girl as his bride is really too hilarious."

Alicia stiffened. "Now that you've had your say, please leave. You're upsetting Bashshar."

"I'll take care of Bashshar," she said. From the corner of her eye, Alicia saw Elizabeth withdraw a coiled whip from the folds of her cape. Bashshar saw it and reared, screaming.

"Elizabeth, step away," Alicia ordered, trying to hold on to the lead but knowing she wasn't strong enough.

Elizabeth drew back her hand, the leather whip singing through the air in a dangerous arc, missing Alicia and the horse's face by inches. Alicia released the animal's lead and threw herself at Elizabeth, trying to tear the whip from her.

"Let go of me!" Elizabeth cried, stumbling to the ground. Alicia bent over her and wrestled her for the leather coil, but Elizabeth refused to let go. Bashshar screamed again in outrage, and Alicia knew that the animal might kill to protect her.

Alicia grabbed hold of Elizabeth's hair and yanked her out of the way just seconds before Bashshar's deadly hooves pounded into the ground where Elizabeth had been.

Dust stung Alicia's eyes and filled her mouth as she pulled Elizabeth safely out of the stallion's reach. Elizabeth's fingers clawed at her side, as though unaware of the danger. Finally, Alicia yanked the whip from Elizabeth's grasp.

Elizabeth sat up and slapped Alicia alongside the face. "That beast should be put down. He tried to kill me!"

Alicia pulled her hair from her face, then ran toward the horse. Bashshar dashed wildly back and forth, screaming.

"You should know better than to draw a whip on an animal," Alicia said, trying to keep her voice low.

Elizabeth stood on wobbly legs. "I had to protect myself.

Everyone knows that Bashshar has gone crazy. If you really knew anything about horses, you'd put the beast out of its misery."

"Wait here. I need to calm him down." Alicia's tone of voice gave no quarter. Instead, Elizabeth refused, and ran alongside.

"Get back, you fool," Alicia ordered. "If he decides to run at you, there's nothing I can do."

"I can do something," Elizabeth fired back. "I'll have the stable master put him down."

"Elizabeth, get back inside the stable," Alicia said. Bashshar bared his teeth, ears flat. There was murder in his eyes.

Alicia stood, shoulders back, and looked him straight in the eyes. "Easy, easy," she said, lowering her arms to her side, her hands hidden. She spoke softly, never taking her eyes from him. The massive stallion tossed his head, shivering, but within minutes, was under control. Finally, the horse trotted over to her, and she hugged his neck. "It's going to be all right, Bashshar. All right."

Alicia led the horse into the stable. She walked him inside the box stall, turned him to face the door, released the lead, then slowly backed out of the stall. With a feeling of relief, she slid the bolt across the lock.

A few minutes later, Alicia shut the stable gate and stepped into the sunlit paddock. She found Elizabeth still waiting by the fence. "Elizabeth, if you ever do that again, I'll ask Dalton never to allow you near the stables, do you understand me?"

"You think you've won, don't you?" Elizabeth's angry gaze raked over her. "Well, I'm here to tell you that your trick won't work, Miss Spencer."

Confused, Alicia strode near her and wrapped her arm around the fence post. "What trick?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I'm referring to last night when you forged the note saying that Dalton was

waiting for me in his coach." She tilted her chin, her green eyes narrowed. "How convenient that your lover was available to help with your plan."

Alicia shook her head. "What are you talking about? What lover?"

Elizabeth sniffed. "Justin Sykes, as if you didn't know."

"You're talking nonsense, Elizabeth. I really don't—"

"Save your lies, Miss Spencer." She pushed a stray lock from her cheek. "Dalton will learn the truth, and when he hears that you had Justin kidnap and hold me at the gamekeeper's cottage, he'll realize what a vicious little gutter-snipe you really are."

Alicia could hardly believe her ears. "Are you saying that Justin Sykes kidnapped you last night?"

Elizabeth's lips thinned. "Don't pretend that innocent act with me. When I tell the dowager duchess—"

"I suggest you do just that," Alicia said, suddenly aware of why Dalton was so positive that Elizabeth wouldn't be at the ball. How could Dalton be so thoughtless? She turned toward the stable door. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Elizabeth, there's something I must do."

Elizabeth reached out and grabbed Alicia's arm. "Don't turn your back on me. Our conversation is finished when I dismiss *you*."

"I haven't time for polite formality," Alicia said, yanking her wrist free. She stormed inside the stable and didn't stop until she reached Cinnamon Rose's stall. Opening the door, she threw a saddle across the mare's back. Anger and outrage flared as she realized what Dalton had done to keep Elizabeth from the ball. Perhaps Elizabeth was spoiled and willful, but she had feelings, just as everyone else. Two wrongs don't make a right.

When she had finished saddling the horse, she led the mare into the paddock. Relieved to see that Elizabeth had finally left, Alicia hesitated a few minutes to steady her nerves. Her knees felt like jelly and her hands were shak-

g. Her clothes were dirty and her left shoulder seam was ripped from scuffling with Elizabeth, but she knew what she must do. Climbing onto the mare's back, she rode stride toward the manor house.

"His Lordship is not in," Ives intoned in a deep monotone, his gray eyes staring at an imaginary fixture above her head.

"Then where is he?" Alicia insisted, thankful it was still so early for the houseguests to be awake and catch sight of her standing in the middle of the great hall, still disheveled from her ordeal with Elizabeth. Although Ives must have noticed, he gave no outward sign.

"I imagine his lordship is where one might usually find him at this hour, miss." Ives's face remained emotionless.

Alicia wondered if Ives enjoyed giving roundabout answers. "And where would that be, Ives?"

"In his quarters, miss."

Alicia hid her growing frustration as she eyed the old servant. Obviously he knew that, very soon, she would become the new mistress of Havencrest, and he might be testing her. "And just where are his quarters, Ives? I wish to know so I can send one of the grooms from Marston Heath to His Lordship. I hear your master is looking to interview a new valet."

Ives's surprised gaze met hers for a fraction of a second before his features schooled back into bored unconcern. "His Lordship is staying at the hunting lodge, my lady. Shall I send a groom to show you the way?" A corner of his mouth lifted.

"That won't be necessary. I know the way. Thank you, Ives." She heard his dry chuckle as she turned toward the front door.

Alicia rode Cinnamon Rose across the fields, the mare's long legs covering the distance in smooth, graceful strides. She drew back on the reins when they approached the

stream near the stone, thatched cottage she had seen many mornings while out riding. A trace of gray smoke curled from the chimney. She dismounted, then tied the animal to the trunk of a nearby ash tree.

A whinny in the distance brought her attention to the attached shed where a white-faced, large-boned chestnut gelding stood. She recognized the horse as one Dalton favored. She braced herself as she strode toward the hunting lodge door. She knocked, her pulse hammering.

"Come in, Alicia," Dalton said when he opened the door. He must have seen her arrive because he didn't appear surprised to see her. "Visiting your fiancé without notice and unchaperoned is frowned upon by the ton, my dear." His lips lifted into a crooked smile. "But most welcomed by me," he added, his eyes twinkling. His gaze took in her appearance. "If the ton were to see how lovely you look in breeches, Alicia, the fashion would become London's latest vogue."

Alicia ignored the compliment as she stepped inside. She removed her riding gloves and glanced about the room. Mounted stag heads and stuffed falcons in flight peered down upon several walls lined with books. An overstuffed sofa and several chairs surrounded the granite fireplace that ran the length of room. Simple, yet very masculine.

"And to what do I owe the honor of your visit?" Dalton asked, and she realized he had been staring at her. He motioned for her to have a seat.

Alicia held back her anger. "Elizabeth just called upon me, and she had an interesting story to tell."

"I prefer not to bring the servants while I stay here, so I'm unprepared for company. Forgive my manners, but I'm afraid I keep no form of refreshment other than cigars, whiskey and brandy." He lifted a brow as he gestured to the crystal liquor decanters along the sideboard. "A bit early in the day for you, perhaps?"

She refused to be distracted. "Is it true?" She sank down

the wingback chair beside the fireplace and glared at him. "Did you ask Elizabeth to meet you last night, then arrange for Justin Sykes to kidnap her?"

"Kidnap her?" Dalton appeared surprised, then shrugged. "You obviously already believe her. What do you want from me?"

Tell me that Elizabeth had lied. How she wanted to believe that Elizabeth had exaggerated, but she needed to hear the truth. "I want to hear what happened in your own words."

He took a deep breath and leaned against the back of the sofa. "I sent Elizabeth a note. I asked her to meet me in my private coach. Although I suggested nothing about what would happen once she arrived there, I knew what she would think. And yes, I arranged for Justin to be waiting for her.

She felt struck down as the last shreds of hope fell away. "How could you?" she whispered.

He studied her for a few moments before speaking. "Justin Sykes is my friend. Regardless of his reputation, which I think is mostly unfounded, I trust him. I know Justin would do nothing to compromise Elizabeth, regardless of what she says." His voice was soft and gentle. "I knew of no other way to prevent her from being embarrassed when our engagement was announced. Besides, she might have created a scene." He gave her a pleading look.

Alicia refused to be put off. "Do you have any idea how frightened Elizabeth must have been? She might have believed you were being held for ransom, or maybe killed. She might have been afraid for her life."

Dalton's mouth lifted slightly. "I'm certain if the situation were reversed, Elizabeth wouldn't be so thoughtful of our feelings."

Alicia took a deep breath. "That has nothing to do with it. She's obviously in love with you, Dalton, and you've treated her abominably."

Dalton glanced out the window to where Cinnamon Rose grazed peacefully in the morning sunlight. "Yes, I believe I did." He met her gaze with a look of contrition. "What do you want me to do?"

She was surprised by his sudden turnabout, and she wasn't sure how to answer. "You might at least dignify the situation with the truth," she said after a short pause. "Elizabeth believes the idea was mine—that I put Sykes up to it."

Dalton shook his head and smiled. He rose, strode to the hearth and tossed another log on the fire. "Elizabeth will believe what she wants to believe." He looked at her side long. "When she comes to her senses, she'll look at the note and realize the handwriting is mine." He returned to the sofa and sat down across from her. "I had arranged for Justin Sykes to stay with Elizabeth for more than one reason." He draped one arm across the back of the sofa and absently stroked the polished wood.

Her gaze followed the play of muscles of his forearm under his white sleeve, and she was reminded of the wondrous feelings she had when he held her in those arms last night on the veranda. She wanted to curl up beside him and feel his strong, protective embrace once again.

She mentally shook herself. Whatever was wrong with her? She must remember that while he had kissed her passionately last night, Elizabeth was being held against her will by Justin Sykes!

Dalton's intense blue eyes studied her. "I had little choice, Alicia. It was the one way my mother would agree to accept you into the family."

Alicia gasped. "Your mother knows of this?" The question felt like a brick in her throat. She stared at him as she finally understood the real motive behind his trick. "You're blackmailing your mother, aren't you? If she refuses, you'll threaten to expose Elizabeth as spending the night with Sykes."

R Dalton lowered his gaze and offered no denial.

ie She rose to her feet and made a dash for the door, but
V was faster. He caught her by the wrist.

“Alicia, you’re sweet and innocent. You have no idea
s the kind of people we’re dealing with.”

Her eyes narrowed with accusation. “Oh, yes, I do.”

“Alicia, wait.” He held on to her wrist. “My mother is
k ed to having her way. She won’t rest until I marry Eliz-
beth, and there was no other way.”

Alicia pulled her arm free. “Dalton, your mother will
v ever accept me. If you can’t admit that, perhaps we should
nd our engagement.”

“My lovely Alicia, you’re such an innocent.” His voice
as low and silky. “My mother will agree. She knows that
o harm will come to Elizabeth’s reputation if my mother
ys that she was mistaken about what she thought hap-
ened the night of your disgrace.”

Alicia almost laughed. “You believe that she’ll agree?”

“She must. She’ll say that she was mistaken about the
vening you were found in Justin’s chamber. She’ll say that
e had sent you to fetch her shawl, but by mistake, sent
ou to the wrong room. When she realized her error, she
ent immediately to Sykes’s bedroom. She’ll vouch that
o time had elapsed for any impropriety to occur.”

“You would blackmail your own mother!”

“I prefer to say that she’s been caught at her own
ame.”

“The ton won’t believe her. They’ll think she’s trying
o save face because you’re marrying me.”

“They may think it, but they won’t say it. Great-Aunt
lary has accepted you. As sister to my late father, she and
y mother will be too powerful to challenge. By the end
f the season, the incident will be forgotten.”

“I thought my disgrace didn’t matter to you—”

“It doesn’t matter to me, Alicia.” His fingertips drifted

across her cheek. "You were unjustly accused. I know how much you value your good name. I did this for you."

She pulled her face away. "I might be innocent, but I'm not stupid, Dalton. You want the ton to accept me, for then your mother will be all the more infuriated at our marriage."

"That's not why I did it, Alicia. I don't give a damn about what those mutton-heads think. It's you I care about."

"Please, don't do me any more favors if it means hurting people."

Dalton grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. "Alicia, Justin Sykes has always been a good friend of mine. What about his feelings? Maybe he had his own reason to get back at my mother?"

Surprised, Alicia bit her lip. She had never considered Sykes's feelings before. Certainly what Dalton said was true; Justin Sykes had been set up by the dowager, just as she had.

She glanced at Dalton and wondered if he was using her concern for others—even the likes of Justin Sykes—to manipulate her. But all she saw in his intense blue gaze was the hope to be forgiven. She felt the pressure of his grip lessen. "I'm sorry you're upset with me, Alicia. What can I do to make it up to you?"

She took several deep breaths. "You could at least apologize to Elizabeth."

Dalton raked his fingers through his black hair. "Very well. I'll do it if it will erase that disappointed look from your face."

Alicia watched in fascination as his eyes darkened with the same smouldering passion she had seen just before he kissed her last night. Her breath caught in her throat.

He was so close. She could smell the warm fragrance of sandalwood mixed with the faint smell of wood smoke. His

teeth felt warm on her face. She didn't know what to think when he looked at her like that.

Her gaze moved down to his mouth—his beautifully firmed mouth. She knew she should leave, but her body betrayed her. She tilted her face to his, moistened her lips and waited for his kiss.

She felt a warm hand cup her breast as Dalton's mouth took hers. She barely held back a gasp of surprise as she returned the kiss with an eagerness that amazed her. Her hands circled his neck, drawing them deeper into the kiss.

"Don't you know I'd do anything to protect you?" he said into her hair.

Alicia pulled back to look at him. "Yes, but I hope you will never hurt or use people to avenge me." She stepped to the partially opened door and took a deep breath of the crisp morning air. He silently watched her; his expression appeared crestfallen, as though she didn't appreciate his motives.

"I must be getting back," she said without looking at him. She needed time to think. Although he tried, Dalton would never come to understand her. He appeared to believe that women were either bedded or protected by any means available. But neither view included love.

Chapter Nine



For the next few days, Alicia buried her anxiety about the impending wedding by spending long hours training Bashshar. The regal stallion shared many similar traits with his master, she thought with amusement. Both could be stubborn, prideful and utterly charming when they wanted to be.

When she came near Bashshar, he tossed his head and pranced around the newly built round pen that Dalton had designed. The structure was ideal for the high-strung Thoroughbred. Secluded away from noise and people, the pen had become one of Alicia's most favorite places at Havercrest. She felt protected, and cared for. Bashshar felt the same way here, too.

She gave a command and the horse stopped. Walking toward him with assurance, she mounted the animal, then brought him into a trot around the ring.

After an hour, she noticed the stable lad, Penn, perched on the top of the fence. Alicia wheeled Bashshar around and rode toward the boy. "Get down from there, Penn, before you fall and hurt yourself."

The young man's eyes rounded with surprise. "Saint protect you, m'lady. Better jump off the master's beast before the devil knows you're ridin' 'im."

Alicia feigned a scowl. "Penn, you know you're not allowed to watch while I'm working." She couldn't keep from smiling.

"I—I knew you'd win 'im over," Penn said, before he popped out of sight behind the board fence.

Alicia laughed, her mood uplifted by the flawless session that Bashshar had performed. He obeyed her commands with ease and grace. "Good baby," Alicia whispered to the stallion as she brought the horse to a halt in front of the gate. She dismounted with a fluid ease, then patted the animal along the neck.

Bashshar blew softly and shook his majestic head as though proud of himself. Alicia laughed. "Yes, you should be proud, you beauty." She ran her hand along the midnight sheen of Bashshar's back, his coat gleaming with red hints in the morning sunlight.

When she opened the gate, Penn's face was pressed against the boards, peering through the slats.

"Young man, what did I tell you?" she said, her hands pulled at her hips in feigned irritation. Try as she might, she couldn't keep from laughing. "Yes, your eyes don't deceive you," she said softly. "Bashshar finally allowed me to ride him."

Penn stared at her as though she had two heads. "Me and says that the Master is going to marry you. Is it because you cured his horse?"

The thought of her coming marriage to Dalton brought a clench to her stomach. "No, Penn. First, Bashshar isn't cured yet. The stallion has only allowed me to get close to him. Now I can begin his actual treatment. And as far as my upcoming marriage to your master is concerned, well...I'm marrying your master because..." She studied the serious look on the young man's face. Penn was almost ten and five. She wasn't sure if he understood how complicated marriage could be. "Our marriage is a business arrangement."

Penn's smile lit up his freckled face. "Then I was right. You'll be stayin'. Me brother owes me a quid, he does."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your brother? I don't remember Ulger saying that he has another son working in the stable."

"Neville is me older brother. He helps the gamekeeper tend the fences. He don't like horses like I do."

"You must bring Neville around some time. I'd like to meet him."

"Don't think he'll come around. He and me pa don't get on well."

"Oh? I can't imagine anyone not getting along with your parents." She realized that she had become quite fond of Penn and the stable master and his wife. Dalton employed decent, loyal, hardworking people.

Penn scuffed his foot in the dirt. "I told me brother that you'd stay here with us and Bashshar after you got married. Neville said you'd move away once Bashshar was healed. Penn glanced up, his face bright with hope. "I was right wasn't I?"

The question had tormented her, as well. Would Dalton tire of her once their honeymoon was over? If he chose, he could send her away for months on end. "I'm afraid I don't know, Penn. I have another stallion at Marston Heath that needs my attention. I left his training to be with Bashshar."

Penn's mouth curled into a frown.

Alicia watched him, then she thought of an idea. "Yes, I know, Penn, I could use a smart lad who has a keen knowledge with horses."

Penn straightened and drew himself up to his full height. He was almost as tall as she was. "Oh, m'lady. Ye'll never regret it. I'll work extra hard."

She eyed him readily. "Yes, but I can't have a young man who can't read."

Penn's face dropped. "I—I can read some, m'lady."

"And do sums, and write with a fine script."

His foot kicked at a stone. "Me pa said I don't have time practice sums."

She met his gaze. "You're not blaming your lack of schooling on your father, are you, Penn?"

He said nothing as he scratched his red hair.

"I'll tell you what," Alicia continued. "I'll show you how to help with Bashshar's treatments. If you prove yourself, then we can speak to your father about you becoming handler."

Penn's face brightened into a wide smile. "Truly, m'lady?"

"Yes, providing you work on your sums and your penmanship. I want you to read books, too."

"Books? I ain't never seen one of them."

She sighed. "I'll start you out with some of the books my grandfather used to teach me about horses."

"Oh, thank you, m'lady. When can I start helping you with the horse?"

"We'll start this evening, after your supper. You can write the alphabet for me and we'll begin there."

"The alpha—?" He scratched his head. "What's that?"

She finally realized that Penn had no idea how much he'd taken on in order to work with horses—something he had always wanted to do. For an instant, she was reminded of her own bargain with Dalton. They would be married within a few days. Did she know everything that would be entailed in her decision to become his wife? She didn't think so, and she might not know until it was too late.

In the distance, an oriole warbled its sweet melody; the happy tune made her determined not to ruin the otherwise good mood with thoughts of her shaky future. She brushed back a strand of hair from Penn's cheek and smiled at him. "I'll explain the alphabet this evening when you come for our first lesson."

He returned her smile, then dashed off to do his chores.

She returned to the pen at the sound of footsteps. The long shadow of Dalton Warfield crossed in front of her.

"I saw you talking to Penn, and I wondered if you would spare me a few words?" Dalton stood with his back to the morning sun. She tented her hand above her eyes and gazed up at him. He was wearing a loose-fitting shirt, similar to hers, except his top button was unfastened. Black whorls of hair curled from the white fabric. The sight gave her a tingling feeling.

His leather breeches clung to his muscular legs, his black boots gloved his calves in satiny leather. A faint smile quirked about his lips as he watched her staring at him. "How is Bashshar faring today?"

"Maybe you'd like to see for yourself?"

Dalton's blue eyes brightened like a child's on Christmas morn. "You'll let me watch?" He was referring to her last edict that forbade him to observe her work.

"I think we've made enough progress. Besides, I'd wager that Bashshar would enjoy showing off for you." She winked at him as she opened the gate and went inside.

At the sight of Dalton, Bashshar snorted, then whinnied a loud greeting and trotted eagerly toward him.

"If I knew I'd be seeing Bashshar, I'd have brought him carrots," Dalton said, rubbing the animal's powerful neck.

"It's a good thing you didn't, because I wouldn't have allowed it." She enjoyed his jolt of surprise.

"And why not?"

"Because feeding Bashshar with your fingers encourages him to bite, especially the other handler's fingers," she said, stroking Bashshar's flank. "While I'm responsible for Bashshar, he will only have carrots and special treats dropped into his feeding bucket." She watched Dalton out of the corner of her eye, enjoying the rare expression of censure on his handsome face.

"As you wish." The amused gleam in Dalton's eyes told

that he was enjoying this. "Have a seat, your grace." She began to walk away when he grabbed her by the waist. "Don't you think it's time you called me Dalton?" His voice held an intimacy that made her insides flutter.

"If you say so...Dalton." The word felt like a brick in her throat. She preferred the safety of formality, because she didn't want him to know how vulnerable she felt in his presence.

"And I have your permission to call you Alicia?" She lifted a brow. "I believe you have already taken that liberty...Dalton."

He smiled lazily. "Now that we're officially engaged, I think I have earned other liberties as well, don't you agree?"

She knew he was teasing, yet she also knew what he said was true. She felt reasonably sure that he wouldn't drag her off beneath the bushes and have his way with her. Yet she recognized his heavy-lidded gaze as the same as the last time he kissed her. Things were changing between them, or was the change only in her imagination?

From the far corner, Bashshar pawed the ground and whinnied, reminding her of a spoiled child who wanted attention.

"I thought you would enjoy seeing Bashshar's progress, Dalton." She smiled and his eyes glinted with pleasure.

"Very well, I shall take whatever liberties you're willing to avail to me." His white teeth flashed as he smiled.

She strode to the center of the ring and faced Bashshar, who eyed her with spirited challenge. "I'm going to give the horse silent commands to come forward, pace three steps to the side, and then," she glanced at Dalton over her shoulder, "Bashshar will perform a special trick that he has prepared, just for you."

Dalton tipped over the empty feed bucket, raised one foot to it, leaning as he watched them.

Alicia faced Bashshar, and with a series of hand gestures,

silently guided the horse through his paces. The elegant animal stepped toward her with precision, then turned and pranced three steps to the side. Pausing a moment, he tossed his head, paced within five feet of Dalton and stopped. With a side glance toward Alicia, Bashshar hesitated, then bent his front foot, and executed a bow, fitting for a king.

Dalton's face broke into a dazzling smile. "Bravo!" he clapped with enthusiasm as he moved to where the horse and Alicia stood. Dalton put his arm around Bashshar's neck, then instinctively hugged Alicia.

Her heart leaped with joy at the look of happiness on Dalton's face. The loneliness she often sensed, although she covered it well, was gone from his eyes.

She rubbed Bashshar's powerful neck as she studied Dalton. His blue eyes met hers, and he knew she had caught him off guard. She averted her eyes to Bashshar, who stood proudly, gleaming in the sunlight.

Dalton took her hands into his own large palm. "You're truly amazing, Alicia. What you've done with Bashshar is a miracle."

She felt her cheeks flush with pride. "Your horse is very special. He has amazing insight and sensitivity." She basked in the glow of his admiration, and she realized how very much his approval meant to her.

His eyes darkened as his gaze dropped to her mouth. She wanted him to kiss her. No, she wanted more. *She wanted him.* The words burned into her brain.

He drew her closer, then finally his warm, firm mouth took hers. Strong, hard arms circled her as she leaned against his chest. Through the thin cotton of her shirt, her breasts pressed against his hard-muscled chest.

He deepened the kiss, and she felt as if her mind had flitted away any trace of reasonable thought. She found his hands sliding up around his neck, her fingers twining in his black hair at the back of his collar.

How many times had she imagined this? But not in her wildest dreams had she ever thought a kiss could be so wondrous. She heard a low moan from deep in her throat. Dear God, what was she doing? It was one thing for her to desire him. But she would be a fool to let him know it. Once they were married, she could enjoy their coupling, but he must never know that she truly desired him. Better to have him think she was only honoring their agreement. She had too much pride to let him know that she truly did have romantic feelings for him.

She drew back. His mouth stilled, then she felt his arms release her.

"What is it, Alicia? Certainly you aren't surprised that I would want to kiss you?"

His stark words broke through her trance as she gathered her wits. "When I am your wife, I know that I'll have no say in what you do with me, your grace. But until then—"

"I'm sorry if I frightened your...tender sensibilities, but I would hardly think a woman such as yourself would be lled with foolish romantic ideas—"

"What do you mean, a woman such as I?"

"You're a practical lass. You know about animals and what goes on about begetting young—"

Alicia gasped. "How can you make such a comparison? Begetting an heir is more than two common animals rutting in a pasture."

His face reddened. "Alicia, I never suggested—"

"But that's what you meant, isn't it?" She tossed her hair back from her shoulders. "Very well, Dalton. We have an arrangement. One I will uphold, you can be sure. And I promise you that I hold no romantic notions about why you want to marry me. For you are correct—I'm well versed in practical matters. But even my stock mares at Marston's Heath do not breed with a stallion unless they choose." Her chin lifted a notch. "Apparently I will not be given that same option..."

A muscle tightened in Dalton's jaw. "You know that not what I meant. Don't try to make this appear as though I'm forcing you." He raised a black brow. "Are you saying that you wish to back out of our marriage agreement?"

She eyed him warily. Oh, why did she have to let her temper get the better of her? Why did she have to respond to him with such emotion? Why couldn't she just have stood, like a post, and let him kiss her?

Because she had enjoyed kissing him, and he knew she did. She pushed back her shoulders. "As you well know I'm financially responsible for my family. And as you also know, I have no choice but to marry you. Of course I won't break our contract."

He folded his arms across his broad chest. The corner of his mouth lifted into an infectious grin. "Oh, you poor little maid. How tortured you must be for having to marry one of the most wealthy, sought after, handsome dukes in England."

She couldn't keep her face straight. "Don't forget pompous, overbearing, arrogant, stubborn, and—"

"Yes, and don't *you* forget it." His grin deepened, showing a dimple in his cheek.

Her small chin lifted, and she straightened her shoulders. "I must return to my duties," she said, pacing back to Bashshar without giving Dalton the courtesy of name or title. "

Dalton chuckled, watching the feisty young woman who would become the new duchess of Wexton by week's end. He never realized before how much he was going to relish being her husband.

Dalton found Justin Sykes in the billiard room, practicing a two-cushion bank shot.

Justin paused, midshot, then looked up as Dalton strolled into the room. "What's the matter, ol' chap? You look like you've just been challenged to a duel."

"Nothing quite so dramatic, Justin." He strode to the deckboard and poured himself a whiskey. "Care for one?"

"No. I haven't had a drink since last night. All the fresh, country air, I imagine. Being sober is rather a strange feeling, I must say." He bent over the table, cue in hand. The crack of ivory sounded after he followed through on the shot, the white ball banked off two cushions, banking off the opposite white ball, then into the red ball.

"Your game is improving," Dalton said, picking out a cue from the rack inside the walnut cabinet. He studied the cue ball as he chalked the cue tip. "Care to place a wager?"

"Hmm, I don't think so. I don't want you taking advantage of my newfound sobriety." He shot Dalton a short look. "Or taking out on me whatever has your dander up." Justin chuckled as he picked up the small leather resin bag and dusted his hands.

"Nothing has my dander up," Dalton charged, duplicating the shot Justin had just made.

Justin let out a low whistle as he watched the cue ball roll across the table. "Maybe it's more than your dander that's up," he said, grinning wickedly. "What has the lovely Lady Alicia done? Or is it what she hasn't done that has you so in a tither?"

"I'm not in a tither."

Justin chuckled. "Don't deny it, old chap. I know all of the symptoms."

"Women. I'll never understand them. But I thought Alicia was different from the others."

"Mistake number one, you fool."

Dalton glared at Justin, who noisily chalked his cue. Alicia should be different. She's more comfortable in a horse stable than a ballroom. She's much too intelligent to indulge in the boring gossip that keeps most of the ton in such a flutter, and Alicia is as comfortable in leather breeches as I am."

Justin raised a brow. "Sounds like you're made for each other. So what's the problem?"

Dalton paused over his next shot. He wasn't certain there was a problem. All he knew was that she could turn his world upside down with so little as one glance of those large, soft brown eyes. "When we're alone together, she makes me feel as though I'm...I'm some sort of...ogre."

"I thought so!" Justin slapped his hand on his thigh. "You've asked her to go to bed with you."

Dalton scowled. "I have not," he said indignantly. "Well, not in so many words—"

"That's why I have no use for maidens." Justin waved his hand dismissively and leaned against his cue. "They behave for the first time as though they're being sacrificed. Once you bed Lady Alicia, she'll realize what a valuable token she has to barter with. Then your marital woes will truly begin, old friend."

Dalton cracked the white ball, ricocheting it across the green baize. "She's agreed to give me an heir, and then once the child is born, she is free to do as she pleases. But I think she wants something more from me, but I can't be certain." Dalton took two steps around the table, leaned in, and shot again. The cue ball almost jumped off the table. "Damned fool notion—love."

Justin grinned. "Olivia seems to believe in love, and you sound like you're up to your neck in it, ol' chap."

Dalton glowered back at him. "Olivia has been protected by the family all her life," Dalton said quickly. "Luckily she married a man who continues to patronize her romantic dreams."

"Why can't you do the same with Alicia?"

"Because I don't believe in perpetuating lies." Dalton finished his tenth billiard, then chalked the tip of his cue.

"I have eyes in my head, ol' chap. I see the way you look at her. I think you're afraid." His mouth twitched

"Good God, you've fallen head over heels in love with her, and you don't know how to handle it."

Dalton glared at him from over his cue stick. "Don't take me for a simpleton, Sykes! Love only makes men weak and women foolish." He turned to walk around the table when he noticed Alicia standing in the doorway. Her face was a stony mask.

Justin's grin faded and he straightened, holding on to the cue stick. He cleared his throat in the lengthening silence.

Alicia glanced from Justin's embarrassed face to Dalton. "Olivia said you might be here, Dalton." Her voice couldn't hide the hurt in her face. "A man is waiting for you in the drawing room. He's just come from London with a message he says is of grave importance." She turned and rushed down the hallway.

"Alicia, wait!" Dalton's long strides quickly caught up with her. "Please hear what I have to say." He swung her around.

She jerked her head away. "I heard what you said, Dalton. You made yourself perfectly clear."

"I was frustrated, I—"

"I understand your feelings, and I agree with you." Her eyes widened as he looked at her in surprise. "I'm not a silly flibbertigibbet who believes in love. There's no need to explain yourself to me."

"I owe you an apology. I'm sorry, Alicia." Dalton drew back and studied her. From the guarded look on her face, he knew she had been hurt by his foolish comments to Justin. Damn, why did he feel so defensive when it came to admitting that he cared for her? Justin knew him well enough to see through him. But Alicia?

She straightened. "The gentleman from London is still waiting for you. And I must be getting back to my letter writing. Should I tell him you'll be along shortly?"

"Never mind, I'll go to him presently."

"Very well." Alicia brushed off her skirts and made a hasty retreat down the hall.

Dalton felt like he had just whipped a puppy. Why did he have this need to cradle her in his arms and keep her safe? Instead, he behaved like someone he didn't know.

Love was a weakness, which created chaos, that was why. Love had blinded his father to his wife's infidelities. Dalton vowed never to let emotions destroy him so. He would put further carnal thoughts of Alicia from his mind. Or try to, anyway.

A few minutes later, Dalton threw open the door to the drawing room and strode inside. Inspector Humphrey Leary, the private inspector from Bow Street stood up from his seat at the fireside chair and turned to him. "Good evening, your grace."

"Leary, this is a surprise." Dalton noticed the crease of worry between the man's eyebrows. "Have you found any leads?"

The solicitor's dour features tightened with concern. "We've begun our inquiries, sir. What we've found is interesting."

Dalton felt an uneasy thread of trouble. "Can't be as bad as you look," he said with a slight smile. Leary came with excellent credentials, but Dalton had heard that the man was a stickler for detail. "Sit down. I'll fix you a drink." Dalton strode to the sideboard and splashed whiskey into two glasses, then handed one to the older man.

Leary took the drink. When both men were comfortably seated, he opened his leather portfolio and shuffled through a sheaf of papers. "I've just received this report from my most trusted runner." He handed Dalton the letter. "Everything is in the report, sir."

Dalton sipped his drink and glanced over the findings. "Lord Templestone?" He glanced up. "He's not family. Why would he be included in this report?"

Leary straightened in his chair. "Forgive me, your grace."

out he has, shall we say...been in close company with your mother, the dowager duchess."

Dalton flinched inwardly at the carefully worded phrase that suggested that his mother and Templestone had shared quarters. "Tell me what you found out."

"Templestone has been gambling heavily and losing, yet he appears to be able to cover his debts."

Dalton's eyes met Leary's. "In the past, he's married rich women. He's a widower again, and he spends money as he pleases."

"True, his marriages have garnered him large land holdings, but not cash, sir."

Although Dalton hated the rumor mill, he was aware of Templestone's mysterious past. "Since he's one of my mother's friends, perhaps you should continue investigating him."

"Of course, sir." Leary jotted a note in a book. "You also wanted us to check on everyone's alibi during the shooting."

Dalton nodded, scanning the report. "Where was Templestone?"

The inspector withdrew a handkerchief from his vest pocket and wiped his shiny forehead. "With your mother, Sir."

Dalton hid his surprise. "I see." His tone was as casual as a man's asking about the weather.

The inspector nodded. "There's no mistake. I can read the details to you if—"

"No, that's not necessary." Dalton strode to the window, unsettled by the new information. His mother was still a handsome woman at five and fifty. With the generous allowance he gave her, she was wealthier than most widows. Did she fancy herself in love? He couldn't quite believe it.

"There is more news, sir."

Dalton clenched the glass in his hand and waited.

"Your brother-in-law has been borrowing large sums of money of late." The inspector handed a paper to Dalton.

"You mean Olivia's husband, Robert Seabrook?" Dalton grabbed the paper from Leary's hand. "If my sister had needed money, she would have come to me." Dalton glanced at the figures. "Damn, he's borrowed almost three thousand pounds." He couldn't keep the surprise from his voice. "Do you know why Robert needed money?"

"Not yet, but I have a man pursuing the situation. These matters must be handled delicately and can't be rushed."

Dalton shrugged. "Anything else, Leary?"

"One minor thing, your grace, but it might mean something. A wager was recently placed in the betting book at White's." His bushy eyebrows lifted. "Templestone placed a large wager on Desert Prince, favored to come in first at Newmarket this fall."

"I'd wager that myself, now that Bashshar can't compete," Dalton said bitterly. "But none of this gives us any clue to who might have shot Bashshar."

"Not yet, but detective work takes time. First, we must gather the facts. Each lead pulls us in a different direction. With time, a pattern will develop. You must have faith, as I do. We'll soon find out who shot at you."

"My horse was shot," Dalton corrected. "Not I."

"Yes, but we can't rule out that whoever shot Bashshar might have meant you as the target. Your life could be in danger."

"Nonsense. More than likely the shooter was a poacher."

"Our findings don't point to a poacher, sir."

Dalton was losing patience. "Thank you, Leary. I appreciate your concern, but I'm perfectly safe at Havencrest."

The inspector drained his glass and rose to his feet. "You should be careful, your grace." He placed the empty goblet on the sideboard. "Men in powerful positions can have

enemies." Leary paused a moment before he bowed, then left the room.

Dalton leaned back and clamped his hands behind his head. Was someone trying to harm him? Or was it Bashshar, who had been a serious racing contender for the Newmarket Classic Cup?

And what of Robert? He had always appeared the solid sort, not a gambler. Why would he need money? Had he placed a large wager on Desert Prince, now that Bashshar was unable to run?

Nonsense. Robert had many friends within the Jockey Club, but he wasn't the sporting kind, nor was he deceitful. But another thought crossed Dalton's mind. If someone wanted to be certain Desert Prince won at Newcastle, would Bashshar be in greater danger if the stallion was cured enough to race?

Everyone knew Alicia was the key to curing Bashshar. Would Alicia now be in danger? The idea sent a chill down his spine.

He walked to the sideboard and laid down his whiskey glass. If Alicia's life was in danger, would he be able to protect her?

Chapter Ten



Alicia knocked on the door of the children's nursery on the third floor where Olivia waited. The manor house was a tangle of corridors where a person might become lost forever, she mused, as the groom, who had led the way for her, retreated down the hall.

"Come and join us," Olivia said.

Alicia opened the door and stepped inside. Leaning against the back of an overstuffed chaise, Olivia held her infant son. A tiny pink face cradled with blond fuzz peeked from beneath a white frilly blanket. "Little Drake has just been fed and I asked Sarah to let him stay up a few minutes."

"I'm sorry I'm late, but I found myself lost amid a tangle of corridors. Thankfully, one of the hall grooms rescued me."

Olivia laughed. "I was born in this house and I still get lost from time to time," she said. "I'm glad that Drake isn't fussing with his new tooth. He cried all morning."

Alicia took a seat beside Olivia and gazed at the infant. "What a beautiful child," she said, brushing her fingertips across the baby's downy head. "I'm most pleased to see you, Master Drake."

"Everyone says the baby looks like Robert," Olivia said

proudly. She stroked his creamy cheek. "But I think he looks like my father. Drake has the same Warfield nose and chin." She turned to Alicia and said wistfully, "I wish you could have known our father. He was a warm, gentle man. Dalton is very much like him, that is, when Dalton comes out of that hard shell he enjoys wearing." She laughed. "Don't ever tell him I said so."

Alicia grinned. "I promise." How she wanted to ask Olivia so many questions about Dalton, but she didn't feel this was the time. "Your son is a handsome lad, to be sure," she said instead.

Olivia's face held a radiant glow as she gazed upon the cooing bundle in her arms. "In another year, you might be sitting here, holding your own baby." She looked up brightly. "Wouldn't that be grand? I could keep you company while little Drake rocks on old Cobby."

Alicia glanced up. "Old Cobby?"

Olivia smiled and tipped her head toward the huge wooden hobbyhorse in the corner. "Old Cobby has rocked each of us over many childhood miles," she said fondly. "And now Cobby waits patiently for the next generation of Warfields."

A raw tumble of anxiety shot through Alicia. Agreeing to marry Dalton was one thing, but to see Olivia with little Drake brought home the full scope of what that promise meant. She didn't know what to say.

Olivia chuckled. "My dear Alicia, my brother isn't a monster. Beneath that unfeeling facade he loves to wear is a good man who is very much in love with you."

Surprised, Alicia regarded her quizzically for a moment. "You think Dalton is in love with me?"

Olivia touched her hand and Alicia could sense her compassion. "I would never say such a thing if I didn't believe it, Alicia."

Dalton's words came back to haunt her. *Love only makes*

men weak and women foolish. "I've heard Dalton say he doesn't believe in love."

"Men say such things because they're afraid of love. I know my brother, I see how he behaves when you're near. But it's how he behaves when you're not around that tells me more."

"What do you mean, Olivia?" She wished she wasn't so curious, but she had to know.

Olivia's smile lit her face. "He's always talking about you, or he's asking where you are." She leaned back, a satisfied look on her face. "I've waited a long time to see my big brother fall in love. Now that he has, I couldn't be happier."

Alicia remained silent, not trusting her voice. How she yearned for Dalton to love her, and the fact made her all the more frightened. She averted her gaze to the shelves of dolls covering the wall beside the window.

Olivia sighed. "I am sorry if I offended you—"

"Not at all, Olivia. It's only..." But how could she explain to Olivia that marriage to Dalton would thrust her into a hostile world, with people she couldn't trust? She needed the peace and simplicity of a rural life. A life with a man who loved her and would welcome her love.

Olivia rose and pulled the bell cord by the door. "I'll ring for Sarah to put Drake down for his nap. Then we can get down to the business of planning your wedding."

Alicia settled back against an overstuffed chair. "I received a letter from my mother this morning. They would have been here by now, except I asked them to wait until your mother's houseguests left." She felt a warm blush at the white lie. Alicia's mother had insisted they wait until *those people*, meaning Dalton's mother and her friends, had left.

"I can hardly wait to meet your family. It will be won-

derful having young people about. How old are your sisters?"

Alicia rose and took a seat at the window. "Kimbra is almost ten and five. Lyssa is eight." In the courtyard below, handsome carriages waited in line for each of the dowager's houseguests to board and be off for the next round of parties.

A short, dark-haired maid entered the room. Olivia kissed the bundled infant's cheek, then handed him to Sarah. Olivia came back to sit on a stool beside a dollhouse large enough for a child to crawl inside.

"Do you think your sisters will enjoy being in the wedding?"

Alicia chuckled. "Kimbra is a young lady and she'll adore it. But Lyssa..." She laughed at the thought of her tomboy sister. "I'm not quite certain about her."

"I've talked to Cook and the wedding breakfast will be a full course meal." Olivia tilted her head in thought. "He wants you to check over the menu with him. He's already started on the bride's cake. You need to decide what flowers you'd like for the arrangements."

"Anything will do," Alicia said with a wave of her hand. She felt suddenly overwhelmed. Before she knew it she would be Dalton's wife.

"The seamstress is ready for your final fitting. Oh, I can't wait to see you in your gown." Olivia's cheeks flushed as pink as her dress. "You must decide what flowers to have for your headpiece. I thought a wreath of roses over the bridal veil, since the season is past for orange blossoms."

The knot in Alicia's stomach tightened. She managed a weak smile. Olivia didn't notice, counting off items on her fingers.

"Dalton promised to speak to Reverend Drew." Olivia bit her lip as she thought. "Do you think your family will

arrive by tomorrow, Alicia? You and your father will need to practice with your attendants.”

Alicia nervously pleated the folds of her skirt. “It will be a simple wedding, Olivia. Just my family, a few of Dalton’s friends, you and your husband...”

“Simple, yet elegant.” Olivia’s smile returned to her face.

A feeling of gratitude welled inside her for this kind and sensitive woman who would soon be her sister-in-law. “Thank you for your help, Olivia. I don’t know if I could get through this without you.”

“I’m thrilled to be of service, my dear. Besides, Robert and I are looking forward to our stay here for a few more weeks. It will give us time to get to know one another.” She patted Alicia’s hand. “I meant it when I said I’ve always wanted a sister.”

Alicia’s throat tightened. “Thank you, Olivia.”

The door suddenly creaked open and Alicia glanced up to see the dowager duchess step inside the room and close the door. Dressed in a black silk gown and matching turban, the older woman appeared commanding. The glower on her face contrasted sharply with the smiling Punch and Judy puppets hanging along the wall behind her.

Olivia shot up, her mouth open. “Mother, what a lovely surprise. Shall I ring for tea?”

“This isn’t a social call, Olivia. The carriage is waiting. I’m leaving for London. I’ve only stopped in to say goodbye.”

Olivia nervously touched her throat, her gaze following her mother as the dowager crossed the room to stand beside Alicia.

“I’d like a word with Miss Spencer, Olivia. Please leave us.”

Olivia glanced uneasily at Alicia, a thread of worry creasing her brow.

Alicia managed a smile. "It's quite all right, Olivia. We'll talk later."

"I'll be in my room if you need me." Olivia hurried to her mother's side and brushed her lips against the older woman's cheek. "Have a safe journey, Mother."

A knot of uncertainty tightened in Alicia's belly. "Your grace, I was hoping we could have a nice visit before you leave." She took a deep breath. "Please sit down, your grace."

"Behaving as though you're already the duchess, are you?"

Olivia's face paled. "Perhaps I should stay?"

"Leave, my dear." The dowager's tone gave no quarter.

Olivia glanced helplessly at Alicia before she silently left the room.

The dowager waited until the door clicked shut. Alicia felt chilled by the woman's frosty demeanor, but decided she would not allow her future mother-in-law to anger her.

The older woman sniffed as she took a seat in a wing chair. Alicia remained standing, waiting for the real reason that Dalton's mother had sought her out.

The dowager glanced around the room. "Rather ironic that our first private meeting takes place in the nursery—a room for children and their toys." Her thin lips twisted. "Like a pretty doll, you've obviously entranced my son. He wants to marry you, and Dalton gets what he wants. However, he's my only son, now that Drake is gone. In my unique way, I care for Dalton. I don't want to see him hurt." She paused, casting her cold blue eyes directly at Alicia.

"Dalton and I are very much alike, Miss Spencer. Even as a child, Dalton wasn't capable of love. So if you're under some romantic notion..." The dowager studied her carefully. "Dalton is determined to marry you because he knows it will upset me." Her smile showed no hint of

humor. "He knows me quite well. And I can understand why you accepted him. Dalton is one of the most wealthy men in England and the family estates are some of the most enviable in all of Europe. He's handsome, dashing and I'm certain a great lover, for he's the best in everything he undertakes."

Alicia felt her cheeks warm, but she said nothing.

"Very well, I'll get down to the crux of the matter. I'm willing to pay you a fortune not to marry Dalton. I want you to leave by nightfall and I'll pay you any amount you ask. Of course, I'll want a signed agreement that you've broken the marriage contract."

"And if I refuse?" Alicia managed to ask.

"Why would you refuse? I'm giving you what my son has offered, and more. With my proposition, you will be free—a very wealthy young woman who could marry whomever you choose."

"I'm not for sale, your grace."

The older woman arched a thin black brow. "Are you denying that my son put a price on your services like some common harlot?"

"We have a marriage agreement."

"So how can you say you're not for sale?"

"You're attempting to buy me off. I'm Lady Alicia Spencer, not some trifle who is bedazzled by title or wealth." She fought off the light-headed feeling that threatened her. "I'm sorry that you're disappointed in Dalton's choice. I'm sorry that Elizabeth was hurt—"

"Obviously you haven't heard." The dowager's eyes glittered dangerously. "Elizabeth's parents bundled her off for a hasty marriage with Lord Rothbury. But marriage to a man she doesn't love won't prevent Elizabeth from finding happiness. She'll always remain close to Dalton, I would imagine." Her thin lips curled, and she reminded Alicia of a cat ready to pounce.

Beneath the dowager's anger, Alicia sensed something else—a feeling...like an animal in pain. Yes, she felt the same sensation emanating from the duchess as she did when finding an animal snared in a trap. Fascinated, Alicia ignored the woman's words and concentrated on her own instincts. Beneath the dowager's hatred, she could feel a soul filled with anguish. Defying all reason, she felt sadness and compassion for this woman. The woman was like an injured she-wolf, defending her young the best way she could.

But why did she sense the dowager was wounded? The idea was outrageous, yet she couldn't ignore her intuition. "I believe you love Dalton," Alicia began gently, "and I know he cares for you."

The dowager paused, surprised. "You know nothing of who we are!"

"It's not something I know, it's what I sense." Alicia stood and held out her hands. "I can't explain logically what I feel, but I trust my instincts. Even now, in this room so filled with your pain, I sense the reason behind this visit was your love for Dalton."

Surprise, then wariness crossed the older woman's face. "What trick are you trying to pull?"

Alicia ignored her and pressed on. "You truly believe that Dalton would be happy married to Elizabeth. I can't change your belief, but if you refuse to allow Dalton to make his own decisions, then you'll eventually lose him. That's a terrible price to pay to have your way. You need Dalton in your life, and he needs you. I hope you see that before it's too late."

"Don't tell me what I need! I need no one. And if Dalton marries you, he never need bother to see me again." She rose, and before she reached the door, Alicia dashed to her side.

"Please...don't leave Havencrest with this anger between you and Dalton."

The dowager drew back, regarding her quizzically.

"I'd like very much if you would attend our wedding." She was as surprised as the dowager with her spontaneous invitation to this woman who openly despised her, but as soon as the words were spoken, Alicia knew that she wanted Dalton's mother to share in the celebration.

The dowager's thin face was a study of surprise mixed with suspicion. After a long, uncomfortable silence, the older woman marched from the room.

When the door slammed, Alicia felt her body tremble as the repercussion of what just transpired seized her. She felt as though she had been face-to-face with an injured beast, only this time, she was helpless to give comfort.

She sat down in the chair, her mind heavy with questions. What had happened in that woman's life to harden her so? And even if she knew, would the dowager want her help? Of all her questions, that one held the definitive answer. *Most certainly not!*

Someone pounded on the door. Alicia jumped up, for a moment, wondering if the dowager had returned. No, the duchess hadn't bothered to knock the first time, surely she wouldn't now.

Alicia opened the door, her fingers still shaking.

"Alicia!" Dalton stormed into the room, his handsome face creased with worry. "Olivia said that my mother came to see you." He glanced around the room. "Where is she?"

Alicia sighed with relief. "She was here but she's left."

He put his arms around her. "Are you all right? I came as soon as I heard."

"Of course I'm all right." She smiled, relieved that he didn't have to witness his mother in her present mood. "I'm sorry Olivia disturbed you. But I can fight my own battles, you know."

He smiled as he brushed a stray hair from her face. "Yes, I know, and I'm certain Mother took note of that fact, as well."

Alicia laughed, hoping to ease his mind by making light of the matter. "Now, let's find Olivia and reassure her that everything is fine."

She took his arm and sighed in relief. Thank heaven that Dalton hadn't thought to ask why the dowager had wanted to see her in the first place.

Chapter Eleven



The rain poured during the three days before the wedding, but Alicia barely noticed in the whirlwind of activity that filled each day. With Penn's help, she fit in, between bridal gown fittings and the endless details that Olivia found necessary for her to oversee, Bashshar's daily exercise and training. Thankfully, Alicia was too busy to see much of Dalton or to worry about the bewildering changes that would present themselves when she became the duchess of Wexton.

Marie sang as she fastened the back of Alicia's bridal dress. Although the words were in French, Alicia had no trouble understanding the translation: "'Happy is the maid who is wed in the sunshine, but unlucky is the bride who marries in the rain.'"

Olivia gave the maid a sharp look. "Stop that, Marie," she said in French. "That's a silly superstition, which only applies to the French. Besides," she said, peering out one of the lead-paned windows of the sewing room, "I believe the sky is clearing." Her words were almost drowned out by a clap of thunder.

"I hope you're right," Alicia said, as one seamstress adjusted the high waistline of the bridal gown while another gathered the lace veil around her head. "My parents should

have arrived two days ago. Ives said all the roads are nearly washed away. What if my family doesn't arrive in time for the wedding?"

"What would Ives know about roads?" Olivia grinned at Alicia. "Since the rain began, Ives hasn't left the house."

Marie sighed. "*Oui*, but I heard the gardener say the rain has ruined all of the flowers. Not a single lily—"

"Marie!" Olivia pulled the maid around by the shoulders. "Finish pressing Alicia's yellow gown."

"But my lady, I'm not finished—"

"Off with you!" Olivia scowled as the maid flounced into the alcove off the bedroom.

Alicia frowned. "It's no use, Olivia. Marie is right. The rain is ruining everything."

Olivia put her finger under Alicia's chin and smiled. "The rain can't ruin how lovely you'll look when you repeat your vows with my brother, my dear. Now don't worry. Your family will arrive in time, the church will be filled with fresh flowers, and everything will be perfect for your wedding tomorrow."

Dressed in her gown of bishop's blue, Olivia flitted about the room, and Alicia was reminded of a delicate hummingbird.

"If the rain continues," Olivia said, looking at the stream of water pounding on the windows, "we'll put up tents on the grounds for the local people. It will be like a country fair, only much more festive."

Alicia felt her spirits sink, but she didn't want to dispel Olivia's stubborn attempt at optimism.

Suddenly Olivia squealed, her eyes bright. "Oh, Alicia! A line of coaches just passed the gatekeeper's house. They're coming up the drive." Her blond curls bounced. "Your family has arrived!"

Alicia flew to the sill and peered through the rain-spotted windowpane. Four matching coaches, each pulled by a set

of six prancing horses wheeled in front of the main entrance. Excitement and happiness flooded her. "Look, they've brought Jupiter!" She pointed to the handsome bay stallion tied to the last coach.

Olivia peered closer. "A handsome animal. Is it one from your racing stock?"

"Yes, Jupiter was the first colt I trained for racing. I had hoped to enter him in the Newmarket Classic this fall."

Olivia turned from the window and studied her. "You sacrificed your own horse's training to come to Havencrest and aid Bashshar, didn't you, my dear?"

"There's a time and a place for everything. Jupiter will have other years, other chances to win the Newmarket Classic." Despite her words, Alicia could tell that Olivia wasn't convinced.

Rain pounded the courtyard below as grooms swarmed around the coaches when they came to a stop. Her parents and sisters stepped from the first vehicle—such a handsome coach. Wherever did her father find such impressive rigs to rent?

Alicia's heart leaped with joy when she recognized her maid, Hortense, gawking from the open coach windows of the second coach. How she had missed her abigail. Trunks of assorted shapes and sizes bulged from the last two vehicles.

Her family had arrived for the wedding. Her wedding. Dear God, it was really happening. By this time tomorrow, she would be walking down the aisle to become the bride of Dalton Warfield.

"Hurry, my dear," Olivia coached, watching the seamstresses lift the delicate bridal gown over Alicia's head. "Marie, bring Lady Alicia's new gown," she called to the maid, who was setting up the ironing board in the ante-room. "The willow-green gown and matching slippers."

"*Oui*, Lady Olivia," Marie said, bustling into the room. Four maids, carrying the bridal gown and veil, dashed

into the anteroom. Alicia's hands shook as she held up her arms for Marie to help her into the first of the elaborate gowns that had been fashioned from the fabrics Olivia had helped her choose at the drapers. The willow-green silk had been turned into a delectable confection that Olivia had said brought out Alicia's brown eyes and reddish-gold highlights of her chestnut hair.

Alicia blushed when she saw herself in the mirror. It was the first time that she wore the *zona*, the Grecian brassiere. It was such a puzzle of silk ribbons that she would never have been able to dress herself if not for Marie's expertise. When the maid had finished, Alicia's modest bosom was uplifted in the height of fashion.

She wondered what her mother would think if she noticed her lack of petticoat in place of the new style of wearing only flesh-colored tights. When Marie had finally finished with the elegant gown, Alicia could hardly wait to rush downstairs.

"Your skin glows like a freshwater pearl against that delicate willow-green silk," Olivia said, smiling.

Vanity is a sin, Alicia thought suddenly. She glanced one last time in the mirror, then averted her eyes as Marie brushed her hair, entwined with a ribbon secured through the soft waves.

"Oh, Lady Alicia, you are a picture of loveliness," Marie said, waving her hands as though overcome with her own handiwork.

Alicia glowed briefly with the compliment. "Thank you," she replied, gliding her feet into the matching green slippers Marie held out for her.

Alicia took a deep breath, then strode through the hall to the staircase. She had no sooner made it to the middle steps when, in the hall entrance, she saw four grooms assist her mother and sisters in removing their soaked mantles. Ives stood, frowning at the dripping puddles on the marble floor.

"Alicia!" Lyssa and Kimbra cried in unison when they

spied her. They dropped their wraps, and in a flurry of skirts, stormed up the stairs to greet her.

Overjoyed, Alicia clasped both girls into her arms as the two bundles of energy crashed down upon her in a burst of shrieks and giggles.

"Girls!" Alicia's mother cautioned from the hallway. She stood, shoulders back with her usual dignity, and Alicia hid a grin as Ives frowned at the scene with admonishment. Alicia hugged the girls, then arm in arm, went to meet her mother.

"My dear, you look most well," her mother intoned, eyeing Alicia's gown with maternal curiosity. Alicia wondered if her mother already knew, by that strange sense all mothers have, that her eldest daughter wasn't wearing a petticoat.

"Where's Father?" Alicia asked, hoping to divert her mother's attention. She looked out the door as the grooms carried trunk after trunk into the hall. Ives stood and directed several servants to carry the luggage to the proper quarters.

Alicia's mother brushed a kiss to Alicia's cheek. "Your father wanted to oversee the grooms as they took Jupiter into the stable, dear."

Alicia took a quick breath. "What a lovely surprise to see that you brought Jupiter. I can hardly wait to see him."

Little Lyssa tugged on her arm. "Let's go now," she pleaded, her eyes wide.

"We'll go later, I promise," Alicia said, wiping a strand of blond hair from the child's face. "First, I want to go with you when the maid shows you to your rooms. Then you can freshen up before dinner is served."

Alicia went ahead with her sisters while a maid took their mother to her quarters. In just the few weeks since she had last seen the girls, Alicia thought her sisters had grown several inches taller. A strange sadness wound around her heart. *So much was happening, and all too quickly.*

"I can't believe I'm going to be in the wedding," Lyssa said, holding the skirt of her new pink dress out and twirling in circles in the hallway. "Can I be a bride, too?"

"Lyssa, act your age," Kimbra ordered, more for the attention of the two young grooms who were lugging an overly large trunk up the staircase.

Lyssa stuck out her tongue, but thankfully, remained quiet.

Alicia wondered how Dalton would take to her sisters' high jinks, then she reminded herself that her family would be staying only for two days. At least her family had agreed to come. There would be very few wedding guests. The only members of Dalton's family would be Olivia and her husband, Robert.

"Where is the duke?" Kimbra asked when they arrived at the suite of rooms Alicia had picked out for her sisters. Kimbra's eyes widened with amazement as she glanced inside the opulent suite.

"Dalton hopes to join us at dinner," she said, wondering where he was. She hadn't seen him since dinner last night, but she didn't want to say so.

"Several maids will be up shortly to unpack and help you dress for dinner. Be sure to ask the groom at the end of the hall to escort you around." Alicia wagged a finger at her sisters. "Promise me you won't go wandering off by yourselves."

Lyssa's smile flashed mischievously, as though she thought the idea might be great fun. Kimbra gave a more knowing look. "Fear not, Sister. We won't embarrass you. We'll leave that task to Father."

Alicia hoped Kimbra was trying to be amusing. "Dinner will be in two hours." She closed the door and went down the corridor to the last suite.

The door to her parents' suite was ajar. She peeked in to see her mother lying on the bed, eyes closed.

"Mum, are you overly fatigued from the journey?" Alicia said, coming beside her.

"No, dear. I thought I'd lie here and collect myself." She lifted one hand from her forehead and studied her. "La, I can see straight through your gown, Alicia." She sat up, her eyes wide. "You're not wearing a petticoat!"

"Olivia says that this is the latest Paris fashion, Mother."

"What does Olivia know? I'll not have my daughters—" Her voice faded, then she smiled. "Oh, Alicia. You're not my little girl any more. I have no right to tell you what to wear."

Alicia drew her into an embrace. "No matter how old I become, Mum, you'll always be my mother, and I'll always love you."

"I know that, dear." Her mother patted her hand as she studied her. "Alicia, so much has happened so quickly. Are you certain that you'll be happy here?"

Alicia looked away. "Who wouldn't be happy at Havencrest? If not, there are the other properties. The town house in London, the castle in Scotland—"

"You know what I mean, Alicia." She paused, as though waiting for Alicia to say exactly the right thing to ease the older woman's mind, as she so often did in the past.

After a lengthy silence, Alicia nodded. "Yes, Mum, I'll be happy. Very happy." No need to trouble her mother with her fears.

"I'm so glad, my dear. Because of your marriage, Kimbra and Lyssa will have the many things I've always wanted for you."

"I'll have everything money can buy," Alicia said as she plumped the pillows behind her mother's head. *Everything but love.*

"Dalton's sister and her husband will be here for the wedding," Alicia said brightly, hoping she sounded more cheerful than she felt. She thought of the invitation she so

hastily had given to Dalton's mother, but the dowager had left, as expected. There was no doubt she would shun her son's wedding as she said she would.

"Dalton has one other guest—the groomsman. It will be a small wedding." She thought it best not to mention to her mother that Dalton insisted that his best friend, Justin Sykes be his groomsman. The idea had surprised Alicia, but most of what Dalton did surprised her. Besides, Dalton had done so much for her, she could at least hold her tongue about Sykes.

"Mother, are you certain nothing is bothering you?"

"Well, I don't wish to be indelicate, my dear, but...I've overexpensed a few bills with your sisters' new gowns, and wedding gifts, and...I was wondering if you might...take care of the draper's bills and the livery bill."

"B—but I thought Dalton had..." Alicia knew her mother knew nothing of money. "I mean, I thought Dalton had offered to pay for your expenses in coming here."

Her mother's eyes widened in surprise. "I've not seen a penny, my dear."

Alicia covered her frustration. No doubt her father hadn't told his wife the generous pension Dalton had provided them.

"Very well, Mum. When you have time, bring me the bills and I'll arrange to have them paid."

Her mother's relieved smile brought an immediate sense of satisfaction. For the first time in Alicia's life, she could easily manage what, in the past, had been a grievous problem—her family's finances. Now, their future would be secure.

"Rest now, Mum. You'll have time for a nap before dinner. Don't worry about the girls. I'll see that Lyssa and Kimbra are properly dressed for dinner."

"Thank you, darling Daughter."

Alicia closed the door gently, then crossed the hall to the

large suite at the end of the wing. Before she reached the door, a groom bustled toward her.

"My lady, your father is waiting for you in the library. He asks to see you directly."

"Thank you. Do you know if his lordship has arrived?"

"Yes, my lady. He's downstairs with your father."

"Oh." A shiver of unease slid through her as she headed for the stairs.

She could hear raised voices from the room at the end of the hall before she approached the closed doors. She rapped on the solid wood, then boldly opened the door.

Conversation stopped as she entered the room. Dalton stood by the window, arms crossed, his dark features emotionless. Her father leaned against the white marble mantel, his ruddy cheeks flushed. His angry face stilled when his gaze met hers, and a wide smile broke across his face.

"Hounds of Jericho! Look at my girl! Pretty as the first buds of springtime."

She ran to his open arms. "Father, I'm so glad to see you."

He released her and stepped back. "That's more than your future has to say." His voice was a low, angry growl.

Alicia recognized her father's disrespect by referring to Dalton as *her future*. She gave Dalton a helpless look. "Is there a disagreement, Dalton?"

Dalton's mouth twisted in what she thought might be amusement beneath his icy demeanor. "It seems your father has brought your stallion from Marston Heath."

"Yes, I saw Jupiter from the window." She whirled to face her father. "It's so thoughtful of you. I was worried about his training. Besides, I've missed him so." She gave her father a quick hug.

Dalton's mouth twitched. "Seems your father thought I might like to purchase Jupiter as a wedding present for you."

Alicia stared at her father. "Why, that's ridiculous. You know I own Jupiter. I've raised him from a foal."

"Leave us, Daughter," her father demanded. He scowled at Dalton. "This is between you and me, Wexton. Women have no place in business."

"I'm sorry, Father, but it is I who wish to speak to you privately." She turned to Dalton, whose expression had now turned to utter boredom. "If you would be so kind, Dalton, as to permit me this one request."

Dalton glanced at the father, then the daughter. "There's no need for privacy between family members, which is exactly what we shall be in less than a day." He smiled lazily. "I have no need of another horse, especially a stallion, Lord Spencer. However, since Jupiter is not one of your carriage horses, and because he is a stallion, he must be boarded away from my other horses. I must charge you stabling fees for your time here. Of course, the charge will graciously include feed, water, quartering and all the various animal handlers' payments, plus tips included." Dalton's smile was dazzling. "Four hundred pounds should cover your stay, I'd say."

"Four hundred—!" Alicia's father's jaw fell as he realized what Dalton had done. His mouth snapped shut as his ruddy face darkened against the shock of black hair. "Very well, Wexton. I'll give you the horse, but you can be sure it's only because of my concern for my darling daughter. Oh, how she loves that horse."

"Thank you, Father," Alicia said. Her eyes fixed with Dalton's and she recognized that mischievous twinkle in his. She smiled her thanks to him, and was rewarded by a wink.

"Father, you must be tired. I'll have a servant show you to your rooms."

"Thank you, girl. I am rather." Without a glance back at Dalton, her father trudged to the door where a groom

waited. When the door closed, she came to stand beside Dalton.

"I don't know how to thank you." She smiled, a torrent of conflicting emotions welling inside her. "You have no idea how I despise my father's attempts to take money from you. I find it so ungracious of him, especially with your heartfelt generosity."

"I'm only concerned with what makes you happy." He brushed a hand along her hair, capturing a curl in his fingers.

She noticed a change in his mood as he studied the way her hair coiled between his thumb and forefinger. "I know that," she said, fascinated as his heated gaze took in her mouth, her neck, and lingered on the sight of her breasts straining against the willow-green silk.

Under his intense scrutiny, she felt her breasts tingle as the nipples puckered against the taut fabric. After tonight, she would be his, and there would be no stopping what she saw in that intense blue gaze.

She didn't have to look at him to know he was thinking the same thing. Try as she might, she couldn't turn away. He wanted to kiss her, and she realized how much she wanted that, too.

She tipped her chin up, parted her lips, and fluttered her lids shut, waiting. He was mere inches from her. She could feel his heat, smell his masculine scent. She would know him anywhere—the subtle sandalwood, brandy and trace of tobacco.

For what seemed like an eternity, she waited, the fleeting moments spanning between them. She reached out and slid her fingers across his square, beard-shadowed jaw. Then his lips took hers, as though waiting for her beckoning gesture. With a sigh, she gave in to the feelings that had consumed her for so long. Her fingers slid through his inky black hair as he deepened the kiss.

She pulled back as her eyelids drifted open. He was smil-

ing, as though thrilled that she wanted him. His devilishly smug smile would drive a courtesan to blush.

Her cheeks flamed, but she forced her lips to lift into a confident grin that was an exact mockery of his expression.

"You're really quite adorable, my darling." His eyes fixed with hers. "And I find that I'm eagerly looking forward to our wedding day, tomorrow."

"So am I," she said, managing to give him a confident smile. She hoped he didn't notice that behind her back, she had crossed all her fingers.

Chapter Twelve



That evening after dinner, Dalton and the other men retired to the game room for billiards and cards. Olivia and Alicia's mother were chatting in the nursery with Lyssa and baby Drake. Alicia had changed into a day gown to check on Bashshar for the night. When she passed the library, Kimbra caught up with her.

"Mind if I go with you?" Kimbra's large brown eyes, so much like her own, pleaded up at her.

"I'd love your company," Alicia said, sensing there was something on her sister's mind. How many times in the past had Alicia listened to Kimbra's problems, then helped guide her younger sister to work out the solution for herself? If only grown-up problems were as simple.

"Maybe we could just talk and go to the stable later?" Kimbra suggested.

Alicia had guessed correctly. "Of course, my dear." She glanced at the open library door. "Let's go inside. No one will bother us here."

Inside the library, the pleasant smells of wood smoke from the fireplace, old leather from the bound volumes lining the walls and beeswax from the servants' polishing rushed at them. Kimbra curled up on the red velvet love seat in front of the marble hearth while Alicia lit the lamp

on the side table. The small fire in the grate crackled cheerfully, chasing away the night dampness.

Kimbra smiled self-consciously when Alicia sat beside her. She ran her fingers through the younger girl's chestnut curls, waiting for her sister to begin. After a few silent minutes, Alicia asked, "How does it feel to have a duchess for a sister?"

Kimbra grinned. "I don't know. Ask me tomorrow after the wedding."

Alicia made a face. "Very well. You ask *me* a question."

Kimbra's smile faded and she absently traced the stitching along her gown. "Do you want to marry Dalton?"

Alicia's soft laugh covered her nervousness. "Why, what would make you ask such a thing?"

Kimbra's solemn gaze brought a tug of guilt to Alicia. The child only wanted to be reassured that her older sister wasn't sacrificing herself for her family. An honest question deserved an honest reply.

Alicia gazed into the fire, and she realized the truth. "Yes, I really do, Kimbra. I'm not entering into a marriage I find distasteful."

Kimbra folded her arm behind her head and studied her. "Father said that you were selling yourself."

Alicia gasped. She felt her cheeks flame. "Well, that's not true!" She paused a moment to settle herself. "Dalton and I have agreed to a marriage of convenience. It's quite practical, and I consider myself lucky to have been asked to be his bride."

Kimbra's eyes widened. "What do you have to do as Dalton's wife?"

Rubbing her palms nervously over the folds of her gown, Alicia glanced at her sister. "I'll play my role as Dalton's wife. I'll have his children, see that they're properly raised, look after the households. After I bear a son, I'll be free to lead my own life, to come and go as I please. I'll be al-

lowed to return to live at Marston Heath if I choose." She watched Kimbra's eyes widen in surprise.

"Don't you want to live at Havencrest?"

Alicia floundered for an acceptable answer. "Yes, but I want to live at Marston Heath, too." She forced a smile. "Meanwhile, I'll visit you often." She patted Kimbra's knee. "And you can come and visit me, too.

"Besides," Alicia continued, hoping to change the subject. "It's not too early to begin your piano and singing lessons. I'll hire a dancing master, then when you're ten and six, you'll have your coming out in London." Her spirits lifted with her plans. "You'll be so lovely every man will fall hopelessly in love with you."

Kimbra's proper demeanor collapsed into giggles. "How will I know which man to marry?"

Alicia laughed, then she hesitated, suddenly serious. She thought of the first time she saw Dalton. "You'll know."

Kimbra's brow creased. "But how? That's what I want to know, Alicia. How did you know the duke was the man you should marry?"

Alicia's throat tightened. Of course Dalton was the man she should marry, but how could she explain her feelings when she didn't know why herself? But she knew she loved the man who lived beneath that mask of indifference.

"When I'm with Dalton and we're working together with his stallion, it's as if we're of one mind. I can almost sense what he's thinking." She smiled, feeling the wonderment again. "Sometimes, I find him looking at me in that certain way, and I know he feels the same way, too.

"He's so incredibly gentle at times. He cares for others—whether it's the servants, or his sister, or...me, he can be kind and protective.

"Other times, I feel I can see inside his soul, and what I see almost breaks my heart—the loneliness, the pain that he keeps bottled inside himself."

Alicia blushed, suddenly self-conscious. She gave a side-

long look at Kimbra. "I know it's hard for you to understand—"

"But I think I do." Kimbra curled her arm around her knee. "You've always healed our pets, the horses, the other animals with your love. Maybe you can heal the duke, too."

Now it was Alicia's turn to be surprised at Kimbra's grown-up insight. "I'd like to try," she replied.

Kimbra pursed her mouth. "That's who I will marry—a man who can look into my soul and promise to love me forever." She looked at Alicia and blushed. "Or who will threaten to fall upon his sword unless I become his bride."

Alicia rolled her eyes. "And Dalton and I will dance at your wedding, Sister." Her chuckle was joined by her sister's giggles.

Alicia stretched, feeling a sense of relief. "Are you ready to go with me to the stables?"

Kimbra stood up and yawned. "No, I think I'll join Mother and Lady Olivia in the nursery. Dalton's sister promised to show me the latest drawings of what is fashionable in London."

"Then I'll look in on Jupiter with you tomorrow. Ask the groom to escort you to the nursery. You'll never find the way alone."

"I will, Alicia." Kimbra leaned over and brushed a kiss on her cheek. "I'm so glad you are my sister."

Alicia felt a warm tug on her heart. "Thank you, darling. I'm glad you're my sister, too." She smiled as Kimbra rushed from the room, one moment a young lady, the next an energetic child.

After the door closed, Alicia drew back against the cushions and stared into the white coals still glowing in the hearth. The only sounds were the raindrops sliding against the windowpane and the clock ticking on the mantel. So quiet. So peaceful.

"I'm sorry to break into your solitude, my lady, but—"

Alicia jumped to her feet, her heart racing. She wheeled around to see Justin Sykes rising from the leather couch at the far window.

"Good lord, how long have you been hiding there?"

He raised his hands in the air, and Alicia was reminded of that night, three years ago, when she had stumbled upon him in bed. She felt like running from the room, but she held her ground. "I asked you a question."

"I was taking a nap, and I heard you and your sister...." His dark eyes glinted with humor. "When I realized what was happening, I thought it might be best if I remained out of sight."

"And why didn't you remain that way?" She fought to control her tongue.

"Because..." Behind his dark, shuttered gaze, she sensed he felt contrite.

"Well?" she asked.

"I've been here for some time, dear lady, and I...well..."

Alicia finally realized the delicacy of the situation. She drew back to let him pass. "You may leave."

Justin took several steps, then turned to her. "If I may have a few words with you, Lady Alicia. I will be leaving in the morning—"

"You're not staying for the wedding?" In her surprise, she forgot her anger.

"I wouldn't miss the honor of standing beside Dalton. I'll be leaving following the ceremony. I won't be at the wedding breakfast, so I may not have another chance to speak to you."

"I see. Where are you going?"

"I've made plans, and I'm afraid they cannot wait."

"Dalton will be very disappointed that you can't remain to celebrate. Are you certain one day will make such a difference?"

His long black lashes shaded his eyes. "For me, yes. But

before I go, I couldn't leave without remarking about something you said to your sister."

"So you were eavesdropping."

"My reputation is most sullied, as you well know, my lady. Eavesdropping is a virtue compared to the other sins that have been charged against my soul."

She raised a brow. "How quaintly put." She couldn't hide a smile as she took a seat across from him. "So what is your comment, Mr. Sykes?"

His face broke into a charming smile, and she could well imagine what devilment Dalton and this handsome rake must have thrust upon London Society.

"I've learned a great deal in these last few days with Dalton. Mostly I've learned something about myself. And I owe you for my belated education."

She raised a brow. "Me?"

He smiled as though he enjoyed her confusion. "I'm probably one of Dalton's oldest friends," he said, leaning against the back of the settee. "We met in Cambridge and we've been friends ever since. But you're right about Dalton. He does keep himself closeted away beneath that arrogant facade. Yet in a few weeks, you saw right through him, didn't you?"

She didn't feel comfortable discussing her feelings about Dalton with this stranger. "How do you see him, Mr. Sykes?"

"Dalton is the best at everything he does. He's stubborn, yet he'll admit when he's wrong, but you better be ready to prove that he's wrong." He laughed, the room filling with his rich, throaty baritone. "In a fight, he's the friend every man wants at his back. He's loyal and he uses truth as a sword." His lips lifted into an irresistible smile that flashed white teeth. "A man's man, one whom I'm honored to call my friend."

"Your praise is more appropriate for a eulogy." She

smiled at his huff of laughter. "Or maybe to a man such as yourself, marriage is the same as death?"

His dark eyes glittered dangerously. "At one time I may have thought so, but not anymore."

She wasn't certain if he was serious or teasing. He was a rake, albeit a charming one. "I can see why Dalton considers you a friend."

"Why, thank you, my lady." He gave her a short bow.

"Does Dalton know you're leaving immediately after the wedding?" she asked, surprised that she felt reluctant to see him leave. There was a refreshing honesty about the rogue and she would really like the opportunity to know him better.

"No," Justin said. "I'll tell him tomorrow."

On impulse, Alicia said, "Why not reconsider, Mr. Sykes? I'm certain Dalton would be terribly disappointed if you left so soon." His dark winged eyebrows rose in surprise, and she felt equally surprised by her change of mind. "Is it possible to alter your plans and remain with us for a few more days?"

His dark-brown eyes brightened. She recognized within their startling depths the look of sincere pleasure. "I'm truly honored by your invitation, Lady Alicia." His voice was deep and low. "And I accept your kind and generous offer."

She felt a thrill of satisfaction. "Dalton will be so pleased." He took several steps toward her, and she held out her hand for him to kiss. He stepped back. "Forgive my impudent manners, Lady Alicia, but I promised your future husband that I would not so much as lay a finger on your person, your sisters, mother or any of the female servants employed under his roof."

She laughed. "Dalton made you promise such a thing?"

He nodded, tugging on his snowy neckcloth. "Yes, and I'm beginning to notice the strain." His mouth twitched with amusement. "Besides, since my stay here, I've been

surrounded by such wholesomeness that I've taken it upon myself to try refraining from drinking and smoking. If I keep this up, I expect my tarnished reputation will wither on the vine. Drat, I might even become respectable. Can't have that, eh?"

She couldn't hold back her laughter. "Very well, Mr. Sykes. I promise not to tell anyone about your newfound honor."

He hesitated, and a strange look of longing deepened in his eyes as his expression became serious. "I once asked you to marry me, do you remember, my lady?"

Her cheeks warmed at the memory; she nodded.

If he was going to say more, he decided against it. Instead, he flashed her another dazzling smile. "Dalton is a very lucky man." He turned on his heel and strode to the door.

"Mr. Sykes?"

Justin glanced over his shoulder as he stood with his hand on the doorknob.

Alicia hurried to him and stood on tiptoe. "I don't think I told you how very glad I am that Dalton has you for a friend." She brushed her lips against his cheek.

A glint brightened in his warm, dark eyes. "Aye, Dalton is a very lucky man."

She watched him open the door and listened to his footfalls fade down the corridor. Only when the hall was silent did she remember that he hadn't told her what he had learned about himself.

The morning of the wedding, rain poured down in torrents as Alicia stepped into the ducal carriage that would take her to the church. Covered with sagging white ribbons and bows and water-beaten garden bouquets, the vehicle had all the gaiety of an overripe melon. She stifled a nervous giggle as she leaned against the velvet squabs, a cold wave of nervousness trickling down her spine.

Across from her sat her parents, as was the custom. Ali-

cia felt guilty that she would have preferred Olivia, who had gone ahead with Marie and Hortense. Her father sat morosely silent while her mother, her eyes red from weeping, smiled bravely.

The carriage shifted dangerously to the side as the wheels wobbled against the muddy ruts. Alicia jolted upright, wondering if the other carriages had arrived safely. The last vehicle in the wedding party was always the bridal carriage, yet she would have felt more relieved to know that Dalton was already waiting for her at the church.

She hadn't seen Dalton since dinner, which had been cut short because her mother had remained in her room. To make matters worse, her father had been in one of his surly moods, refusing to speak to anyone.

Early this morning, she had been awake and served breakfast in her room. She couldn't eat a bite. After the maids had helped her dress, her mother dissolved in tears, flanked by a somber Lyssa on one side and a worried Kimbra on the other. *Dear God, I pray the wedding won't be a complete disaster.*

Alicia squeezed the bouquet of white-and-pink rosebuds in her hand, her fingers numb with cold. Thank goodness the ancient family church beside the family mausoleum was only a few miles from the manor. The roads were a mud bath, making travel nearly impossible.

Finally the carriage lurched to a stop. The footmen, dressed in their new purple-and-gold livery for the special occasion, jumped down to assist them to the church. Through the wind and rain, Alicia noticed the line of carriages that had already arrived, and she felt relieved. Maybe everything would go smoothly.

A footman held up a cover for her and her mother to shield them from the weather. She tried to open her parasol, but a wind gust blew it inside out. Blinded by the rain and the sheet the groom held in front of her, she stepped into a puddle. *Lord, help me get through this day.*

For what seemed like an eternity, Alicia waited in the antechamber for some sign that the ceremony would begin. Marie and Hortense had patted dry everyone's hair and gowns, and resurrected what was left of the floral bouquets.

Olivia smiled lovingly at her. "See, I was right. Everything is going to be perfect."

Alicia didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Yes, you did," she said instead, trying to suppress a giggle. She felt light-headed and giddy, but relieved that Olivia was by her side.

"Thank you, again, for acting as my bridesmaid. I know it's unusual, but it means a great deal to me."

"My pleasure, Alicia. I would have insisted, even if you were having a large London wedding."

She smiled, relieved that Dalton had agreed to her wish for a small ceremony. She would never have been able to bear the mockery of the ton watching them through their quizzing glasses.

The first chords of the organ roared. Alicia jumped from her seat. A shiver of foreboding went through her. Olivia stood, her face pale, but smiling. "I'm carrying a hartshorn, in case you may need it."

Alicia glanced up with surprise. In spite of Olivia's insistence that everything would be perfect, she had decided to carry smelling salts, just in case.

"It's time, my dear," Olivia said finally.

Alicia straightened her shoulders and clamped her fingers around the fragrant rosebuds she held. "I'm ready."

Olivia clutched her pink-and-yellow-and-white rose bouquet and stepped to the door. The pages creaked open the heavy oak doors for them. Alicia fell in step, her heart hammering. There was no backing out now.

Dalton stood at the altar with Justin, his groomsman, and waited for his bride to walk through the fortified doors that

had withstood the battlements from medieval wars down to the last skirmish when his ancestors had defended their king. For over six hundred years, Dalton's history had been played out within the ancient stone walls of this church—weddings, baptisms and funerals. Now, he was the next in line to lay down his seed for the new generation. He and his bride.

Dalton knew she would be beautiful, but he wasn't prepared for the delicate innocence and disarming vulnerability that shone from Alicia's face as she walked down the aisle with her father.

When she took her place at his side and smiled up at him, Dalton thought his heart would break with happiness. Dear God, what manner of woman was this who could melt him so?

The minister's voice broke through his thoughts, but Dalton couldn't drag his gaze from her. In her white, delicate gown, she looked all skirts and shoulders. The single row of pearls at her throat was shamed in contrast to the illuminated beauty of her skin.

A bridal veil drifted delicately over the crown of roses atop her head to trail loosely across her bare arms, then fall gracefully to the floor.

What powerful feeling captivated him? How tempting to drink in the sight of such innocence and truly believe in what poets sang about—love. Maybe for these next few days he'd throw reason to the wind and make believe. For who could blame a fool in love?

Alicia said her vows slowly, her strong, clear voice echoing inside the Gothic arches that spiraled toward heaven.

Dalton repeated his vows in deep, low tones and in what seemed the shortest of time, the minister finally announced they were husband and wife. Dalton slid the gold ring on her finger, his touch warm and solid. She and Dalton joined hands and turned to face the small congregation of smiling faces.

For the first time, Alicia noticed the stoic face of the dowager duchess, sitting beside Dalton's great-aunt Mary at the other side of the first row. Alicia blinked, not believing her eyes. She slid a sidelong glance at Dalton, who was watching her with obvious pleasure.

Her heart leaped with joy and gratitude. Regardless of her reason, Dalton's mother had come to her son's wedding.

Dalton squeezed her hand, and she smiled back at her new husband. Devastatingly handsome in his dark-blue frock coat and white waistcoat, he also looked powerful. Never had she seen him without authority and control, and it was here, today, as he held her hand in marriage.

The small wedding party milled at the door as Dalton led Alicia down the aisle. Justin winked at her, and she winked back. He had performed his duties earlier by providing a generous sum to the minister for the poor, and paying a large fee to all the attendants.

When the grooms opened the heavy church doors, a gloriously sunny morning awaited them as they stepped from the church. Alicia felt another surge of happiness when she gazed up into the azure sky. She turned to Dalton. "There's an old French saying: if the sun shines on your wedding day, you'll be very happy."

He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the ducal carriage. "Happy is the only way I'd want you to be, my bride."

Lyssa carried a basket in her arms as she laughed and skipped ahead of them, swirling the few rose petals that had been salvaged from the rain. A pair of magpies chided them from a nearby branch. "What a beautiful day," she said, meaning every word.

When they reached the carriage, several footmen opened the door. "I find I don't want to let you go," Dalton whispered in her ear.

She blushed, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "You must. Otherwise how will we fit inside the coach?" She was rewarded by his chuckle as he helped her up the tiny steps of the carriage.

When he had settled beside her, the vehicle lurched forward, the jingle of harness and the clamor of hooves hammering the muddy ground. She could feel his gaze on her, but she pretended not to notice as she felt along the floor of the carriage.

"What are you doing?" Dalton said, a look of amusement hovering on his lips.

"I'm looking for the bag of coins we are to throw when we come to the village," she said.

"Your father has probably already beaten you to it." He chuckled, then drew her close to him. She shivered in response and her reaction wasn't lost to him.

"You have nothing to fear, Alicia. I won't do anything to you that you don't want me to do."

She wished she could hide her nervousness, but she knew she could hide very little from this man. Instead she straightened the folds of her gown. "What should we do if we have no coins for the villagers? They will expect it."

He leaned back, a trace of a smile on his face. "The footman hid the box of coins beneath the driver's seat. They'll slow down when we approach the outskirts of the village." He looked at her as though she were an overly excited child enjoying a birthday.

"What shall we do when we return to the manor?" she asked.

"Partake of the feasting, at least until the evening draws near."

She heard his soft chuckle, and her cheeks flamed with the thought of their wedding night. She averted her gaze to look out the window. But when she felt his finger trace

a line across her cheek, she turned back and their eyes met.

“Don’t be afraid of me, Alicia.” But the smouldering look he gave her only fueled her thoughts of their wedding night.

Chapter Thirteen



The leather-faced shepherd raised his tankard in toast to the duke and duchess of Wexton. "May the good Lord shine on ye and yer bride, yer grace." A resounding cheer rose from the country folk feasting at the rows of white-linen-covered tables groaning with platters of mutton, ham, roast beef and game pies. Garlands of lilies and roses hung from the fluttering silk tents, the makeshift coverings Olivia had ordered in case of rain. Barefoot children and barking dogs scampered along the grass, cries of laughter and singing filled the sun-kissed afternoon.

The dowager duchess, leaning heavily on her cane, had complained that the rain had brought on her rheumatism, and had departed for London before the outdoor festivities had begun. Alicia wondered what the real reason was behind the dowager's appearance today. Perhaps the proud woman didn't want to snub her son's wedding, thus upsetting Aunt Mary. But Alicia preferred to think that Dalton's mother, although she would rather die than admit it, wanted to be present for such an important occasion in her son's life. She hoped so, for Dalton's sake.

She glanced at her handsome husband, sitting with her at the head of the table. Dalton nodded in appreciation as

he eldest villager at the far table stood to toast them, then the ritual repeated itself at the next table.

Earlier, Dalton hadn't been able to take his eyes off his bride as she met each villager, complimenting the farmers on their strong sons, their wives on their neat, flowered cottages and their children on their handsome, well-behaved pets. She had captured them instantly with her generosity and grace. Although the short ride through the village was customary, she had been entranced with the throngs of curious villagers, and asked if they might stroll among them instead of riding in the open carriage back to the manor.

Walking hand in hand with her among the people, Dalton couldn't help but be amused as each man, woman and child greeted him first, as was the custom, but it was Alicia who held their attention. Young and old reached to touch her, as though she were a lovely talisman, bringing fruitful crops and good health to their hamlet.

His gaze fixed upon her as she settled beside him, laughing with Olivia and Robert as they watched the three-legged men's race. Perhaps Alicia was a Lady Fortune, bringing healing and good with her touch.

"...don't you think so, Dalton?" Robert asked.

Dalton grinned. "I'm sorry, I must have been woolgathering." Robert smiled a quick look with Olivia. "I said, the men are lighting the bonfires. It will be dark soon and the dancing has begun. This might be a good time for you and Alicia to make your leave." He reached for Olivia's hand. "Do you remember our wedding, dearest?"

Olivia's only answer was a becoming blush to her cheeks. "Perhaps Robert is right. If you remain for any more toasts, you might not be leaving at all."

Great-Aunt Mary barked a huff of laughter, narrowing her eyes. "Speak for yourself, child. I intend to toast some more and dance until dawn." She motioned for a servant to refill her champagne glass.

"Perhaps we should leave," Dalton said, taking Alicia's hand. Her fingers were like ice, and he couldn't help feel disappointed. She knew their arrangement included bearing him a child. Did she detest him and their wedding night this much?

A servant pulled back their chairs as they rose, and Dalton brushed back his frustration. Tonight, in the privacy of their bedchamber, man and woman would become one.

"Will there be anything else, your grace?" Ives's bored monotone wavered slightly, the only indication that earlier, he had led the servants' celebration of the occasion by drinking the most ale.

"Yes, one more thing," Dalton said, reaching for the small gift in his desk drawer. "A token of the day from my wife and me," he said. "Your new mistress picked this out especially for you."

Ives's gray eyes brightened as he took the elegantly wrapped box. "Why, thank you, your grace."

"Go ahead. Open it now." Dalton grinned with pleasure as the old retainer, who had served him, his father and grandfather before him, ripped open the wrapping with childlike glee.

"A watch! A gold watch." Ives's face lit up as he recognized the value, and heartfelt gratitude spread across his face. "Thank you, your grace, and our new duchess. I hope you'll both be very happy."

"Thank you, Ives. Now run along and rejoin the others for the festivities."

"Of course, your grace." Ives bowed, then turned on his heel, eager to show off the gift to the other servants.

Dalton stole a glance at the clock. Heaven help him, but he had never dreamed his bride would be reluctant on their wedding night. A terrifying realization washed over him. He'd never bedded a woman before who wasn't willing. And he wasn't about to begin now.

Alicia. Beneath her feminine curves was a woman of passion, he knew. But what was it she wanted from him? He raked his fingers through his hair. Well, whatever it was, he'd find out soon enough. Women never remained silent for long if they wanted something from a man.

But that didn't apply to Alicia. No, his bride wasn't like other women he'd known. Although she was the most desirable woman he had ever met, she appeared to have no desire to share his bed.

Good Lord! What was he going to do?

Alicia glanced around the oak paneled master suite as Hortense pulled back the heavy gold curtains surrounding the bed. "You may go now," Alicia said, hoping Marie and Hortense would leave before they noticed she was trembling.

Hortense squealed with surprise as she turned back the gold satin comforter on the great four-poster canopied bed to reveal carmine rose petals scattered across the fragrant sheets. "Kimbra was in here earlier with Marie," she said with a laugh. "Now I know what they were up to."

"It was Kimbra's idea," Marie said as she brushed Alicia's long, lustrous hair.

"Kimbra has always been the romantic of the family," Alicia said, touched by her sister's lovely gesture. If only she could be as lighthearted about the occasion as Kimbra, she thought, tension mounting by the minute. With trembling fingers, she untied the white ribbons at her throat so Marie could remove the silk negligee, revealing the virginal white lace nightgown.

"Should I put another log on the fire, my lady?" Hortense shuffled toward the bronze woodbox. "There's a dampness to the evening, and you don't want to catch cold."

Marie laughed merrily. "His Grace will not allow that to happen, Hortense." A pink blush darkened Hortense's

cheeks and she clucked her disapproval at Marie's brazen remark.

"Another log would be fine," Alicia said, shivering.

Marie put down the hairbrush. "Perhaps her ladyship would like a glass of brandy?"

Alicia climbed upon the feather bed and almost sank out of sight. "No, thank you," she said, attempting to contain her dignity. "Please close the door when you leave."

Marie and Hortense exchanged knowing smiles, but bustled quickly from the room. When she was finally alone, Alicia pulled herself up from the thick feather bed and donned her silk robe. She refused to wait in bed for Dalton like a trussed-up Christmas goose. She stepped to the mantelpiece and blew out the only lamp the maids had left burning. Now, the only light came from the fire crackling in the grate.

Minutes passed as she stared into the fire, the sound of the ticking clock on the mantelpiece growing louder. She bit her lip and glanced at the gold numerals. Almost midnight. Where was Dalton? How long would he keep her waiting?

She glanced over her shoulder and peered at the massive canopied bed. Opulent, imposing and intimidating—just like the master.

She rubbed her temples, her head spinning with apprehension of what the next few hours might bring.

When Dalton stepped inside the shadow-filled bedchamber he wasn't prepared for the sight awaiting him. In the chair in front of the fireplace, Alicia curled in repose, eyelids closed in sleep.

He would have thought she was too tense to sleep, but then he realized how exhausted she must be after the past few days. Despite the flurry of wedding activities, Alicia had been up before sunrise, fitting in Bashshar's training sessions between endless wedding details. If anything, she

had spent more time with the stallion. Nor had her other duties prevented her from teaching Penn how to read after dinner, often late into the evenings. He smiled, savoring the new and unexpected feelings as pride filled his heart for this unusual woman who was now his bride.

In slumber, she looked like an innocent temptress, if there was such a thing. Firelight caressed the silken gleam of her skin and the red-gold of her chestnut hair. The delicate silk of her dressing gown did nothing to conceal the feminine curves beneath. Dalton swallowed, aware of the hard response of his body as he watched the soft rise and fall of her creamy breasts peek from the inviting opening of her dressing gown.

How he wanted to lift her and carry her to bed and drive himself into her. He wanted to see her rapturous face when he made passionate love to her. He wanted to teach her all the delights of lovemaking and watch her melt with desire for him.

She shifted slightly, her full mouth drawn in slumber. She moved her head, her hair slipping from her shoulder to reveal the exquisite curve of her neck and the delicate hollow of her throat.

He watched, fascinated, as the low-burning fire cast golden shadows across the perfect oval of her face. She was beautiful, yes, but he'd had beautiful women before. Women even more beautiful than she...but not with that soft, full mouth, or that unguarded innocence.

For some reason, the picture of her with the village children flickered into his mind. She'd picked up a little boy who'd been crying, afraid of the coaches' horses. She'd held him on her shoulder with his dirty face and copious tears ruining her gown. She hadn't given a thought to it. She'd made the little boy smile, too.

Dalton gazed at her mouth, the soft, full lips, the rich, delicate coloring of them against her fair skin. Would she smile at him with tenderness if he made love to her? Would

she whisper his name? Would she murmur the sounds a man could lose himself in, lose his pain in?

He reached to touch the silky strands of firelight in her hair when he noticed that his hand was shaking. Surprised, he drew back.

A tumble of new emotions welled deep inside him, feelings for a woman he had never felt before. He wanted to protect her, comfort her, make the world safe and secure for her.

What the hell was the matter with him? He desired his bride, his body was responding with a violent surge, so what was stopping him?

What was stopping him, indeed? He sucked in a deep breath. He felt more than mere lust. *He was in love with her.* She was a woman, and any man who thought himself in love was a fool. And Dalton hadn't been a fool for many years.

Abruptly, he turned on his heel and strode quietly from the room. He needed a drink. He needed a dose of fresh air and a level head.

But glancing back at her before he closed the door, he had a bridled, puzzling image of that frightened little boy who had reached out to her as she smiled at him.

A log tumbled off the grate crackling into white embers, the noise startling Alicia. She lunged forward, her breath catching in her throat. Glancing around the shadowed chamber, she was, for the moment, disoriented; then she remembered. *Her wedding night.* She swallowed hard, running her hand through her unbound hair.

Three-thirty in the morning! She stared at the clock. It would be dawn soon. Where was Dalton? The question hammered at her.

For no reason that she could understand, she hurried across the room, pulled open the heavy door and peered down the empty corridor. What had she expected to see?

Feeling foolish, she closed the door, leaning against the carved wood. As she watched the flickering shadows from the low-burning fire play across the walls and massive furniture of the bedchamber, her gaze fixed on the bridal bed, waiting untouched, just as she was.

Didn't he want her? Surprised by her disappointment, she was also amazed at her growing feeling of rejection. The idea that he wouldn't come to her bed had never occurred to her. Did he find her so undesirable or lacking in appeal?

Why hadn't she thought of that before? She wasn't the type of woman that he fancied. She wasn't knowledgeable in the art of satisfying men, as was Elizabeth, or the other women who fawned over men like Dalton. She felt a squeezing hurt in the pit of her stomach. Despite her earlier fears, she was disappointed. Yes, she had wanted Dalton to come to her, make love to her as though he really cared.

The silence of the room, forlorn and desolate, brought a sweep of perplexing feelings that chilled her. Pained by the unbidden truth, she felt the loneliness and isolation to her very soul. She fought back the hot sting of threatening tears. Pride. Thank God, she still had her pride. If she wanted him, she'd be damned if she would show it. If he didn't love her, then she would force herself not to love him.

Alicia stormed out of the room, down the hall to her own suite to change into a day gown. She had some serious thinking to do, and there was only one place where she could find the peace she craved.

When Alicia stepped into the stable, she was immediately comforted by the familiar smells of hay, animals and leather. She hurried past the horse stalls until she reached the last box at the end of the corridor.

Penn had left the lantern burning, she thought with irritation. Then she noticed Bashshar's stall door was ajar. Before she had a chance to react, the door creaked open.

Dalton stood, staring in surprise. Instead of speaking, he opened the door wider, almost in invitation. Beside him, Bashshar whinnied, tossing his head in greeting. She noticed the currycomb in Dalton's hand, then she realized that he often worked with the horses after the servants had retired for the night. Perhaps he had sought the one place that brought him peace, too.

He was dressed in a white shirt, open to the waist. Whorls of black hair covered his chest. She couldn't help but stare. He ignored her as he gripped the currycomb in one hand and the stiff brush in the other. Both hands began the long, slow strokes across Bashshar's flank. His sleeves were rolled to the elbow. She had never seen his bare arms before, she realized, and the sight brought strange little flips in her stomach as she admired the flex and play of the long, thick muscles in his forearms.

"Did you come looking for me?" he asked finally, not taking his eyes from his work.

"Of course not!" Her cheeks grew hot as she realized he was arrogant enough to believe she might have sought him out. "I—I couldn't sleep. I thought I might see how Bashshar was doing."

"Hmm." Dalton's long easy strokes across Bashshar's back never slowed. "You were sleeping quite soundly a while ago...."

Surprised, her eyes fixed with his. So he *had* come to their bedchamber. She hesitated, afraid to reveal the joy that knowledge gave her. "Then, why didn't you...remain?"

A look she didn't understand crossed his face. "I...thought you needed to sleep."

"Oh." She dropped her gaze to Dalton's beautifully shaped hands as the brush slid across the ebony satin of the stallion's hide. She watched, mesmerized, as the corded muscles flexed with each stroke of the brush and currycomb. A strange sensation twisted in her stomach.

Had he found her so undesirable that he could simply walk away from his bride on his wedding night?

Maybe she should leave, if that's what he wanted. He hadn't come looking for her, after all. But somehow, here in the familiar comfort of the stable with the horses, she didn't want to return to the cold elegance of his bedchamber. She had always felt more at ease with Dalton, here, working with Bashshar. At least here, she wasn't alone. "It will be dawn soon," she said, then immediately wondered why she had said something so incredibly silly.

"Hmm."

In the lengthening silence, she watched him groom the horse, and she felt increasingly as though she didn't belong. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she turned to leave. "Well, since Bashshar seems to be content for the night..."

Dalton glanced up. "I've never thanked you properly for all you've done for Bashshar." His voice was deep and thick with emotion. Bashshar nuzzled Dalton's neck and shoulder as though he understood. Alicia's throat tightened as she saw the rare glimpse of his caring that Dalton tried so hard to hide.

"After Bashshar's accident, I was racked with guilt for not putting him down. Every trainer, including the royal horse trainers had urged me to put him out of his misery. But...I just couldn't bear to lose him. Somehow, I'd hoped for a miracle—" Dalton turned his loving gaze on her "—and then I found you."

A rush of tender gratitude squeezed her heart. She wasn't sure if he was speaking about her, or about her healing. "I—I'm glad," was all she could trust herself to say.

He straightened, then laid the brush and currycomb down. In several strides, he came beside her. Taking her small hands in his, he gently rubbed her fingers. "Such small hands for such great healing."

"I wish I could heal what troubles you."

Immediately his brows lifted. "Heal me? Of what?" he asked playfully, refusing to take her seriously.

What had just passed between them gave her courage. She pressed forward. "Heal you of your fear of love."

He took her hand and smiled lazily; his white teeth flashed against his dark, sun-bronzed skin. "You haven't forgiven me for my earlier careless remarks to Justin. I apologized, Alicia. Won't you forgive me?"

"Then you're admitting that you believe in love?"

"Of course." His words came much too quickly. She knew he was just saying what he believed she had wanted to hear.

Oh, why couldn't she let matters lie? Now, he would think she wanted him to confess deep affection for her. Embarrassed, she dropped her gaze to the straw-strewn floor. "Are you planning to remain here for the rest of the night?"

"Is that your way of asking me if I'll come to your bed?" he asked lightly, a teasing glint in his eye.

"Of course not! I mean, I expected to...I don't..."

Dalton smiled. "That's not a very clear message, my dear."

A feeling of vulnerability that he could see right through her caused her to snap. "I'm sorry. I'm not experienced in these...arrangements."

"That's obvious." His voice was low and rough. "If you were, you wouldn't have come looking for me here, now, if you didn't intend to offer...an arrangement."

"Believe me, your grace, I have no wish to trouble you with offers you do not want."

Dalton's heated gaze grew darker. "Believe me, Wife, you could not make any offer of yourself that I would not want."

She took several steps backward, reaching the door of the stall. She turned and pushed opened the door. He

walked up behind her. "I think I'll spend the remainder of the night in my cottage," she said.

"Now there's a thought."

She stepped into the corridor and paused, peering over her shoulder as he followed her. She watched him draw the bolt across Bashshar's stall. "What do you mean?"

"The cottage," he said, his voice silky. "We can spend what remains of the night at your wee cottage."

"Certainly not you...I mean, there's not enough room for—" Her fingers nervously played with the ribbons at her neckline.

He laughed. "How much room do you think we'll need?" He leaned closer, his face within inches of hers. He brushed a strand of hair from her face, the familiar, fresh masculine scent of him suddenly unsettling. Her pulse hammered in her throat.

In the lantern light, she recognized the heat of desire in those blue eyes beneath the black lashes. *Desire*.

"Alicia, I want to please you," he said tenderly. Brushing his lips against her temple, he added, "I don't want you to come to me afraid."

His strong hands swept her up into his arms. She leaned against his hard chest while she slowly glided her hands across his broad shoulders to lock behind his neck. He smiled down at her as he carried her from the stable. The loud crunch of his footfalls along the gravel could barely be heard above the pounding of her heart.

Outside, the cool, damp air rushed against her flushed skin as he carried her along the path that led to the tiny cottage nestled in the shadows.

He pushed the door open. The fragrance of roses from the bouquet on the mantel filled her nostrils. She closed her eyes, making believe that he wanted her, loved her with all his heart. For tonight, she would pretend it was more than desire. Then maybe someday... But the words she had

overheard him say came back to taunt her. *Love makes women weak and men foolish.*

He laid her upon the lace coverlet, the only light coming from the half moon shining through the lace-paneled window. Self-consciously, she glanced down at the plain gown she wore. "I wanted you to see me in my new night-gown—"

"Shh, my darling," he said huskily.

She watched his strong, dark fingers unfasten the pink ribbons at her neckline. With experienced assurance, he brushed the soft fabric down her arms, covering her partial nakedness with his body while he tenderly removed her other garments. The heat of his body surrounded her. She closed her eyes, feeling shy and uncertain.

Gently, his mouth moved over her face, lightly kissing her cheeks, her forehead, each closed eyelid. "Alicia, look at me."

Barely able to breathe, Alicia did what he asked. But she wasn't prepared for the wild and uncontrolled passion darkening his eyes. "Kiss me, Alicia."

She wanted to, how she wanted to, but she didn't possess the skill of the other women he'd known. What if she displeased him?

He nibbled at her bottom lip. "Kiss me, my love."

My love. How she wished it were true. She stiffened. If only she could be neutral to his pretense of desiring her.

His warm hand cupped her face toward his. "What's the matter, Alicia? Don't you want me to love you?"

She shivered, turning her head away.

Dalton's fingers grasped her shoulders, drawing her toward him. His warm breath mingled with hers. "I'll not force you, Alicia." His arms slid away from her and he sat up, the mattress creaking when his long legs draped over the side of the bed. "If you want me to leave, then say it."

Everything was going so badly. She closed her eyes,

afraid to trust her voice to speak. Instead, her answer was a soft whimper coming from deep inside her throat.

The sound of her cry was his undoing. "My darling, if you're so afraid of me, then we'll wait."

Her thick lashes shaded whatever emotion was in her eyes.

"Dear God." His voice broke with huskiness. "Are you this unhappy to be married to me?"

Her head lifted. "N--no, it's..."

"It's what, Alicia?"

She raised her chin. "It's that I—I don't think you could pretend well enough for me not to know that I don't please you."

"If you don't please me?" Amazed, he shook his head. "Dear God, Alicia. What have I done to make you think such a thing?"

"We both know that I have no practice in..." Her thick lashes shadowed her cheeks, and at that moment, he thought his heart might explode with tenderness.

"It is I who should please you, my love. Don't you know that?" Her dark velvet eyes met his, and her unguarded innocence threatened to be his undoing. "Lie back and let me love you, Alicia. Let me show you all there is between a man and a woman."

She shuddered. "Are you going to kiss me?"

He smiled. "Do you want me to?"

Her lips curled slightly. "Yes, I would like that."

He grinned, then leaned over her and feathered a kiss along her bottom lip. He felt her tremble beneath him. Then she opened her eyes. "Why don't you kiss me like you did in the library?"

"Hmm, I don't think I remember." He nibbled gently at her lower lip. "Why don't you show me?"

Her sweet mouth met his, her soft, gentle fingers worked their way to the back of his neck. His lips demanded more, and she willingly gave. She shifted beneath him, molding

her body to his. Blood leaped in his veins as he sensed the change in her.

Her tongue sought his, inflaming him with desire. Gently, he cupped her silky breast; her nipple blossomed beneath his touch. The low moan she uttered stroked his manhood and challenged his self-control. His mouth gently closed around the hardened nub as he drank in her sweetness. She arched beneath him, moaning.

"Dalton?" she said huskily.

He lifted his head. "Yes, my sweet?"

"Why is it...the more you kiss me, the more...?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"The more you want me to?" he finished for her.

Her answer unfolded in a soft, yielding sigh.

Dalton smiled. "That, my pet, is the wonder of love-making." He pulled her curving body on top of him, gathering her against his chest. Her exploring fingers curled against the tangle of his chest hair. Everywhere she touched him, he felt the silky fire burn him alive. He wanted her, desperately. He had never known a woman whose sweet innocence and heated sensuality fired him with such excitement and passion. He wanted her like he had never wanted a woman.

Bolder now, Alicia kissed him passionately. His eyes opened when he felt her hips match his in their primal rhythm. Her eyes, warm pools of heated desire, flamed him further. He ached to touch the sleek depths of her womanly heat, but he didn't want to do anything to startle her.

With a long, ragged breath, Alicia lifted her head. If she knew the seductive power her smouldering gaze had on him, she'd not believe it. His trembling fingers slid along her hips; he felt her shiver. He ran his hand between her thighs. She twisted with his touch. Gently, he shifted her beneath him, then captured her mouth in a deep, endless kiss filled with raw hunger.

He felt her legs part as she arched for him. Moments later, she was damp, ready for him.

Alicia shivered as he began to move over her. She wanted to beg him to end this sweet torment, but she had no idea what she wanted instead. All she knew was that she didn't want him to stop the driving thrusts that fueled the gathering storm deep within.

As Dalton increased the tempo, Alicia felt a burst of sheer ecstasy erupt inside her. His mouth captured her cry of delight. She clung to him, writhing against him, lost of all consciousness. With the last deep thrust, she felt his shuddering warmth pour into her.

Her arms twined around him, lost in the glory of the moment. If only they could remain like this, hearts beating as one, lost in their own sweet heaven.

Chapter Fourteen



Dalton watched her, snuggled against his shoulder, sleeping so trustingly in his arms. For the longest time he had lain there, fighting the effect her warm breasts, nestling intimately against his bare chest, had on his body. In fact, everything she did affected him. He knew she had a passionate nature, but he had no way of knowing that her shy attempts to bring him pleasure could unleash such profound ecstasy.

But her effect on him was more than just lust. Never before had he felt such vitality at being alive. Despite his ingrained cynicism, he was left in awe at the change in him. Feelings long buried and unfamiliar were springing to life. Longing caught in his chest. With her at his side, the world was a special place.

The scent of roses from the bouquet on the mantel curled around them, pulling his thoughts back to the present. Dawn was slanting its pale light across the sky. Although he didn't want to leave her warmth, he knew the servants were up. Expecting the cottage to be empty, a maid might wander inside to refill the vases with fresh flowers and startle Alicia awake. Instead, he would leave word at the manor that no one should disturb the cottage until her ladyship awakens. He eyed the empty wash basin and pitcher and

an idea formed in his mind. How surprised she would be to find warm water for her morning ablutions. If he hurried, he would have time to fill the pitcher himself before she awoke.

Dalton lifted the silken drift of her hair across his chest and carefully rolled away from her. She murmured slightly, yet the tiny sound tightened every muscle in his body. He drew a shaky breath and eased the sheet higher, covering her shoulders. She shifted to her side, facing him, her rosy mouth pursed, as if awaiting his kisses.

He couldn't remain another moment and not taste those sweet lips. He groaned and forced himself to his feet. When he had quietly finished dressing, he grabbed the empty pitcher and slipped quietly from the cottage.

When Alicia opened her eyes, sunlight streamed through the open window, filling the room with a cheery glow. Far off, a robin trilled sweetly to its mate. Happy and sated, she smiled, stretching like a contented cat. She glanced at the empty place beside her and tenderly touched the slight impression in Dalton's pillow. He must have arisen early. Perhaps he was in the stables preparing the horses for an early ride before breakfast.

She threw back the sheet and got out of bed. The porcelain pitcher, filled with warm water, stood on the nightstand. Dalton must have summoned the maids already this morning, she thought with surprise. No one knew they would be spending the night in the cottage.

She felt a blush warm her cheeks as she wondered what Hortense and Marie must have thought. She poured water from the pitcher into the wash basin, then began to bathe.

She didn't expect to see a great deal of her husband once they finally settled down to everyday manor life. He had several vast estates to oversee, and she would be engrossed with managing the households. However, that could wait. For the next few days, she wanted to remain with him—

by his side. She wanted to know all she could about this fascinating man who was hers.

After she had bathed, she chose a blue riding habit from the clothespress and dressed quickly, hoping to join him. Although they had made love for most of the night, she found that she still ached for him. More shocking was that she wondered when they would make love again. Heavens, but she was becoming insatiable!

When she finished dressing, she studied the image of herself in the mirror. Did this wondrous glow show in her face? She laughed aloud at the scatterwit notion. She was feeling too happy to care. All her life she had been so wise, so practical about matters of the heart. Today was the first day of her married life, and she was feeling glorious. But she was still practical enough to know this feeling wouldn't last, and wise enough to enjoy it.

Before Alicia arrived at the stables, she saw a groom lead Bashshar to the paddock where Dalton waited. When he saw her, he motioned for her to come toward him.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Dressed in a pearl-grey riding habit, he looked positively dashing. Alicia caught her breath just at the sight of him. He smiled. "I've already asked that Jupiter be saddled for you. Such a beautiful morning, I thought you might enjoy riding with me."

Not trusting her voice, she nodded and smiled with delight, then hurried toward Jupiter, who impatiently pawed the ground. After the groom helped her onto the sidesaddle, she brought Jupiter alongside Dalton and Bashshar. The two stallions eyed each other uneasily. Although it wasn't often stallions were allowed close proximity, Alicia felt Jupiter's presence might help instill pride and confidence in Bashshar.

Dalton and Alicia rode along the neatly clipped path for a long time before she spoke. "Jupiter is full of energy and wants to lead. What do you say to a race?"

Dalton glanced across the meadow and patted Bashshar on the flank. "Good idea. We'll cross the field and head toward the waterfall."

She laughed. "Splendid." She waited until Dalton brought Bashshar up alongside Jupiter. "Are you ready?"

A wide smile was Dalton's answer. Alicia gave Jupiter his head as the horse took an early lead across the rolling fields of yellow wildflowers. Wind whipped her hair, and she felt exhilarated.

Dalton rode the black stallion easily beside her, and she was thrilled to see Bashshar accept the challenge so readily. The weeks of intense training and practice showed. Bashshar's long, easy strides proved his champion bloodline. But Jupiter came from superior stock, as well, and the young stallion showed equal promise.

Alicia set her jaw and leaned over Jupiter's neck, balancing low over the saddle. Gently, she coaxed the stallion to break away with a sudden burst of speed. Beneath her, she could feel the stallion's powerful muscles flex, his breathing deepen.

Almost as if Dalton sensed her strategy, he urged Bashshar faster, both horses now neck and neck.

Alicia knew she shouldn't take her eyes from her mount, but she couldn't help stealing a glance at Dalton beside her. His shadowed jaw, clenched in determination, matched the challenge in his eyes. In that instant, Dalton edged Bashshar ahead of Jupiter. Alicia's stallion fought to keep up, but Bashshar's last minute burst of power carried him past Jupiter as the horses rounded the grove of larch trees bordering the waterfall beyond.

Alicia laughed as she eased Jupiter into a trot. "I've never been more happy to lose," she said when she came up beside him. Happiness welled inside her as she watched Dalton with the horse. This was the first serious ride that Dalton had undergone since Bashshar's accident, and she

knew that he was delighted with the stallion's improvement.

"Thanks to your help, I believe that Bashshar might possibly race again," Dalton said, rubbing the stallion's neck.

Her heart swelled with pride. "Of course he will. Perhaps you should enter him at Newmarket."

"I don't know. That's less than six weeks from now."

"He may not win, but the training and experience will do him good." She felt exhilarated by the idea. "If we both work with him, he'll be ready in time."

Dalton's dark brows knotted in thought as he dismounted. "What of Jupiter? I thought you hoped to enter him at Newmarket?"

"We can enter both horses."

Dalton's smile was dazzling. "That's a champion idea!" He helped her dismount. "If I'm not mistaken, Ives should have our breakfast set up by now." Dalton glanced at the grassy knoll overlooking the waterfall. "I thought you'd enjoy an outdoor breakfast."

He was looking steadily down at her, her face shaded by the brim of her peacock-blue hat. Wisps of coppery strands blew around her smiling face. He felt a sudden twist in his chest as he realized, again, this beautiful woman was his. What would she say if she knew that he wanted to make love to her, here in the meadow beside the waterfall? They could bask in the sunshine, naked, and they could make incredible love all day.

He watched as she tethered Jupiter to a tree, the powerful stallion following behind her like a tame pussycat. Dalton was amazed again at the profound joy of a simple morning ride with this exceptional woman. Never had he smelled sun-kissed air in his lungs, seen the vibrant tapestry of fields and woods, or felt such joy in his heart.

Alicia. He watched her face light with childish delight when she found the white-linen-covered table and chairs that Ives and the servants had left for them. Yes, it was

Alicia who ignited his senses. She called to him and laughed; her laughter hung in the air like warm honey.

He smiled, hurrying to her as she dove into the picnic basket, bringing out a bottle of wine, glasses and covered dishes. "Hurry, or I'll eat everything and not leave you a crumb."

Whatever this wondrous feeling was that possessed him, it left him feeling wobbly and unsettled. But he wouldn't have traded these last twenty-four hours for anything in the world. Alicia was the most incredible woman—innocent nymph and knowing temptress all in one. She was enough to dazzle any man's senses. And she was his bride.

She called to him again, and this time he joined her across the table. "Squab, sausages, partridge and boiled eggs. Ives has arranged a feast." She uncovered a large bowl of bread crumbs. "And what is this?" she asked.

"Bread for the swans. After we eat, I'll show you the other side of the river. Below the bridge, swans, ducks and all manner of game birds come to feed. The gamekeeper has strict orders to protect their breeding grounds from hunters."

"Your orders, I presume?"

He smiled. "I strongly believe in protecting the birds and other game for future generations." *For our children and grandchildren*, he thought with a start. He looked across the silver river wending through the meadow, its surface smooth except where it bubbled over rocks along the shore. He could almost imagine their children's laughter carried on the wind. Children. Yes, it was entirely possible. Although he always knew he would need an heir, he'd never before visualized his son, with his mother's warm dark eyes, or a daughter with a musical laugh. He gloried briefly in the awakened sense of wonder.

"My grandfather believed in protecting the hunting fields at Marston Heath," she said wistfully. He watched as she removed her bonnet, the wind lifting her chestnut curls

around her shoulders. She dished up a small helping of squab and handed it to him.

"Will your father allow you to oversee the improvements you plan to make at Marston Heath?"

"He will have little say." She smiled as she prepared a plate for herself. "But my mother is most pleased."

"Your mother is a fine woman."

"Yes," she said simply, but love and admiration for her mother reflected from her expressive eyes. She was silent a moment, then her voice grew serious. "I was so pleased that your mother attended our wedding. Did you have a chance to talk with her before the ceremony?"

Dalton knew her simple question held her relentless hope to see peace restored between his mother and himself. He would grant Alicia anything, but when it came to the dowager...

He shook his head. "We exchanged only a brief tête-à-tête. But I'm glad her presence pleased you."

She offered him a cluster of grapes. "Perhaps I shall invite her for a visit. I'd like to arrange a birthday celebration for you. Do you think she will accept?"

My God, she was serious! He took a swallow of wine. He didn't want to abate his wife's hope, but the dowager believed the more distance between family, the better. Yet he found himself fascinated by his wife's insatiable concern for people. "My mother has caused you nothing but grief. Why do you still care about her feelings, my dear?"

"Your mother reminds me of someone who has been very hurt. Sometimes it's those who act unlovable who need love the most."

How fresh and unspoiled Alicia was. She could never understand a woman as complicated as the dowager. "My mother prides herself on not showing emotion. She considers stoicism a virtue."

"That's false pride speaking. She believes everything she's done in the past was for your and the family's best

interest. She cares very much for you, Dalton, but she's unable to show love."

He hid a smile as he wondered what his mother might say if she knew of Alicia's sentiments. "You're most generous to a woman who has done everything to ruin you." He couldn't take his eyes from her. "Yet you're willing to forgive her. Why?"

Her dark eyelashes lowered, her cheeks pinked quite becomingly. "Because without forgiveness, there can be no healing." She put her hands in her lap, then looked up with what he almost thought was shyness.

"I don't understand. Why would you care, Alicia?"

She gave him a coy look. "Perhaps I'll tell you later."

"Alicia," he said gently, extending his hand, "if you wish to invite her, then do so." He felt suddenly in need to protect this lovely young woman. "But promise me you won't be hurt when she refuses."

She clasped her fingers around his hand, her only answer a gentle smile that tugged on his heart.

While they finished their meal in silence, Dalton wondered if Alicia might better understand his mother if he told her the one secret he vowed never to share. "Alicia, there's something I think you should know," he said with hesitation.

She glanced up over her wineglass.

"When I was two and ten, my favorite horse was an Arabian mare, Quicksilver. I was delighted when she gave birth to a foal. I had been up most of the night with her, and when she finally had the colt, I could hardly wait to tell my mother. My father was in London, on business. I raced up the stairs to her bedroom suite. There were no maids or footmen around. I rushed into my mother's bedroom and—"

Her eyes widened, waiting. "And what?"

Dalton glanced away. "I found my father's brother, Uncle George, with her. My mother was beside herself. She

ran after me, trying to explain. I ran off. I took refuge in the hunting lodge where one of the gamekeepers found me." His eyes met hers again, and he saw the shock and pain in those large dark eyes. "I've never forgiven her for deceiving my father. I never will."

Alicia laid her hand on his fist. "Did your father know?"

"He never behaved as if he did."

Alicia rose and came to his side. Her fingers touched his cheek. No words were needed as his arms pulled her across his lap. He felt her rapid heartbeat against him as his mouth settled against hers. As their kiss deepened, he was fueled with a passion that would be his undoing.

Her mouth was like a sun-kissed rose, silken, honeyed, intoxicating. She drew in a little gasp, drawing him closer.

He parted her lips, his tongue stroked and explored. How he wanted her.

Far off, a horse whinnied, barely breaking his consciousness. He lifted his head in time to see a flash of sunlight. Or was it?

Gunfire exploded from the woods nearby. The whine of a bullet stopped in the oak beside them as bark flew in the air.

"Get down," Dalton cried, dropping to the ground with Alicia. He rolled over her, shielding her with his body. The flash of light he'd seen had been the glint from a rifle barrel.

Bashshar, tethered beneath the tree, raced in circles, screaming. The whites of his eyes glowed as he yanked on the leather lead. Beside a stand of firs, nearly twenty feet away, Jupiter danced uneasily, ears pricked.

Alicia struggled from his grip. "Bashshar!" she gasped. "I must go—"

"Stay still, Alicia," he said, pulling her back down in the shelter of the high grass. "Someone's firing at us. We don't know how many." He raised his head, his gaze scanning the trees and shrubs for any sign of their attacker, but the forest was silent. Too silent. "Keep your head down,"

he whispered, gripping her wrist to make sure she stayed with him.

Bashshar's screams, like an animal in the throes of death, rent the air as he reared and kicked at the end of his lead.

"Dalton, please." Her eyes shut against the heart-wrenching sounds. Beneath him, he could feel her heart hammering with his. Dear God, if anything were to happen to her...

"Alicia, lie still, love. There's nothing we can do for him," he whispered. *There was a good chance the shooter was using Bashshar to lure them out into the open.* But he couldn't tell her that. "The shooter may have only wanted to frighten us," he whispered instead. Yet the reality was that whoever fired the shot would probably try again.

Alicia's eyes rounded in horror. "You think he purposely shot at us?"

"I'm not sure," he whispered. He lifted his gaze to scan the horizon. Nothing.

They lay hidden, listening, for what seemed to be hours, but may have only been twenty minutes. Bashshar had finally stilled, more from exhaustion than lack of fear. But Dalton was certain the horse wouldn't have quieted if there was still a shooter nearby.

Dalton lifted his head and glanced around. The woods appeared peaceful, birdsong filled the air. "I want you to inch your way toward Jupiter," he whispered in her ear. "He's behind those trees and can't be seen by the shooter."

"No, I won't leave you."

"Alicia, listen to me." His voice was gentle but firm. "Take Jupiter and ride the path along the hedgerows. You'll be out of sight if the gunman is still there. But the noise will confuse him long enough for me to untie Bashshar and get him to safety."

"No, you might be killed. I can't leave you here—"

"Alicia, please. By the time you reach the back meadow, I'll join you. If I'm not there, keep riding until you reach

the manor. You can bring help." He held his breath, hoping he could convince her. It was the only way to ensure she would be safe.

"Do you promise to follow immediately?" she asked.

"I promise." He couldn't help admire her bravery. Most women, when confronted by an unknown attacker, would be hysterical. Not only had she kept her head, but her thoughts had been of him and Bashshar. He also realized that she trusted him, the feeling giving him heartfelt pleasure.

She glanced at the black stallion, and her anguished look told him she knew the animal was severely exhausted. The sooner they try to escape, the better.

She finally nodded her agreement.

"Carefully work your way toward Jupiter," he coached. "I'll be right behind you as soon as I untie Bashshar." He watched as she crept toward the thick fir. Within minutes, he saw her mount Jupiter and gallop toward safety.

Easily, he moved steadily to where Bashshar stood, his eyes wary. He spoke softly while he untied the reins, all the while watching the leafy horizon. Still no sound or movement from the woods. Dalton wasn't fooled. If the gunman had wanted to shoot them, he and Alicia had been open targets. No, whoever the shooter was, he'd only wanted to frighten them.

Dalton mounted Bashshar and urged the horse toward the open meadow. Cold fury threatened to break Dalton's calm exterior, but he forced it back. Now wasn't the time. But he made a silent vow that whoever was doing this was going to pay.

Jupiter tossed his head just as Dalton, riding Bashshar, appeared through the hedge. Thank God they were all right. Alicia felt the relief all the way through her. When he rode up beside her, she brought her horse in step as they rode along the path that wended away from the gaming fields.

They walked in silence, the only sounds coming from the creak of tack as the horses' hooves drummed upon the clumps of grass. A slight wind, bringing the scent of hawthorn berries from the hedgerows, ruffled the horses' long tails.

A disturbing thought crossed her mind. She made a stern effort to keep the fear from her voice. "How can you be sure that you're not the intended target?"

Dalton gave her a sidelong glance. "If someone wanted me dead, he would have had his chance by now to do the job."

How she wanted to believe him, but she thought he might be trying to protect her from the truth. "Has the inspector from Bow Street ruled out that you might be the shooter's target?"

"Mr. Humphrey Leary has a meticulous mind. He leaves no stone unturned."

She lifted a brow. "That's not what I asked."

The smile he gave her erased all tension from his face. "Are you wondering if my life is in danger out of curiosity, or do I detect that you care about me, my love?"

"Curiosity," she said teasingly.

His deep laughter was infectious, and she found herself grinning. Despite his nonchalance, the question hammered at her.

"You'll keep me informed?" Alicia glanced away at the squares of ripening green and gold that covered the rising hills, hoping he couldn't read the concern that she knew was on her face.

"You are adorable, sweet one." His odd, husky voice drew her eyes to him. "It's been a long time since anyone worried about me." The heat in his blue eyes warmed her as no blaze could have, and she was aware that he, too, was savoring the moment.

I care because I love you, she wanted to say, but knew better. He might feel obligated to say the words *I love you, too*. And that would be worse than never having him say what she longed to hear.

Chapter Fifteen



For the next three weeks, Dalton spent most of his spare time watching Alicia train Bashshar to overcome the fear of loud noises. She was fascinating to watch. Besides her patience and boundless energy, Alicia's movements around the horse were as fluid and graceful as a dancer's.

The horse appeared to sense what she wanted and obeyed her slightest commands. In fact, their timing was so perfect that if he were a fanciful man, he might believe that woman and beast could read each other's minds.

Of course he knew better. Yet when he was around her, she brought out a side of him that wanted to believe anything was possible.

He stepped on the lowest fence railing and rested his arms over the top, watching Alicia wave to Ulger, who stood in the middle of the pasture with a shotgun slung over his shoulder. She tightened her rein on Bashshar as Ulger lumbered toward her. When he was within a hundred yards of where she and Bashshar stood, she called out, "Stop. That's close enough."

Ulger nodded, then loaded the weapon and fired into the air. The shot cracked the silence. Alicia rubbed the stallion's neck in soothing circles, crooning in his ear while

gripping the lead. Bashshar barely flinched. "Good boy," she whispered.

Penn dropped a carrot into the horse's food bucket. "Thank you, Penn," Alicia said as Bashshar's massive head dove for the treat.

The lad's eyes widened as the horse chomped the carrot. "It won't be long 'fore Bashshar is cured of loud noises, eh, yer ladyship?"

Alicia stroked Bashshar's glossy flank. "I'll know better after we gradually lessen the distance between Bashshar and the gunfire." She smiled at the young man's natural curiosity. "You have the knack with horses, lad. You're going to be a fine trainer one day."

"I'd rather be a healer like ye," he said with a grin. "Me dad says yer the best 'ealer 'e's ever seen."

She felt a warm glow at the compliment. "Well, be sure and thank Ulger for me. Coming from a man as experienced with horses as your father, that's fine praise."

Penn's grin widened. "Course I'd like to be a jockey, too. Maybe I'll be a 'ealer an' a jockey."

"You'll be exceptional at whatever vocation you choose, Penn."

"Can I ride Bashshar back to the stable?"

She smoothed her hand along Bashshar's glossy mane. "No, Penn. The horse has never had anyone ride him except his lordship and me."

Penn's face dropped. "Please, yer ladyship, I'm ten and four. Big enough. Besides, 'ow can I 'elp ye with 'is trainin' if I can't ride 'im?"

She studied the lad's serious face, and her heart melted. Responsible and bright, Penn had worked as a stableboy for Bashshar longer than anyone. He was indeed big enough. Strong and wiry, he was also the perfect height. Most jockeys were no larger than he. Besides, the horse appeared comfortable with the lad.

Resisting the urge to ruffle his hair, she said, "Very well, but you must promise to do exactly as I say."

Penn's smile brightened. "I promise, yer grace."

"Climb to the top rail of the fence, and I'll walk Bashshar over to you."

Penn scurried to the top rung as she brought the stallion around. "Now, Penn, very gently, ease yourself onto the saddle."

Bashshar flicked his ears, but remained still while Penn carefully lifted his foot over the side of the saddle.

Alicia stroked the horse's neck as Penn settled into the seat. With her fingers clenched firmly on the lead, she whispered encouraging words to the horse. She glanced up at Penn. "For the first time, I'll walk you around the pen, then we'll see how he takes to you."

Penn's freckled face held a mixture of happy excitement and serious concentration. As Alicia led them around the ring, the stallion carried Penn easily, never threatening to bolt or rear.

Later, when the lad had finished several laps by himself, he returned to the fence and flashed her a triumphant smile. "See, I told ye I could ride Bashshar, yer ladyship. Can I ride 'im tomorrow?"

She stroked the horse as Penn climbed down from the saddle. "Providing you show me later how well you've practiced your sums, I think you can ride tomorrow." She glanced up to see Dalton and Ulger standing by the fence. They had been watching her all the time. Her heart skipped a beat at Dalton's approving grin.

Ulger scratched his beard. "If I'd not seen Penn ridin' Bashshar, I'd not 'ave believed it.

"Your son has the makings of a fine jockey," Dalton said to the stable master, but his eyes remained on Alicia. "Most lads would be afraid to ride Bashshar."

"Aye, Penn's always been a plucky lad." Ulger hooked

his arm around Penn's wiry shoulders, his leathery face beaming with fatherly pride.

Alicia handed the lead to Penn. "Have the groom put Bashshar in his stall. I'll see you later."

When the horse was led away, she turned to Dalton. "You really don't mind that I permitted Penn to ride Bashshar?"

"I trust your judgment completely. Besides, Penn has a natural affinity for horses. He truly cares about them. And it speaks well of your training that Bashshar allows Penn to ride." His gaze held such admiration that she could have basked a lifetime in it.

"Thank you, Dalton. I hope you'll always trust me."

He regarded her quizzically for a moment, and she saw something disturbing flicker in his eyes. "Trust is a value that one earns, Alicia."

There was a seriousness in his voice that wasn't there before. Was he referring to Bashshar's training or something else? Her uncertainty increased as he studied her intently. *Why wouldn't you trust me, Dalton?*

Of course! *His mother's infidelity.* The thought crashed down upon her like lightning. He hadn't mentioned the incident since he first spoke of it the morning after their wedding, but she hadn't been able to forget how horrible it must have been for a young boy to carry the shock and betrayal for so long. The idea that she could be unfaithful to Dalton was ridiculous, but that he might instinctively harbor a doubt wasn't as far-fetched.

She ran her fingers along his slightly cupped hand. "I'll never give you reason to distrust me, Dalton. You know that, don't you?"

His shuttered look was gone, and just as quickly, his mouth tilted in his familiar grin. "I agreed to place Bashshar in your capable hands, my dear," he said, "and I'm a man of my word."

She returned his grin, but was well aware that he hadn't answered her question.

Dalton pulled an envelope from his inside vest pocket and handed it to her.

A thrill of excitement shot through her. "Is it from your mother?" she asked as she opened the flap. "I hope she's coming to your birthday celebration. I wrote and invited her and—" Her happiness faded when she unfolded the letter and saw the letter was from the Newmarket Classic Racing Board. She glanced up at Dalton. "I don't understand."

Dalton's smile faded. "I was hoping it would be a surprise." He glanced away. "I'm sorry, Alicia. Don't expect to hear from my mother. I thought I made it clear—"

"Yes, you did, Dalton." She forced a smile. "I—I'm sorry, I was foolishly hoping..." She recovered her composure. "This looks like a registration form," she said brightly.

"Yes," he said, taking the letter. "The forms are to enter Jupiter. Once we fill them out and pay the hundred guineas entrance fee, Jupiter will be registered in the Newmarket Classic."

She was completely caught off guard. "I don't think he's ready. He hasn't been worked since I've arrived at Havencrest."

A look of tenderness crossed his face. "You've given so much of yourself for Bashshar, I'd like to show my appreciation by entering Jupiter in your name. I'll help train him, and between the two of us, we'll make him ready in time."

She couldn't believe her ears. Dalton was an expert horseman who had guided Bashshar's early training, which resulted in the remarkable animal he became before the accident. Her heart swelled with gratitude. "You would do that for me?"

His vibrant blue eyes held her like a sweet caress. "I'd do anything for you, Alicia."

She fought to catch her breath. If only things could stay like this between them. When they were alone together, without the outside world beckoning, she felt such a part of him. But soon reality would come crashing in and... She refused to think of that now.

"Good," he said. "We'll begin Jupiter's training tomorrow. I'll start by clocking him for the quarter mile. We'll see what he can do."

She felt a warm glow at the thought of working with Dalton. Living at Havencrest, sharing her passion for horses with the man she loved was her idea of heaven on earth.

The next morning, Alicia entered the breakfast parlor to find Dalton waiting for her. Instead of the usual formal buffet, a small table and two chairs had been set up in front of the fireplace. She glanced around to find that they were alone—not a servant in sight.

Dalton smiled in response to her surprise. "I told the maids that we'd serve ourselves. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, but why?"

He lifted a silver lid from one of the plates, then he pulled out her chair for her. "I wanted to enjoy our anniversary breakfast with just the two of us."

A shivery feeling rippled through her. "Our anniversary?" she asked, never expecting that he would remember it had been four weeks since they'd exchanged marriage vows.

"One month to the day. I've invited Olivia and Robert for the weekend, as well as your family to share in a small celebration. Although you haven't mentioned it, I thought you might be homesick to see your parents and sisters."

"How thoughtful, Dalton. Yes, I'm very pleased."

After they had finished eating, Dalton pulled a long narrow velvet box from his jacket pocket and placed it alongside her plate. "I have a small token for you to mark the occasion."

"Dalton, I don't know what to say." She sat, then watched him pull up a chair beside her. "I—I'm afraid I don't have a gift for you."

He gave her a tender smile. "Having you as my bride is my greatest gift, sweet one." He kissed her fingers, the touch of his lips searing her skin.

Her throat felt tight with longing. He spoke the honeyed words she wanted to hear. If only he meant them.

Her gaze dropped to the dark-blue velvet box, and she lifted the lid. Inside, lay a gold chain with a medallion at the end—the initial *R*. Puzzled, she fingered the gold letter. The chain was too short to be a necklace. She wrapped the gold coil around her wrist several times. Too long to be a bracelet. Perplexed, she looked at him.

His eyes sparkled with teasing glints. "Give up?" he asked, finally.

She laughed. "Dalton, the jewelry is beautifully crafted, but what is it?" She examined the medallion. "What does the *R* stand for?"

"I'll give you one hint. The *R* stands for Rufus."

"Rufus?" She rolled her eyes. "Explain yourself this instant!" Her laughter joined his.

"Very well," he said, "but you'll have to come with me to find out more, and bring the trinket." He caught her hand and pulled her, laughing, from the room.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the paddock. The rain-clean air was filled with smells of rich earth and lemon lillies. Alicia noticed that Bashshar and Jupiter were already saddled and waiting. She glanced over her shoulder at Dalton. "What have the horses to do with my present?"

He chuckled. "Patience, my love. You'll see."

More curious than she cared to admit, she noticed that neither horse was equipped with a sidesaddle. "Dalton, what will the servants think if they see me riding astride?"

"They know they'll be strung up by their eyeteeth if they dare say anything." His playful mood was contagious.

“Actually, I thought you might enjoy a race. I’m amazed at the speed Jupiter has shown lately. I think he might almost be as fast as Bashshar.”

“Very well,” she said, enjoying this fun-loving side to her husband that she’d rarely seen before. Hooking the gold chain to the saddle, she asked, “Which path shall we take?”

“We’ll ride across the open fields to the gamekeeper’s cottage.” Dalton pointed to the gently rolling hills in the distance. “The terrain and distance are similar to the grassy track at Newmarket.”

Dalton gave her a hand up, while Alicia put her foot in the stirrup, and swung her leg over Bashshar’s back. She carefully folded her full skirt to cover her legs. The stallion pricked his ears and eyed the other horse nervously. “Easy, boy,” she said, rubbing Bashshar’s powerful neck.

Dalton climbed onto Jupiter’s saddle and wheeled the horse in the direction of the gamekeeper’s cottage. Alicia trotted Bashshar a safe distance from Jupiter, then waited for a signal from Dalton.

Bashshar quivered with excitement, as though he sensed the competition. When Dalton gave the signal to begin, Alicia urged the black stallion into the match. With smooth strides, Bashshar’s long legs ate up the ground beneath them.

Cool damp wind whipped back Alicia’s hair as Bashshar took a commanding early lead. The sound of creaking leather and thundering hooves resonated her senses as the superior animal beneath her exploded with energy and drive. Fence posts and hedgerows whizzed past them as Bashshar surged ahead, holding the lead with little struggle. Minutes later as they raced around the bend, the gamekeeper’s cottage rose into view. Alicia stole a glance over her shoulder at Dalton. He and Jupiter were several lengths behind, and she was filled with the pride of victory. It was

more than winning a race. Bashshar had the makings of a class champion.

She was out of breath by the time she dismounted, grabbed the gold chain and waited for Dalton. When he finally rode Jupiter to the fence and dismounted, she could read the mixed emotion on her husband's face.

"Bashshar's speed has never been faster," he exclaimed, patting the stallion's glistening back. "But I really thought Jupiter would perform better."

She couldn't help but feel pleased that Dalton took such an interest in Jupiter. "He's still young," she said, hoping to offset his disappointment. "Let's race back, and this time you ride Bashshar."

His eyes twinkled with mischief. "Ah, but first, you must see your present."

She glanced at the gold chain dangling from her fingers. "I must admit, I'm extremely curious. Where have you hidden it?"

"Inside the cottage." Dalton opened the white picket gate for her. She gave him a quizzical look, then strode toward the front door. Pink honeysuckle climbed beside the window.

Her hand barely touched the knob when a huge grey wolf sprang at her from inside the window. Alicia fell back into Dalton's arms. His rich laughter filled the air. She stared at the hairy giant barking at them, then her heart skipped with joy.

"An Irish wolfhound!" She pushed open the door and the pup jumped up, propping its huge front paws on her shoulders. A wet tongue licked her face. If she hadn't braced herself against Dalton, the dog would have knocked her to the ground.

Dalton pointed at the dog. "Get down, Rufus."

Obediently, the wolfhound dropped to the floor.

"Dalton, he's only a puppy," Alicia said, kneeling be-

side the animal. She scratched his wiry forehead. Rufus's tail thumped loudly on the rug.

"He's nine months old. The gamekeeper has been training him, and the pup knows better than to jump on people." Dalton couldn't keep his face straight as he leaned over and feigned a scowl at the dog. Rufus barked, then licked Dalton's face.

Alicia couldn't help but laugh. "Come, Rufus. Let me see how your new collar fits." The wolfhound's teeth caught the edge of Dalton's cuff and tugged playfully before releasing his hold.

Dalton laughter was warm and rich. "Perhaps Rufus only obeys the gamekeeper."

Alicia snapped her fingers and the wolfhound loped immediately to her side. She slipped the chain around the dog's ruff. "A perfect fit," she said, ducking out of the way of Rufus's expressive kisses.

"He'll need a bigger collar in a few months," Dalton said, moving to the door. "He's only half-grown, I'm afraid."

Rufus sat, tongue flopping, as Alicia stroked the dog's chest. She was filled with delight. Her husband was one of the wealthiest men in the realm, a man who could afford to give her anything she would want—and he did. "Oh, Dalton, there's nothing you could have given me that I would love more," she said. "How did you know I love Irish wolfhounds?"

"I don't think there's a puppy you wouldn't love," he said with a laugh. Then his smile faded. "Wolfhounds are intelligent, even-tempered. Loyal." His voice lowered. "Rufus will be good protection."

Her fingers stilled, and she suddenly understood. Dalton was worried that someone might repeat the attempt to shoot Bashshar. A dog would provide warning if a stranger dared approach. "You're afraid that whoever shot at us might try again?"

He looked away, his dark and rugged profile contrasted sharply against the sunny window filled with the scent of honeysuckle. "Alicia, I'll not lie to you." He turned and looked directly at her. "I don't know if the shooter will strike again, but if he does, we must be ready. Inspector Leary will be arriving from London sometime today. I'd like you to join us when he gives his report."

Her fingers toyed with Rufus's collar. "Of course," she said, her tone equally serious. "Did you write him of the latest shooting incident?"

"Yes, and he believes we should take every precaution."

"Such as?"

"It might be best if you let someone know where you are at all times."

Her hand rose to her throat. "But surely I'm not in peril."

"We don't know for certain who is the target. If it's Bashshar, you're with the stallion more than I. I don't want you endangered."

A sudden thought crossed her mind. "Oh dear, then Penn and Ulger—"

"I doubt if they're in jeopardy. Unless the shooter changes the routine, he's only struck when Bashshar is away from the stables. Perhaps he's afraid he'd be too easily spotted by the servants."

"Unless, of course, the shooter is one of the servants." She surprised herself with her words. Dalton's expression didn't change and she realized that the idea wasn't new to him. She felt a sudden chill despite the warm September morning.

"Almost all the present staff have been born into service at Havencrest," he said as though sensing her worry. His mouth tilted with a wry grin as he patted the dog's neck. She noticed how deeply tanned and masculine his strong hands looked against the dog's silver-gray fur. "I'd like to believe the servants are loyal."

Dalton was so proud—he would be devastated if one of his staff proved to be involved in a plot to harm Bashshar. “I’m sure they’re loyal, Dalton.” How she wanted to say or do something to comfort him, yet there was little she could do. She rose to her feet and brushed at her skirts. “If Inspector Leary is arriving soon, perhaps we should return to the manor.”

“Hmm, we probably should.”

Alicia barely touched the doorknob when Rufus rushed to her side. “Do you think Rufus will follow us back to the manor?” she asked.

“He’ll probably race ahead and be waiting for us at the stable,” he answered dryly. “The kitchen door, more likely. The gamekeeper said the dog will eat us out of house and home.”

She chuckled, glad that his good humor had returned.

Outside, Jupiter gave a nervous whinny when Alicia mounted the horse. Uneasy, she glanced along the stand of oaks and coppery beeches that bordered the rear of the cottage. Although she saw nothing unusual, the hair at the back of her neck prickled. She felt as though someone were watching them.

She gave herself a mental shake at her foolishness. She and Dalton were a safe distance from any dense thicket that might conceal an armed man. Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself. Of course they were safe.

Dalton swiveled Bashshar in a tight circle, then reined sharply to move beside her mount. When she nodded the signal, both stallions leaped forward, hooves pounding against the soft earth. Beneath her, Jupiter’s muscles clenched and flexed, the animal easily taking the lead. She leaned forward in a crouch as rider and horse became one.

Rufus’s barking confirmed that the wolfhound was keeping up. She dared not lose concentration with a glance over her shoulder. Wind tore at her face as memories of her dream of Jupiter becoming one of England’s most notable

racing stallions flashed through her mind. Now, she realized, that hope—thanks to Dalton—might come true. Although younger and less experienced, Jupiter possessed a winning spirit. She felt a renewed sense of pride. In time, Jupiter would be prove himself a winning champion.

As both horses rounded the last field, Bashshar gained speed. Alicia pressed her horse forward, and he took a slight lead. She felt exhilarated and flushed with excitement when both horses rode to a pounding finish. She and her mount thundered past the gatepost only seconds before Dalton and the black stallion.

Alicia shouted with sheer joy. "I won because I'm not as heavy as you," she offered as an excuse a few minutes later when they dismounted. "With a lighter jockey, Bashshar would have won easily."

He gave her a dazzling smile that showed he was as pleased as if Bashshar had won. "Weight is a factor, but—" he glanced at Jupiter, who was barely breathing hard "—it's possible that due to Bashshar's traumatic experience, he'll only win if you're his rider."

She had never considered it before, but what he said might be true. As they walked back to the paddock, what Dalton said about Bashshar only winning if she were riding him was intriguing.

"I'm very pleased with Jupiter's time," Dalton was saying, but she was only half listening as she led Jupiter along the trail.

What if she were to ride Bashshar in the Newmarket Classic? Intriguing idea, indeed.

Chapter Sixteen



Rufus was close on her heels when Alicia strode into the library, a few hours later, to finish her letter to Kimbra. She stopped at the writing desk in the corner and took a seat. Picking up the quill, she hesitated before dipping the nub into the inkpot.

In front of her was the half-written letter to her sister, and she remembered the question Kimbra had asked on the eve of Alicia's wedding. *Do you want to marry the duke?*

She blushed, realizing how naive she'd been when assuring Kimbra that marriage to Dalton would be bearable. Her pulse pounded just thinking about him.

How would she have ever guessed that sharing a quiet evening together was so exciting? Whether he was reading a book or she was seated with her watercolors, they were always aware of each other. This part of their arrangement was more enjoyable than she could have ever imagined.

She loved his teasing remarks and smouldering glances. In fact, she had no idea married people behaved in such a manner.

She put down the pen and scratched Rufus behind the ear. Certainly her parents never had! Her blush deepened at the thought. Perhaps when her mother and father were

young and first married...? Were they so different from she and Dalton?

At the time, she had answered her sister truthfully, but little did Alicia know what magnificent pleasures awaited her. What followed when she and Dalton went to bed was more than marvelous. He was an incredible lover, and he'd taught her to relax and enjoy the sensuous delights that went on between them.

She leaned on her elbow and stared into the fire. Of course, Dalton had had many mistresses before marriage—women more beautiful and experienced than she. Compared to the others, he must find her dull in comparison, although Dalton's innate sense of kindness would never allow his displeasure to show.

No doubt he'd been a passionate lover with the other women in his life. Dalton knew how to handle women. Her good mood faded as the realization dawned on her: Dalton was a gentleman, and until she bore his heir, he would do everything to make her enjoy their lovemaking. And in return, she must accept the limitation of their arrangement and behave accordingly. She bit down on her lip.

No more responding to him like a besotted young girl, wildly in love with romantic notions. She'd be warm and generous to his demands...

Whose demands? Her cheeks warmed with the truth. She met his passion equally, and found herself almost insatiable for him.

Alicia folded the unfinished letter in the desk drawer. She would finish Kimbra's note later.

She moved to the window, the afternoon sun casting dappled shadows through the trees, and she couldn't help wonder if she'd be at Havencrest or Marston Heath next autumn.

The thought gave her a start. If she became with child, she was determined to leave without a whimper. He would be free to return to his former life, and she'd show him no

tears. Dalton was an honorable man who never pretended to love her. Somehow, she'd find it in her heart to honor their agreement....

Rufus barked before Alicia heard the rap at the door. She glanced up to see Dalton entering the room. The smile he gave her was especially appealing. "I hope I'm not disturbing you." Dalton's appreciative gaze swept over her new gown of jade watered silk. "As ravishing as you look, my dear, it is I who am disturbed, in a most disconcerting way." He chuckled, and his husky voice drew a flutter deep in her belly.

She smiled back at him, her cheeks warmed more from pleasure than shyness.

"A courier just arrived with a letter." Dalton's teasing smile told her it was no ordinary letter. He pulled a creased white envelope from the leather courier bag. "It's from Justin."

"Justin!" She was surprised how elated she felt to hear from him again. "Where is he?"

Dalton unfolded several sheets of paper. "He's in London at the moment. He's planning to join Wellington's army in Portugal." His gaze scanned the first page. "He says that he won't have time to see us at Havencrest before he leaves." He grinned. "Let me read you this passage:

"I don't have to tell you, old chap, what thoughts are going through my mind while waiting for news of my commission. With luck, I'll be leaving before next week to take part in Wellington's expeditionary forces in Portugal. As I wait, I can't help but think of you and that lovely wife you don't deserve, living in the peace and quiet of Havencrest."

"Poor Justin. What a brave thing to do—help fight against Napoleon." She was aware of the surprise in her voice. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Please keep reading," she said.

"I think you know how lucky you are, Dalton, and

when the war is over and if I return to England in one piece, I might look for a country estate and settle down with a wife, too. Yes, I know what you're thinking, old chap. A rake such as myself could never settle for one woman. But I've felt a touch of envy while watching you with your bride. You have something very precious, old chap. Give your bride a kiss for me. Tell her that you're one lucky man to have married her.'" Dalton's voice broke off.

"I can't imagine Justin Sykes as the sedate country gentleman, can you, Dalton?" she laughed.

"No, but I'd wager that many have said the same about me. That is, those who have never met you, my dear." His mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Justin is completely smitten with you, Alicia. *That* I do know."

She blushed. "Strange, I never would have thought that I would care to see Justin Sykes again, but the little I saw of him, I realized he can be quite charming."

Dalton smiled. "All rakes are charming, my dear."

"Yes, I know. I married one."

"Touché." His rich laughter joined hers. "I think Justin might appreciate a cheery note from you. I think you're a good influence on him, and your letters will help keep up his spirits during the campaign."

"I'll write him."

He kissed the top of her head as he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. She could feel another envelope inside his jacket. He watched her, grinning, as she found the letter and snatched it from his inside pocket.

"It's from your mother!" Alicia felt a thrill of excitement. "I hope she's accepted our invitation."

Dalton looked pleased even though he had warned her not to expect a cordial reply.

"I thought you might enjoy opening it."

She shot him an I-told-you-so smile as she withdrew the

sheet of expensive, cream-colored stationary. "It's a very terse note, but a note just the same."

Alicia's smile faded. Dalton read the note over her shoulder. He let out a loud audible breath. When he looked up, his blue eyes blazed. "My mother is getting married."

Alicia took a deep breath. "Yes, she's marrying Lord Templestone!" The tall, strikingly handsome man who had been the dowager's constant companion came to mind. Although she had no reason, Alicia had disliked the man. Perhaps it had been the strain between Dalton and Templestone that she'd sensed. Whatever it was, she always trusted her feelings. "I see that you're not pleased, Dalton?"

"It's none of my business whom my mother marries," he said, walking to the fireplace. He paced back and forth, and Alicia could see that he was more than a little concerned.

"How well do you know Lord Templestone?" she asked.

"Well enough to know his first two marriages were with rich, older women."

She gasped. "Are you implying—"

"I'm merely stating facts."

Despite Dalton's denial, Alicia knew he was worried. "Perhaps you'd like to speak to your mother?"

Dalton huffed. "My mother has never listened to logic." He picked up the letter again. "She's inviting us to a dinner at Templestone's London town house in several weeks." He lifted a brow. "I suggest we decline."

Alicia fought back the unpleasantness of declining any family social engagement, although it was quite obvious Dalton had been correct about his mother—she wouldn't even honor Alicia with a refusal to Dalton's birthday celebration.

As though reading her thoughts, Dalton moved to her side. "Don't be sad. I can think of much better ways to

spend an evening." His eyes flashed wickedly, and she tried desperately to look disapproving, but she couldn't.

"What excuse will you offer your mother?"

Without warning, he cupped her chin, gently drawing her face to his. "I'll tell her that we're still on our honeymoon."

Her knees felt weak when he looked at her with such tender desire. He brought his lips down against hers. Her heart pounded as his mouth became more demanding. Passion heated within her as her arms wound around his neck and she surrendered to him.

"Oh, Alicia, how I want you," he said, his arms encircling her waist.

Her eyes fluttered shut. *You desire me, but you can't find it in your heart to say you love me.* She pushed the thought from her mind. It didn't matter, she told herself. He wanted her, and for now, that was enough.

It was nearly 3:00 p.m. when Inspector Leary arrived from London. Seated beside Dalton on the gold brocade sofa in the drawing room, Alicia studied the dignified, bespectacled man. Probably in his early fifties, he was solidly built. She wondered if his full gray beard might hide a double chin. He pulled an official-looking paper from his portfolio.

"On my last visit," Leary said, "you instructed me to quietly arrange for you to underwrite the loan your brother-in-law was seeking." He glanced up, his gray eyes the same shade as his beard. "You'll be relieved to learn that my men have discovered why he required such a large sum of money."

Surprised, Alicia turned to Dalton. "Why would you probe into Robert's personal finances?" she whispered.

"The inspector is looking into anything unusual, my dear. Robert was seeking large loans. He even mortgaged

the family estate in Surrey, which was part of Olivia's dowry."

"Dalton," she said, bristling with indignation, "the idea that Robert was suspected of wrongdoing is simply shocking."

"Your ladyship, a serious investigator can leave no stone unturned," Leary added in defense. "I'm happy to report that our suspicions were groundless." His mouth twitched. "As you can see by my report, your brother-in-law used the money to buy shares in the *White Dove*, a trading vessel loaded with sugarcane. Last week, the ship sailed into port, safe and sound. Today, he's a wealthy man."

Dalton's gaze swept over the document. "I'd never take Robert for a gambling man, but this long shot certainly paid off." His vibrant blue eyes danced. "I'm happy for him and Olivia."

"You must admit, your grace, that his attempt to borrow large sums looked suspicious. In fact, the reputable money lenders had already turned him down. If it hadn't been for your guaranteed note to back your brother-in-law's loan, he might never have found a banker."

"And my backing will be kept confidential, Inspector," Dalton demanded.

Alicia felt a rush of admiration for her husband. Although he had no idea why Robert needed the money, Dalton had put his faith in Robert to back his loan.

"What's important is that you no longer suspect Robert," Dalton said with finality. His eyes fixed with hers, and he gently squeezed her hand. "The inspector is right, Alicia. It may seem ruthless, but being meticulously thorough is why this gentleman runs the best agency on Bow Street."

The inspector's face flushed with the compliment. "Why, thank you, your grace."

Alicia leaned forward. "Who else is on your list of suspects, Inspector?"

He drew another paper from the portfolio. "We cannot dismiss Ulger, the stable master."

Alicia bolted upright. "Certainly not Ulger!"

Dalton clasped her fingers in his warm hand as though to reassure her. "What makes you think so, Inspector?"

"It's been rumored that Ulger hasn't taken too kindly to your wife being put in charge of Bashshar's care. The locals at the tavern have teased him rather harshly, in fact."

Dalton grimaced. "Ulger comes from a long line of stable handlers. He's one of the best horsemen I know. Before my wife arrived, I discussed the matter with him. Ulger showed no resentment that Lady Alicia would remain to help the horse."

"Perhaps Ulger wouldn't have confided his true feelings, your grace," Leary pointed out.

Dalton shook his head. "I know the man, Inspector. He's a good soul."

Alicia listened, relieved that Dalton confirmed her feelings about Ulger. Although she didn't know the man as well as Dalton, she felt Ulger was trustworthy. Besides, she had watched him with his son, Penn. She trusted her intuition completely.

She also realized that beneath her husband's aloofness was a man who cared deeply for others. And with all of Dalton's ducal responsibilities, no matter seemed too trivial if he could help.

Inspector Leary grunted. "Nevertheless, it's in your best interest that my men watch him." He sent a piercing glance at Alicia then Dalton. "Rumor at the pub is that your ladyship has cured Bashshar. Although you've said he's loyal, Ulger, who considers himself a horse expert, might not take kindly to be usurped by a woman."

Leary peered over his eyeglasses as he continued. "As you know, your grace, the past two shootings have occurred in broad daylight with only servants about. It's unfortunate to think one of your staff might be capable of such a con-

temptible act, but to be blind to that fact might put you both in extreme peril."

Alicia could feel Dalton tense. He leaned forward, his jaw muscle clenched. "I want my wife to be aware of the facts, Inspector. But I won't have her frightened needlessly." His tone brooked no argument.

Leary pushed his spectacles up to the bridge of his nose. "Forgive me, your ladyship."

"I understand," Alicia said. "You're only doing your job."

Dalton leaned back and stretched his long legs. "What about Elizabeth? Her family's estate borders Havencrest. Surely she is on your list of suspects?"

"At the time, Lady Elizabeth was on her honeymoon in Vienna." At Dalton's surprise, the inspector's eyes widened. "Surely you knew she recently married Lord Rothbury?"

Dalton glanced at Alicia. "No, I've not bothered to read the society pages of late."

The memory of Elizabeth taking a whip to Bashshar flashed in Alicia's mind. Thank goodness Elizabeth was out of the country. Alicia knew it would be a long time before Elizabeth's fury against them would die down, if it ever could.

"I've ruled out members of their family, too," the older man said. "Lady Elizabeth's parents have been on the continent for most of the year, and her brother has not left the university in Cambridge."

Dalton shook his head. "Frankly, Inspector, I don't think we have any strong leads. Maybe we should hire more men."

"We have every available man on the case, your grace. Although it's unpleasant to think the shooter might be one of your servants, all clues point that way."

"You mean because it would be difficult for a stranger to do the act and not be seen?" Alicia asked.

He nodded. "Consider the most recent shooting. That morning, all the servants knew you were having a picnic. Whoever shot at you had little time to prepare, yet he was in position, ready to strike with little more than a few hours of notice."

"Put some of your men within my staff," Dalton suggested.

The inspector smiled. "That's what I was about to suggest."

Dalton shrugged. "See my steward. He takes care of all that."

Leary nodded. "I'd also like to stake several of my men in the gamekeepers' cottages throughout the estate."

"Do whatever is necessary," Dalton said, obviously perturbed. "Have you found out any more about Templestone? My mother is planning to marry him."

Leary raised a brow. "Really? I wonder if that might account for the large transfers of funds from your mother's bank account to Templestone's."

Dalton uncrossed his legs and leaned closer. "How large?"

The inspector shuffled in his leather folder and pulled out another draft. "Here are the figures, your grace."

Dalton glanced at the sheet and whistled. "Good God, she's given the man a fortune!"

"Then you have no idea if it was a loan?"

"No, and I'm damned curious. My mother has never been of a generous nature. If Templestone needed a loan, she would probably tell him to seek out a money lender."

The inspector leveled his gaze at Dalton. "Please forgive me, your grace, but is it possible your mother was paying him back on a previously held note?"

He huffed. "Hardly. My mother receives a generous allowance from me. She'd have no reason to borrow funds."

Leary nodded silently. "Then that leaves one of two options. Do you think Templestone sold her something—a

painting, a work of art—or acted as a broker for such a purchase?”

“My mother isn’t the extravagant type—her art purchases are as an investment, not as a connoisseur.”

Alicia watched as the inspector paused, as though choosing his words very carefully. “That leaves one other possibility.”

Dalton looked skeptical. “And that is...?”

Leary straightened in his chair. “Blackmail.”

“Blackmail?” Dalton almost shouted the word. “Don’t be ridiculous, Leary!”

“I’ve offered the four obvious reasons for the large drafts that your mother deposited to Templestone’s account, your grace.”

He rose from the chair, gathering his papers and returning the documents to his portfolio. “I shall return within a fortnight with my next report. Perhaps by then you and your ladyship will have thought of something.”

A soft rap sounded at the door, then the butler entered. “Your sister, Lady Olivia, has arrived, your grace.”

Alicia rose. “I’ll see her in the drawing room, James.” She glanced at Dalton, who was still seated, a serious look on his face. “That is, if my presence here is no longer needed.”

“Of course, my dear,” Dalton said, his mind obviously distracted. “I’ll be along shortly.”

After Alicia had left the room, Dalton turned to Inspector Leary. “I’ll look forward to your next report, but in the meantime, I want you to find someone close to Templestone—a servant, a mistress, anyone—who might know him intimately, and who can be persuaded to spill a few secrets.”

“Persuaded, your grace?”

“Persuaded. Bribed. Whatever you want to call it. But I want to know exactly what he’s about. Money is no object.”

Leary nodded. "Of course, your grace."

After the inspector left, Dalton strode to the sideboard and poured himself a shot of whiskey, then drained the glass.

Something Alicia had said earlier echoed in his brain.

I know this sounds strange, Dalton, but I sense that beneath your mother's pride, she's burdened by something so painful, so hurtful, that it has almost destroyed her.

He laid the empty glass down on the sideboard. Could that remarkably intuitive woman whom he married be right? Could his mother carry a secret from her past, and was Templestone blackmailing her?

By the time Alicia arrived at the front hall, Olivia was waiting for her with outstretched arms. Beside her stood the nanny holding the sleeping baby, Drake. Marie and several other maids were chattering as they removed their wraps.

Olivia, dressed in a royal-purple traveling gown and matching mantle trimmed with silver-grey fox, looked lovely. "Alicia, my dear. I see marriage agrees with you. You're looking especially well."

Alicia smiled, overjoyed to see her. "I'm so glad you could come. My, how little Drake has grown."

"Robert will be joining us in a while. He wanted to speak to the head gardener in the greenhouse." She laughed. "My husband is wildly interested in growing pineapples." She rolled her eyes. "Besides, we have exciting news to share with you."

Alicia guessed that Olivia's news was Robert's good fortune in the commodities market. "Dalton will be along. Let's wait for him in the drawing room."

Olivia instructed the nanny to put the baby to bed in the nursery while Alicia ordered tea. A few minutes later, Alicia was settled with Olivia when Dalton entered the room.

He greeted his sister. "Where's Robert? I was hoping he would join us."

Olivia glanced up at him. "He'll be here soon, Brother. We've just come from London where he's concluded an exciting venture, which he'll tell you all about." She leaned back and studied her brother. "My, Dalton. I've never seen you look more dashing. Apparently married life agrees with you."

He bowed elegantly to his wife. "I owe all my dash to my lovely bride," he said with a chuckle.

Alicia blushed. "Have you heard from your mother? We've just received her news."

"What news?" She looked up at her brother.

Dalton sobered by the mention of his mother. "We received word that she and Templestone are getting married."

Olivia gasped. "Married?" She glanced from Dalton to Alicia. "There must be some mistake. Mother would never marry that scoundrel."

Dalton sat on the arm of Alicia's chair. "I'm afraid there's no mistake, Sister."

"But last week in London, I saw something that would tell otherwise. I had just entered a small shop on Bond Street when I overheard an argument. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Mother and Templestone quarreling. In public, mind you!" Olivia touched the brooch at her throat. "At first they didn't see me. I heard Templestone call out, 'We'll see about that!', and storm out of the shop. Poor Mother's face turned crimson. She just stood there, staring at the door. I was afraid to move from behind the potted palm, hoping she might leave without seeing me." Olivia's eyes brightened. "But before she left, she glanced around, and our eyes met...." Olivia's gaze fell to her lap. "She looked at me with horror. Our mother, so regal, so proud." She shook her head. "I tried to think of something, but

before I could get a word out, she fled, almost running from the shop."

Dalton made a face. "Obviously a lovers' quarrel of little consequence."

Alicia looked up. Although Dalton appeared unimpressed, she didn't believe he took the matter so lightly. He stood and brushed a kiss on Alicia's cheek. "Excuse me, my dear. I remembered something about which I need to speak to Mr. Leary before he leaves." He smiled at his sister, then left the room.

Olivia's eyebrows slanted in a frown. "I've never understood my brother where Mother is concerned," she whispered. "He can be quite unfeeling."

Alicia sensed that Dalton cared deeply about his mother, whether he knew it or not. She didn't believe his act of indifference for a moment. Although she wanted to defend Dalton to Olivia, she decided against it. It wasn't her place. Besides, Olivia didn't know that the dowager's great love was not her husband but his brother, George. Without knowing the truth, Olivia could really never know the complicated woman who was her mother.

"Why do you think your mother is marrying Lord Templestone?" Alicia asked.

"I have no idea! What possible reason could she have?" She sniffed. "Templestone is the one who will profit." A frown creased Olivia's forehead. "Tales of his debauchery provide endless hours of titillating gossip for the ton. I can't imagine what Mother is thinking." Her voice was tight with concern. She paused when the maid entered the room, carrying a tea salver.

The servant placed the tea on the table in front of them. After she left and closed the door, Olivia continued.

"Mother is too proud, too proper, to be associated with the likes of *him*." She took the tea cup Alicia had poured for her, the delicate cup clattering against the saucer.

Sipping her tea, Alicia watched her sister-in-law. "Will you speak to your mother about your concerns?"

Olivia cradled her fingers around the cup. "No. Mother never listens to anyone once her mind is made up."

"But if you spoke to her, perhaps she could allay your fears—"

"My dear, my mother has no wish to allay anyone's fears. She will simply refuse to speak of it." Olivia gazed at her and smiled. "I'm afraid, my dear Alicia, that your mother-in-law can be most trying at times."

"I've invited her to visit us for Dalton's birthday celebration." She smiled at Olivia's gasp of surprise.

"We received your invitation, and I've already responded with a written acceptance. What a lovely idea, Alicia. I can't remember Dalton ever receiving a birthday celebration, now that I think of it." She tilted her head to one side. "Anyway, Robert and I will be here."

Olivia took another sip from her cup. "I think it's most gracious of you to invite Mother after all she's done to you. You're the most forgiving person I've ever met, Alicia. But don't be disappointed if Mother refuses to acknowledge the invitation."

"That's exactly what Dalton said." Alicia smiled when Olivia gave her an I-told-you-so expression.

Alicia rose and pulled the bell cord along the wall. "I want you to meet Rufus," she said lightly, hoping to distract Olivia's sober mood. Within minutes, a maid entered the room.

"Mary, please ask Ives to bring Rufus."

"Yes, your grace." The maid turned and left.

Olivia lifted a delicate brow. "Rufus?"

Alicia grinned. "Wait until you see him."

"Knowing you and Dalton, Rufus must be an animal."

"You'll just have to wait and see."

Just then, a knock sounded on the door, and Ives entered with Rufus. The wolfhound bounded across the room and

leaped over the side table, clattering the tea service. His final leap ended beside Olivia on the sofa.

Olivia clapped her hands. "Good heavens, a horse!" She giggled, petting the silver-gray head.

"He's an anniversary present from Dalton."

"How romantic!" Olivia's fingers curled around the gold chain. "You're a handsome fellow, Rufus. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance."

Rufus slurped his long tongue across her face. Olivia laughed. "Oh, Alicia. I can't wait until you and Dalton have children. You both have so much love to give, and you'll spoil them dreadfully."

Alicia felt a flush warm her cheeks. "Rufus, get down this instant." The dog slunk to the floor and curled up at her feet.

Olivia put her cup and saucer aside and eyed the tea cakes. "How I miss cook's delicious lemon scones," she said, helping herself to a fat, golden morsel. "So tell me," she said, nibbling at the flaky corner, "are you still training Bashshar?"

"Yes, in fact, I have an assistant. Ulger's son, Penn, is helping me. Bashshar accepts the lad, and Penn has the makings of a fine horseman."

Olivia's blue eyes twinkled. "I'll wager Dalton is pleased. Now you'll have more time for him."

Alicia blushed. "Dalton is quite busy working with Jupiter. He's entered the stallion in the Newmarket Classic. Two months won't give Dalton long to prepare."

"Working with Jupiter will divert Dalton's disappointment about Bashshar," Olivia said softly. "He was so discouraged when Bashshar was injured. My brother had his heart set on capturing the Winner's Cup."

Alicia hesitated. "I think Bashshar is ready to race, and I've been wondering..." She was filled with half excitement, half dread. "Do you think Robert might help me enter Bashshar in the Classic as a surprise for Dalton?"

Olivia's eyes rounded with surprise. "Oh, what fun! But do you really think Bashshar can race again?"

"Yes, in fact, I think the experience would do him good."

"What splendid news! But why surprise Dalton? I would think my brother would be thrilled at the idea. He's always wanted Bashshar to race at Newcastle."

"Yes, but..." She wasn't certain if Olivia would accept her plan. Alicia paused, weighing her options. Olivia watched her, her blue eyes bright with expectation. Yes, she would trust Olivia and Robert. If she were to put her idea in motion, she'd need several allies to help.

"You see, Olivia, I'm not certain Bashshar could win if just anyone rode him. I—I thought..." Alicia hoped Olivia wouldn't think the idea utterly foolish, but she pressed on. "I was thinking of riding Bashshar myself."

"You?" Olivia almost dropped her teacup. "Why... that's quite impossible, my dear."

"Why? I've been riding and training horses since I was eight years old. When my grandfather was alive, some of England's greatest jockeys trained at Marston Heath. I watched and learned from the best—"

"I'm sure you have," Olivia said gently.

Alicia lowered her voice "—if I dressed as a man, I know I could ride Bashshar to victory. But there's one problem I haven't worked out yet." Alicia paused to refill Olivia's teacup. "Dalton would know as soon as he read Bashshar's name on the roster that I was the jockey. There's no possible way I could surprise him."

Olivia's eyes lit with an idea. "I'm not so sure. I remember Robert speaking of a mystery entry who won several important races on the continent a few years ago. The horse was disguised in colored silks and the jockey was masked." Her eyes danced with excitement. "What if you did the same?"

"A secret entry? Do you think it might work?"

"I'll ask Robert. His cousin, Lord Teddy, is one of the pillars of the Jockey Club and would help us, I'm sure."

Alicia recalled the distinguished-looking gentleman. "Thank you for offering, but I wonder what Dalton might think."

Olivia looked genuinely surprised. "Alicia, that doesn't sound like you. Besides, Dalton trusts you completely. What better way to show him that Bashshar is cured than to ride him to victory." Her smile beamed. "And if anyone can do it, Alicia, you can, my dear."

Alicia's heart swelled with hope. "I'd do anything to prove that Bashshar is healed. I want this so much for Dalton."

Olivia clapped her hands. "Then it's settled. Besides, I've always wanted to surprise my brother. Ever since I was a child—" she feigned a scowl and lowered her voice "—Dalton has always guessed my surprises." Her smile caused two dimples in her cheeks. "But this time, we'll fool him." She laughed again. "Let me speak to Robert immediately."

The following afternoon, Dalton passed the music room and stopped when he heard his wife humming. He peeked inside and stood watching her arrange yellow tea roses, her lovely face intent on her work.

He recognized the melody of their favorite waltz, and her merry humming brought a special warmth to his heart, a feeling still new to him. In fact, for the past five weeks, two days and nine hours since their marriage, Alicia had brought a greater depth of feeling into his life than he'd thought possible.

She'd infused her magic throughout the ancestral house of Wexton with her special touch. From the bedroom candles scented with his favorite sandalwood to the ubiquitous vases of flowers throughout the rooms, Alicia had trans-

formed the chilly formality of Havencrest into a warm and gracious home.

She had put her special touches on him, too. From their first joining, he knew he would never be the same. From his first waking moment, he could hardly wait to see her rapturous face as he made passionate love with her. How his heart yearned to watch her melt with desire. But it was more than physical passion. Alicia was his heart.

The realization crushed down on him. *He was in love with her.* Dear God, but it was true. He'd never thought it was possible, but somehow, this lovely, incredible young woman had stolen his heart.

"What are you thinking, Dalton?" she called out, sniffing a golden bloom. "You're staring at me with a strange look on your face.

He feigned a serious frown. "I was mentally weighing the agricultural merits of turnips as a spring crop," he said, unable to hide the teasing from his voice.

Her laughter sounded like tiny bells. "You had that far-off look in your eyes," she said, her brown eyes twinkling. "And I don't think it was turnips that were on your mind."

He rounded the piano and came beside her. "How well you know me," he said, taking her hand. But he felt too vulnerable to admit how very much she meant to him.

As if she sensed his thoughts, her eyes lowered in a demure gesture as she smiled.

"What brings such a happy smile to your lips, my darling? Thoughts of your husband, perhaps?" he whispered in her ear.

"Actually, yes." She tilted her head up and looked steadily at him. "But it's a surprise and I can't tell you."

"Hmm, a surprise?" He ran a finger along the nape of her neck. "I know about my birthday celebration. Are you planning something else?"

Her lovely eyes filled with laughter. "I'll give you one

hint," she said, sliding into his embrace. "It's something Robert is arranging, and I won't give you any more hints."

"Robert, eh? Then my sister must know. I'll ask her."

Alicia pursed her brow together in mock horror. "You will behave yourself and ask no more questions." Her arms twined around his neck as he tasted the delicate soft hollow of her throat. His mouth lowered and he felt a shudder of pleasure ripple through her.

"Dalton, I almost forgot! I'm expected at the stables. Penn will have Bashshar saddled and ready for me."

Dalton nuzzled her behind the ear before he released her. "I'll go with you. I'd rather you not ride alone."

"I'd love your company," she said, her smile as warm as a July afternoon.

The sharp rap at the door startled them. Dalton glanced up to see the butler entering the room.

"Your grace, Mr. Brockmoor is here for your fitting."

"My fitting?" It took a moment for Dalton to remember. "Brockmoor, my tailor," he exclaimed, shaking his head. "Damn! I'd forgotten that he was coming from London today."

Alicia grinned. "I'll go ahead, and you can join me when Mr. Brockmoor is finished. You can't keep the man waiting, Dalton."

Dalton gave Alicia a sly wink. "Very well, but take Penn or one of the grooms with you, just to be safe."

"That's not necessary," Alicia said, moving to the door. "I'll be riding Bashshar along the hedgerow, away from the woods and the gaming fields." She smiled at him over her shoulder. "I'll be careful."

Chapter Seventeen



Alicia rode Bashshar along the grassy stretch, reining in when they passed the turnstile gate, which marked the finish of the six-furlong distance. She gazed at the stopwatch again, not believing her eyes. But it was true—under two minutes—Bashshar’s best time yet.

She could hardly contain her happiness since Olivia told her that Robert approved of her idea to ride Bashshar, and promised to speak to the racing board immediately.

Yes, she might have her chance to race Bashshar at Newmarket!

She leaned down and stroked the horse’s neck. “You’re going to make your master so proud,” she said. The stallion blew, tossing his head. If only the board would approve of her registering as a mystery entry.

She glanced around for Rufus, who had taken off to follow a rabbit through the field. “Rufus?” she called, her gaze searching the golden-tipped grass to the far edge of the gaming field. The only answer came from the cedar and spruce branches creaking in the afternoon breeze.

Alicia’s pulse quickened. How far would Rufus trail the rabbit? She glanced across the high ridge of colorful square patches of fields as far as the eye could see, but there was no trace of the dog.

Uneasily, she urged Bashshar through the grass. "Rufus?" she called against the wind. Beneath her, she felt the horse shiver, and she wondered if the horse realized that they were approaching the dense thicket near the place the shooter had last struck. She felt a strange premonition and reined in, deciding to return to the manor. She would have Ulger send the grooms to search for Rufus.

Alicia had no sooner wheeled Bashshar in the opposite direction when she recognized Dalton's two-wheeled curricule, pulled by the pair of white horses, racing across the park. She stared at the dark-haired gentleman driving the carriage and the fashionably dressed lady by his side. Olivia and Robert. Alicia bit her lip. They were heading straight toward the open stretch that bordered the gaming fields.

Alicia brought Bashshar around and raced the horse along the hedgerow path at the edge of the woods, her thoughts on warning Olivia and Robert. If she hurried, she might stop them before they ventured near the gaming fields.

As Bashshar's hooves thundered beneath her, she forced a calm she didn't feel. It wouldn't help the horse to sense her uneasiness, if he hadn't already. Her fears were foolish, no doubt. When she caught up with Robert and Olivia, safe and sound, they would all share a good laugh.

Suddenly Bashshar broke stride and slowed to a trot. He whinnied, tossed his head, his great brown eyes showing white. "What is it, boy?" She stroked his neck, her gaze searching the woods. Except for a splattering of sunlight slanting through the leafy canopy overhead, Alicia could see only vague shadows.

The massive animal beneath her lunged from the trail, branches and limbs snapping and flying at her. For a moment, Alicia had all she could do to keep her seat as she pulled back on the reins.

The stallion charged into the bushes. Alicia clung for dear life, knees pressed to the stallion's sides.

Suddenly, the horse stopped. Alicia pitched forward, almost losing her seat. Directly in front of them, a movement in the alder bushes less than fifteen feet away caused her to look up.

A man, half hidden in the shrubbery, raised a shotgun and aimed for the moving curricule.

She froze. Bashshar curled his lip, baring flashing white teeth. Icy fear shattered through her as the horse screamed, charging for the shooter. She clung on for dear life.

Startled, the man whirled to face them, and his weapon fell to his side. Before he could raise the gun and take aim, Bashshar was on top of him. The horse reared, black mane flying as his front hooves wildly stabbed the air.

The shooter's face paled. He swung the gun, trying to club the horse with the weapon.

"No!" Alicia cried as she stared in terror. With all her might, she pulled hard left on the reins, in a futile attempt to control the horse.

A second later, Rufus's silver head appeared above the tall grass. The wolfhound bolted into the hedgerow toward the man. The dog's snarl was the last thing Alicia heard before Bashshar reared and struck out at the shooter. The man's bloodcurdling scream pierced her senses.

When Alicia finally gained control of the stallion and tied him to a tree, she dashed to the man writhing in the bushes. He sat up, holding his mangled arm. Rufus, with the man's ankle in his jaws, shook the leg as though it were a rag doll.

"Git yer bloody dog off me," the shooter yelled, trying vainly to kick Rufus. The man's hat fell off, revealing bright-red hair.

Alicia stared at Penn's older brother, Neville. Anger and outrage surged through her. She glanced at the shotgun lying a few feet away. She dashed over and picked up the weapon. "How could you, Neville!"

"That bloody 'orse broke me arm!" the man accused.

A flood of relief filled her. Thank God Bashshar hadn't killed him, as she'd first thought. But the shooter's right arm was definitely broken.

From the nearby tree, Bashshar tossed his head and stamped the earth. Behind her, a voice rang out. "Lady Alicia, are you all right?"

She wheeled around to see three riders canter through the tall grass. She recognized the bearded, bespectacled man in the middle—Inspector Leary.

"I'm unharmed, but the man on the ground is hurt. I think his arm is broken."

"We've been following Neville for the past several days," Inspector Leary said, breathing hard. He swung down from the saddle. "We couldn't arrest him until he attempted to shoot. When I saw you on that black horse heading straight for him, I—I—"

"It's fortunate no one else was injured," she said, suddenly feeling shaky.

"We got here as soon as we could!" the inspector said, his tone apologetic.

The youngest man grabbed Neville by the shoulders. "You've a mighty fine watchdog there, your grace," he said. Turning to the wolfhound, he said, "Okay, laddie. Let go of 'is boot now."

"Come here, Rufus!" Alicia snapped her fingers and the wolfhound reluctantly released Neville's ankle.

The third man helped Neville onto one of the horses.

"Your ladyship, are you certain you're not injured?" Inspector Leary's eyebrows knitted with concern.

"I'm a little shaky, but I'll be fine," she said, striding toward Bashshar. She gripped the reins while she stroked the horse's neck. "Olivia and Robert? Where are they?"

"They're coming this way," the inspector said.

Alicia whirled around to see her sister-in-law run toward her. A few yards away, Robert stood beside the curricule, securing the reins of the white horses.

"Dear God, Alicia, are you hurt?" Olivia called out.

Feeling more disturbed than she cared to admit, Alicia shook her head. "I'll be fine, Olivia." She returned her sister-in-law's quick embrace.

"Bashshar must have sensed the shooter hiding in the hedgerow...." Alicia's voice broke with emotion. "He overcame his fear to protect me." Unshed tears stung the backs of her eyes.

"Thank God," Olivia said softly, her face pale.

"If everyone is all right," said Inspector Leary, "and I have your permission, Lady Alicia, my men will interrogate the shooter at the hunting lodge. As soon as I write my report, I'll come to the manor and notify his lordship."

"Yes, you have my permission," Alicia replied. "I'll be along as soon as I see to Lady Olivia and her husband."

"I'm so relieved you caught that terrible man," Olivia said to the inspector as they watched Neville being led away by two of the inspector's men.

Although she was grateful the shooter was caught, Alicia knew that Dalton would be devastated to learn that Ulger's oldest son had betrayed them. She didn't know what she would do if it was found that Ulger was part of the conspiracy, too.

"Lady Alicia, let me help you to the curricule," Robert said. "I'll tie Bashshar to the back, and—"

"Thank you, but I prefer to ride back to the manor." Alicia grinned at his look of surprise. "I'm quite all right, really. Besides, Bashshar needs to settle down, too." She waited until Robert and his wife were seated in the curricule.

"Are you certain you don't want to ride with us, Alicia?" Olivia's brow furrowed.

"Yes, my dear. I'm certain." Alicia smiled, anxious to return to the manor and explain everything to Dalton before Inspector Leary and his men arrived.

Alicia stroked Bashshar's powerful neck as she led him toward the open field. Climbing into the saddle, she felt

almost giddy with relief that Bashshar had surmounted his fear. She urged the stallion into a canter.

Wind furrowed deep grooves in the tall grass as they raced across the fields. A covey of startled partridge took off in flight. The sudden flutter of wings would have terrified Bashshar when she first saw him. Now, even though he was still excited from Neville's assault, Bashshar hadn't even flinched when the birds ascended.

She released the pressure on the reins, giving the horse his freedom as he carried her across the green meadow, Rufus racing at her side.

Beside the window in his study, Dalton held her in his arms as she calmly recited the dramatic events of the past several hours. He didn't trust his voice to speak. As her heart beat with his, one thought blazed through his mind: *She might have been killed, and he hadn't been there to protect her.*

"Thank God you're all right," he said when she'd finished. She pressed her cheek upon his chest. He closed his eyes, stroking her hair with his palm, breathing in the sweet scent that was hers. She seemed so small, so vulnerable. She made no struggle to leave, as though she knew he found comfort in just holding her. He wanted to keep her this way, in his embrace, safe and secure. Forever.

She moved her hand to his forearm, squeezing gently. "Don't blame yourself, Dalton."

He winced. For all she'd been through, her unselfish concern was for him. He pulled away slightly and met her warm cinnamon gaze. His heart melted when she looked at him like that. "I should have insisted you not ride, and I should have warned Robert and Olivia not to take the carriage near the gaming fields. From a distance, the shooter probably mistook them for us."

Alicia shook her head. "It's over, Dalton. What's im-

portant is that Neville has been apprehended, and we'll soon find out why he did it."

"Thank God you had Rufus and Bashshar with you," he said, pulling her close again.

Moments later, the sound of horses' hooves outside the window drew them apart. Rufus barked as two riders approached. "It's Inspector Leary and Ulger," Dalton said. He squeezed her hand before he released her, and she answered him with a brave smile.

When the butler showed the two men into the room, Dalton took a seat beside Alicia on the settee. Inspector Leary took the wing chair by the fireplace, and Ulger, hat in hand, stood solemnly before them.

"As ye know, I've been stable master same as me father for nigh on forty years, yer grace." Ulger's deep voice was low and rough. "God as me witness, me misses and me knew nothin' 'bout Neville's dirty business. But the shame is on me shoulders just the same. I want to see Neville punished fer what he did. And if you want me to leave Havencrest, I'll understand, yer grace."

Dalton stood and put his hand on Ulger's shoulder. "That's not necessary, Ulger. No father can be held accountable for everything his son does."

Ulger shuffled his feet, tears brightening his eyes. "Thank ye. I—I'll find some way to repay ye, yer grace."

"Go home and see to your wife and Penn." Dalton's voice was soft and gentle. "I'll do everything I can to see that Neville has a solicitor and a fair trial. Try not to worry."

Ulger's chin trembled as he muttered his thanks before leaving the room.

Inspector Leary leaned forward from his chair. "Neville confessed that he was hired by a Mr. Gibbs, who had approached him several months ago. I'm sure Gibbs is a false name, but Neville gave us a fair description. My men are

already checking in the village. Hopefully, we'll soon learn the motive."

Dalton glanced up. "Then you have no idea why Neville shot at my horse?"

The inspector's expression remained solemn. "Your horse wasn't the target, your grace." He swallowed. "Neville confessed that this Gibbs fellow paid him to shoot at you, but only to frighten you. Your horse was shot accidentally, if Neville can be believed."

Although Alicia said nothing, he was aware the color had left her cheeks. The last thing he wanted was to further worry her. "A man in my position makes enemies, Inspector." Dalton tried to appear calm, but his throat was tight with emotion. "I'm very grateful that you and your men were on the job."

Leary beamed with the compliment. "Thank you, your grace."

Without waiting to ring for a servant, Dalton crossed the room and opened the door himself. "Very well, Inspector. I'll wait to hear from you." He hoped the impatience didn't show in his voice, but he was anxious to return to his wife. "Have your men stop at the kitchen on your way out. Cook will see that you have your supper."

After the inspector had left, Alicia rushed to Dalton's waiting arms. "Who are your enemies? And why would someone hire Neville to frighten you?"

"I don't know, my darling, but I'm planning to find out."

Tuesday of the following week, Alicia was teaching Penn how to execute a turn with Bashshar when a jaunty two-wheeled carriage drove up beside the round pen and stopped.

"Father, I've been expecting you," she cried, self-consciously brushing at her dusty skirts. She could hardly contain her joy. "Where are Mother and the girls?"

Neal Spencer smiled down at her. "Darlin' Daughter, you grow lovelier each time I see you," he said, stepping down from the driver's seat. He gave her a warm hug. "Your mother and sisters are presently refreshing themselves from our journey." He glanced at Bashshar, his eyes bright with curiosity. "And how goes the beast's training? And I'm not referring to your husband."

She smiled when she heard him chuckle. "Bashshar is nearly cured of his fear of gunfire, Father. See for yourself what he can do."

Spencer watched silently, his sharp eyes on Penn as the lad put Bashshar through his paces. When Alicia explained how Bashshar attacked Neville, preventing a near catastrophe, her father stared in surprise.

"Daughter, you're a credit to your old father and to Marston Heath." His quick hazel eyes studied the stallion's configuration. "What you've accomplished in so short a time is amazing."

"Bashshar is the one who deserves the credit, and I'm going to have a chance to prove it to the world."

His gaze swung from Bashshar to her. "Prove it? How?"

"You must promise to keep what I tell you confidential."

"Of course, Daughter. Of course."

She glanced at Penn as he rode the stallion around the ring. "I'm entering Bashshar in the Classic this year."

Spencer's eyes widened with surprise. "The Newmarket Classic?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, Father." She could hardly hold her excitement. "Bashshar is one of the fastest racers I've ever seen." She recognized the growing interest on her father's face. "Just this morning I timed him at the six-furlong mark. His best time is a minute and a half."

Spencer's eyebrows raised as he stroked his chin. "Hounds of Jericho! A minute and a half? That horse will be worth a king's ransom if he wins the Classic."

"Father, my reason has nothing to do with money." She brought her gaze back to her father. "Tell me, Father. How are the renovations progressing at Marston Heath?"

"Coming along well, thanks to my devoted attention, I might add. They don't make craftsmen as reliable as they used to. But they know I'm watching their every move, and I'll be getting a day's wage out of them, don't worry, Daughter."

She could hardly keep a straight face. "What would we do without you, Father?"

His grin split from ear to ear. "I'll be returning home to carry on while your mother and the girls go shopping in London." He rolled his eyes.

Thanks to Dalton and his generosity, she thought to herself. But she said nothing as she drew her hand around her father's arm and matched his steps toward the manor.

After dinner, Dalton took Robert and Neal Spencer for a tour of the horse stables, while in the music room, Alicia, her sisters and mother caught up on the latest London gossip from Olivia.

"You must go to Madame Minot's shop on Bond Street," Olivia said to Alicia's mother. "I saw a mauve silk gown and matching bonnet, with silk roses that would be lovely for Kimbra."

Alicia's mother fluttered her fan. "I shall certainly do that, my dear." She laughed. "I'm as excited as Kimbra about our shopping trip."

"I'd rather stay here with the horses and Rufus," Lyssa said, pouting.

"That's because you're eight years old," her mother said, straightening the bow in Lyssa's hair. "Wait a few years, my dear, then you'll know what all the excitement is about."

Olivia glanced at Alicia. "Why don't you and Dalton go with your family to London? Now that Bashshar has im-

proved, you should be able to get away. The change will do you good." She sat up, inspired by the idea. "Robert and I will remain here and look after things until you return."

"I can't possibly get away until the end of next week," Dalton said as he strode into the room. He sat on the arm of Alicia's chair. "I'm meeting my steward for the sheep-shearing festival tomorrow."

Alicia smiled up at him. "Then I'll remain here with you." She loved these pleasant, quiet days alone with Dalton. If she had her way, they would remain here, forever.

Kimbra's smile faded, and she turned to her older sister. "It would be such fun if you would come with us, Alicia."

"Don't let my duties spoil the fun," Dalton added with enthusiasm. "Alicia, I think you should go. You and your family can stay at the London town house. If I can get away, I'll join you in a few days."

Alicia felt a stab of disappointment. Was he tiring of her already? She dropped her gaze to hide the hurt. "Why don't I wait and go to London with you, Dalton?"

"Oh, please! I'd really like you to come," Kimbra pleaded, tugging on Alicia's hand.

Dalton gave Alicia a sympathetic look. "I'll get away as soon as I can. I promise."

Olivia clapped her hands. "Alicia, you'll enjoy yourself immensely."

Alicia glanced around the circle of expectant faces. With little recourse, she reluctantly agreed. "Very well."

"Then it's settled," Alicia's mother said firmly. "We'll leave at dawn."

For the next two days, a drizzle fell over London, which did nothing to ward off Alicia's increasing blue mood. The weather did nothing to dampen Alicia's sisters' and mother's spirits, however, as they merrily purchased bon-

nets, ribbons and fabrics, all of which filled the extra carriage creaking along behind them.

Assorted carriages wheeled past, their drivers and coachmen yelling at one another. Alicia pressed her fingers to her throbbing temples. She felt dizzy and her stomach was queasy.

Then she realized why—she hadn't eaten; in fact, her appetite was almost nonexistent since leaving Havencrest.

Suddenly she realized why—she missed Dalton. With a heart-hungry yearning, she felt as isolated as if she were cast adrift in the fog.

She admonished herself for her foolishness. After all, Dalton wasn't moping about, cow-eyed for her. She was in London, and she should enjoy the opportunity.

By the time the ducal coach returned to Dalton's fashionable town house in London's Park Lane, Alicia had thought of an idea that would make her trip to London worthwhile. She remained in the coach while half a dozen footmen removed the parcels and bundles from the second carriage and carried the purchases into the house. Alicia's mother and sisters were helped down the coach steps and stood at the curb, waiting for Alicia to join them.

Instead, she leaned out the coach window. "I'm going to pay a call on the dowager duchess," she said.

Her mother politely hid any surprise from her face. "Very well, dear." She didn't look back as she hurried the two girls toward the butler waiting at the front door.

"Lord Templestone's residence," Alicia called to the driver, then she settled back against the plush velvet squabs and covered herself with the fur lap robe. With a jolt, the coach jerked forward, swaying and clattering along the cobblestone lane.

She glanced out at the passing carriages glistening in the fog. How could the dowager refuse to attend her own son's birthday celebration if Alicia asked her personally?

Why hadn't she thought of this before?

But what if the dowager refused to see her?

Alicia folded her hands in her lap. If Dalton's mother refused Alicia an audience, then she'd approach Lord Templestone. Either way, Dalton's mother would deal with her, whether the dowager wanted to or not.

"Her ladyship will see you, your grace." The butler ushered Alicia into a small drawing room. The dowager remained seated at a fireside chair, a small open book of poetry in her lap. The familiar cane leaned against the side table. She met Alicia's gaze only after the servant announced her.

"My dear. How good of you to come. Please, sit down." The older woman's words were polite in front of the servant, but the frigid tone was as welcoming as January sleet.

Alicia's mouth felt dry as she took a seat at the far edge of the sofa. Despite the fire in the grate, the room felt damp and chilly. She glanced around, wondering if Templestone was in residence and would be told of her visit.

The dowager's sharp eyes appraised her as if staring through a quizzing glass. "I'm rather curious by this visit, Alicia. Now that you're married to my son, I would think you have everything you want." She made a soft sound in the back of her throat. "Are you here to gloat?"

"Your grace, since I haven't heard from you, I thought perhaps you didn't receive my invitation. I'm here to ask you personally to Havencrest to celebrate Dalton's birthday. We're hoping you'll stay the week." She hesitated, hoping the defensiveness in the dowager's tight expression might fade.

After several moments, the older woman spoke. "You've invited the ton and you want me to attend your little affair as proof of my acceptance of you?" she guessed.

Alicia took a deep breath. "Dalton...dislikes large parties. I've invited only Olivia and Robert and my family."

The dowager's face was a study, alternating between sur-

prise and disbelief. After a long silence, she narrowed her eyes. "There is little love lost between us, Alicia. I'm asking you, again. Why are you here?"

Alicia braced herself, relying on her instincts. "I'm here because I think Dalton would be pleased if you'd honor us with your presence for his birthday." Distrust chilled the dowager's blue gaze, but Alicia continued. "I can't make you like me, but I truly harbor no ill will for what you did to Justin Sykes and me. I understand that you believed, and perhaps you still do, that Dalton and Elizabeth should have wed. But that didn't happen. Now, Dalton and I choose to forget the past. As Dalton's wife, I sense that he cares for you—very deeply. I suspect you love him, too. Otherwise, you wouldn't be so able to hurt each other."

"You know nothing of how we feel."

Alicia ignored her. "I would like you both to be friends."

The dowager raised her chin defiantly. "Does my son know you're here?"

"Well...he knows of my wish to invite you."

"I see." She closed the book in her lap and laid it on the side table. "Let me educate you about my son," she said finally. Despite the dowager's calm words, Alicia sensed the hostility flaring within her. "Dalton has refused any birthday gesture that I've offered since..." Something flickered far back in the older woman's gaze. "I've lost count how many years." Her lips thinned with anger. "He speaks to me only when left with no other choice. Yet you come here and ask me to believe that Dalton wishes my attendance at a party in his honor?"

Alicia averted her gaze to hide her doubt. Perhaps Dalton knew his mother would adamantly refuse, and therefore, he wouldn't have to endure his mother's presence. She cast the idea aside. If that were true, it really didn't matter. The love between this woman and Dalton existed—she could

sense it in both of them. "Why don't you come and see for yourself?"

For a moment, a trace of hope glinted in the old woman's eyes; and for the first time since she'd arrived, Alicia felt encouraged to continue. "You must miss Havencrest this time of year. The ash are beginning to turn golden, the red and yellow dahlias along the south border are breathtaking in bloom." She sensed a slight change in the older woman. "Besides, your grandson, Drake, will be walking soon. You might see him take his first steps."

The dowager stiffened. Alicia sensed that despite the dowager's refusal, an inner struggle waged behind that mask of indifference.

When she spoke, the older woman's voice held no hint to her thoughts. "I'll consider the invitation. My secretary will submit my formal answer to you in a few days."

Alicia stood, feeling dismissed by the curt answer. "Thank you for agreeing to see me, your ladyship." As she was about to leave, the dowager called her back.

"Are you well, Alicia?"

Surprised, Alicia glanced back at the dowager. "W—well, yes. I'm quite fine, thank you. And yourself?"

The dowager ignored the question, her eyes studying her with more than polite interest. "You look rather...tired. You have dark circles under your eyes. Are you certain you've been well?"

Alicia's only answer was a weak smile. Although she had a headache, she preferred not to say anything. No doubt the dowager would believe herself to be the cause.

"You're rather pale, too." The dowager asked, "How is your appetite?"

"My appetite is most excellent." Alicia waved her hand dismissively. "Truly, I'm quite well."

The dowager regarded her for a moment. "I can have my maid bring you a plate of pickled eels, or perhaps a

raw egg yolk mixed with cream and brandy for you to drink?"

The image of eels and raw eggs turned Alicia's stomach. "Please..." she said, her hand over her mouth.

The dowager chuckled, then grabbed her cane and rose to her feet. She came beside her and pressed a cold hand on Alicia's forehead. "You're not feverish," she said, regarding her daughter-in-law carefully.

Her scrutiny made Alicia extremely uncomfortable. "Perhaps I need more rest. I slept little with all the noisy carriages clattering up and down the street last night."

"Hmm." The dowager strode back to her chair and gave Alicia a closed look. "How long have you felt dizzy and sick to your stomach, Alicia?"

"Not long. Only a few—" She hadn't mentioned feeling dizzy or sick to her stomach.

A slow grin crossed the dowager's face. "My dear, you're enceinte."

The idea left Alicia reeling. "Pregnant?" She blurted the word.

The older woman raised a delicate brow.

"But I've only been married for—"

"Long enough." The dowager's mouth twitched. "You have the look, Alicia. I noticed it when you first entered, but it wasn't until I mentioned eels and egg yolks that I knew for sure." She chuckled when the offending image shot another wave of nausea through Alicia.

"Please don't speak of this to anyone until I tell Dalton," Alicia pleaded.

The older woman shrugged. "It's no concern of mine. Your secret is safe with me."

"I—I—I must be going. Please, excuse me." Alicia bolted from the room, past the butler in the hall, and hurried toward the waiting coach.

When she arrived at Dalton's town house, she dashed past the butler who opened the door, and rushed up the

sweeping staircase, hoping to avoid her mother and sisters. Her mother would be curious about the sudden visit to the dowager, and Alicia was in no mood to speak to anyone.

The maids looked up, startled, when Alicia hurried into the master bedroom suite. She dismissed them, saying she would prepare for bed herself. She needed to be alone.

How would Dalton take the news that she was carrying his child? How many times had she prepared for this moment? Yet she felt totally unprepared. She needed to calm herself.

A knock sounded, then her mother stuck her head into the room. "Alicia, dear. The maid said you've returned."

She smiled weakly. "I've a terrible headache, Mother. I thought I would retire early."

"You looked rather pale today, Daughter. I hope you're not ill." Her mother bustled toward her, a worried frown on her face.

"I'm tired, that's all." She pulled the combs from her hair, and the thick waves cascaded around her shoulders. "Mother, I think I'll return to Havencrest. If I leave tomorrow, perhaps I'll arrive before Dalton leaves for London. You and the girls can remain here for as long as you wish. But I really would like to leave the city as soon as possible."

Her mother smiled knowingly, her eyes twinkling. "You miss him that much, eh, Daughter?"

Yes, she missed Dalton desperately. She had never known such emptiness than in these last two days. "Thank you for your understanding, Mother."

Her mother patted her cheek. "Your sisters will be disappointed, but I'll try to explain."

"Thank you, Mother." Her mother leaned over and kissed her cheek, and the gesture reminded Alicia how very much she loved and appreciated this special woman. And now the time had come for her to be a mother. She watched the older woman cross the room.

Would she be as gentle and understanding as this strong and quiet presence who had always been at the center of her childhood? "Mother?" she called out.

The older woman hesitated by the door. "What, my dear?"

In the soft candle glow flickering from the hall lamps, her mother looked almost as young as when she had come to tuck Alicia good-night, listen to her prayers and comfort her when she was small. "Have I ever told you what a wonderful mother you are?"

She smiled. "Yes, my dear. Many times." Her smile broadened. "And someday your children will think that you're just as wonderful." She winked. "Good night, Alicia."

Chapter Eighteen



Although Alicia had been gone only two days, Dalton felt her absence to the marrow of his bones. Despite Olivia and Robert's attempts to distract him with their lively dinner conversation, he felt alone and empty. He knew that hosting the week-long sheepshearing festival was his estate duty, but he decided to accept Robert and Olivia's generous offer to oversee the matter for him. Yes, he would leave first thing in the morning, and with good weather, be in London to surprise Alicia.

"Ives, tell the groom to have my coach ready to leave at first light," Dalton said as he strode into the master bedroom suite to shave. He barely noticed the knock at the door or his valet leaving to answer it. A few moments later, Ives returned.

"Your grace, Inspector Leary is here to see you. Shall I tell him to wait?"

"No, no. Tell him I'll be right down." It had been almost ten days since Ulger's son, Neville, had been captured. Perhaps the inspector had found out who put Neville up to the deed.

A short while later, Dalton sat in his study across from the inspector and studied the latest report. "Where did you find this man Gibbs?"

"We traced him to the dock area in London, your grace. After we questioned him, Neville identified Gibbs as the man who paid Neville to shoot at you. There's no doubt we've got our man."

Dalton reread the confession again, not believing his eyes. "There can be no mistake?"

Leary shook his head. "I did what you asked, and it worked. We offered to drop all charges if Gibbs confessed who put him up to it. Then he jabbered like a sea captain's parrot."

Templestone. Dalton swore under his breath and pushed the paper away. "So why did Templestone hire this man to shoot me?"

"That, we don't know. Apparently Lord Templestone never told Gibbs. Figured his money was all that Gibbs was interested in." He paused, then asked gently, "Should we arrest Templestone?"

Dalton leaned back and raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't want him taken to prison. The less people know of this, the better. I need to speak to my mother first. Prepare her." He glanced at Leary, who nodded his understanding.

"I can arrange to lodge Templestone in the hotel across from our office at Bow Street. We often hold witnesses there, and the manager is very discreet."

"Excellent." Dalton got to his feet, impatient to be done with the matter. "Let me know when Templestone is apprehended, then I'll speak to my mother."

"I'm returning to London immediately, your grace. I can have him picked up at dawn."

"Very well." Dalton felt a heavy weight in his chest. "My mother is residing at Templestone's London town house for the time being. I want your men to arrest him when he's alone. I don't want my mother to witness..."

"Of course, your grace."

After the inspector left, Dalton poured himself a glass of

brandy and glanced at Gibbs's signed confession on the desk. Templestone, his mother's fiancé. Why?

A heavy fog covered London the following evening when a handsome coach with the Wexton ducal crest emblazoned in gold pulled in front of Lord Templestone's town house. A liveried footman jumped down from the back and opened the door while another footman raced up the walk and pounded on the brass door knocker.

Dalton stepped from the coach and hurried up the walk. The damp mist seeped into his bones. He could hardly wait to finish this unpleasant business with his mother, meet Alicia at his town house and return to their bucolic world with her at Havencrest.

A butler opened the door a few inches and peered out at him. Dalton pushed the door open, stepped inside and removed his traveling cape. "The duke of Wexton," he said. He placed his card on the silver tray on the sideboard. "My mother is expecting me," he lied. He couldn't chance the delay if his mother wouldn't see him, so he simply hadn't given her any warning of his arrival.

The butler picked up the card, his frown deepened. "I'll tell her you're here, your grace."

Relieved, Dalton glanced about the small hall. Tastefully restrained. His mother would approve, he thought glumly. The butler returned and Dalton followed him into the drawing room.

"This is unexpected." His mother sat in a fireplace chair. Dalton ordered the butler to close the doors on his way out. He ignored the surprised expression on the servant's face as Dalton crossed the room to warm himself by the fire, feeble as it was.

His mother regarded him with curiosity. "You're the last person I expected, Dalton. I trust you didn't rush over to extend your best wishes on my upcoming wedding?"

"I didn't come here to be rude, Mother." He realized

how much he detested their usual rude banter. "I have unpleasant news, I'm afraid."

She lifted her chin, her eyes on him as he pulled the footstool near her chair and sat down.

"Lord Templestone has been arrested for hiring one of my servants to shoot at me." He watched her face for any sign of emotion, but she presented the same iron mask that he always remembered. An unbidden image of his mother, the night when she had received news of Dalton's father's fatal riding accident in Hyde Park came to mind. She had worn that same impassive mask when she broke the news to her children.

"Where is he?" Her voice rang with command.

"Inspector Leary of Bow Street has provided lodgings for him. He's not allowed visitors."

"Then he's not under arrest?"

"I'm hoping to handle the matter discreetly. However, I'm told that Templestone isn't willing to oblige." He noticed her interest peak. "I want to know why he'd do such a fool thing. If he tells me, then I'll drop the charges and forget the entire matter. I thought maybe you might help him see reason."

He saw a flicker of astonishment cross her face. "Why would you want the charges dropped?"

"Because I hate scandal, and you are associated with him."

"You would do that for...me?"

He wanted to protect the Warfield name—for Alicia and Olivia—but he hesitated. "I did it for you," he said finally, and he realized the statement was true.

Unblinking, her eyes glittered with an unspoken emotion. "And what if Templestone still refuses to tell you?"

"I'll be forced to press charges. The London newspapers will make a circus of the scandal. And the truth *will* come out. It always does." He was surprised by the gentleness in his voice.

"Yes, the truth always does." Her gaze dropped to the smouldering logs in the grate. After a few minutes, Dalton didn't think she was going to speak to him again.

"Why are you giving Templestone huge sums of money?"

She gasped, unable to disguise her shock. "How do you know about that?"

"How is not important. I know the amounts and dates."

She said nothing. The only sign that she had heard him was the clenching of her fingers on the head of her cane.

"I also know you had an argument in public with him." At one time he would have relished the uncomfortable expression on her face. Now, he ached to see her suffer. "I know you'd never show any emotion in public if your life depended upon it." He heard the compassion in his voice, and he understood why. "I'm much like you in that manner."

She arched a brow. "I've always known we were alike, Dalton, but I never thought I'd ever hear you admit it." Her mouth twitched as her gaze dropped to her hands. After a few minutes, she looked up at him. "I trust what I tell you will be kept confidential?"

He was dismayed to see what looked like pleading in her blue eyes. "If I can."

"I must have your promise, Dalton."

"I can't give it, but you know that I'm discreet. After all, I've never told your other secret—" he hesitated, remembering "—except to Alicia, and I know your secret is safe with her."

"Alicia?" The word was so faint, if he hadn't seen her mouth the word he might not have heard her. Anguish crossed her face, and he wished he could take back the words.

Her gaze dropped to the huge diamond ring on her finger. As she twisted the stone, sparkles glinted about the room. "Templestone has been blackmailing me for several years.

He found out that your uncle George and I were lovers. I paid him the money he asked for, but the more he received, the more he wanted. Finally, he ordered me to marry him. I refused. He said if I refused, he would..." Her eyes brightened with what Dalton thought were tears. His throat tightened with compassion for her.

"He would what, Mother?"

Her eyes raised to meet his. "He would kill you."

Dalton was too stunned to speak.

"When I heard that someone had shot at you and Bash-shar, I told myself that it must have been an accident. A careless hunter. A poacher stealing game. But Templestone took great relish to tell me that the near miss was no accident. Only the next time they wouldn't miss." She swallowed, the diamond brooch at her throat glittered.

"I said I didn't believe him. I threatened to call the constable, but I knew that eventually, as you say, the truth would come out. I couldn't bear to have that happen, so I finally agreed to marry him."

Dalton tried to clear the lump in his throat. "Mother, why didn't you come to me?" The words came out before the guilt and shame tore at him. But how could she have turned to a son who had been as cold and distant as he had been?

Her regal head bowed, her shoulders slumped in despair. "No one could have helped me."

He closed his eyes, feeling selfish and childish in his long resentment of what his mother had done. "I'm sorry you didn't feel you could confide that Templestone found out about you and Uncle George—"

A sound strangled deep in her throat. "It's more than that."

Dalton studied her, confused. "What, then?"

She grimaced, her lips pressed into a line. "He found out that your uncle George is...Olivia's father."

He stiffened, trying to take in the full force of her words.

The memory of himself as a young lad scurrying up the staircase, rushing down the darkened hall to his mother's suite. He opened the door and there, in bed, his wonderful uncle George, naked. He turned around and Dalton saw the shock and grief tear across the ruggedly handsome face.

"Of course. Olivia is ten and three years younger than I."

Tears glistened down his mother's cheeks, but she wouldn't acknowledge them by wiping them away. "I loved George ever since I first saw him, many years before my parents contracted my marriage to his older brother—your father—the firstborn son.

"George was my one true love, Dalton. He never married, although I begged him to. Your father was a wonderful man, and I loved him, but not as I loved George. I never did anything to embarrass your father—I don't believe he ever suspected."

She trembled, and he wanted to go to her, comfort her, but he realized, sadly, that she might not want comfort from him.

"I know what you saw in my bedroom that afternoon, Dalton, so many years ago, destroyed any love you have for me. But maybe...maybe, now that you've found happiness with Alicia, you might be able to understand...?" Her voice broke with a sob.

He wanted to say something, do something, and he realized he didn't know how. He didn't trust his voice to speak.

"Oh, my son." Her eyes glittered with tears. "When I lost you, my only consolation was that I had gained a daughter."

For the first time in his life, Dalton realized how wrong he had been. He wanted to ask for forgiveness, but...

Her eyes filled with fresh tears, and when she reached out to him, he was instantly at her side. For the first time that he could remember, he held his mother in his arms.

Long-held hurt and anger melted away as she sobbed against him. In its place was understanding. Understanding and love for this woman who bore him, and love for his precious Alicia—the woman who unlocked his heart and set him free.

When his mother's weeping fell silent, he drew back. "We must decide what to do."

She smiled, touching his face with tear-stained fingers. "Thank you, Son, but I don't think there's anything we can do."

"We must protect Olivia," Dalton said. "She must be told the truth."

His mother's eyes widened in horror. "You mustn't tell her."

"Mother, we have no choice—"

"You promised!"

He took her trembling hand. "No. I said I would be discreet. But if Templestone found out, then others might. More than likely a servant or midwife sold the secret...." He paused at his mother's pained look, and he thought his heart would break.

"But Olivia isn't like you, Dalton. She's so like George, so gentle, so vulnerable." She met his gaze, the pride back in her voice. "You have your father's vitality, his authority." Her mouth lifted. "Even though you have my pride."

Dalton gently squeezed the frail fingers. "Olivia is stronger than you think. She must know the truth to keep from being hurt. You know it's the only way."

She raised her chin, but said nothing.

He kissed the top of her head, then crossed the room. He turned the doorknob when her strangled whisper stopped him.

"But Olivia will never forgive me."

He glanced over his shoulder at the proud woman gripping the cane. "I can't speak for my sister," he said gently.

"But I think she will. In the meantime, you'll always have me."

Through the thickening fog, Dalton's coach tilted and bumped along the cobbles before turning down Park Lane toward his London town house. Never had he seen his life as clearly as now. He felt like a curtain had been lifted on his soul.

Alicia. With her intuition and gentleness, she would know how to break the news to his sister in the less harmful of ways. Sweet loving Alicia. She had shown him the meaning of love. And God, how he loved her. And it was time to tell her so. He could hardly wait.

Alicia stared at the calling card. "Mr. Justin Sykes is waiting in the hall?" Surprised at the late hour, she realized that of all people, Justin would hardly be expected to follow Society's rules of visiting married women.

"Your grace. Shall I show him in?"

She hesitated. Perhaps she should refuse, since Dalton wasn't here. Then she remembered that her mother was in residence, and would be a suitable chaperon. Besides, she was glad to have the chance to speak to him again and apologize.

"Yes, Jamison, please show Mr. Sykes to the withdrawing room. Ask my mother to join us, then bring tea and cakes." As the white-haired butler turned to leave, she added, "And leave the door open after you show Mr. Sykes inside the room, please."

"Yes, your grace."

Alicia ordered the maids to continue packing while she smoothed her skirt and went downstairs. A few moments later, the butler ushered Justin inside the formal room.

"Mr. Sykes, how kind of you to call," she said extending her hand. His dark good looks were set off by a beige

waistcoat of finest wool, matching knee breeches and white linen that contrasted vividly with his swarthy features.

"You're looking lovelier than I remember, if that's possible." Justin kissed her hand, his dark eyes twinkling.

"Do sit down. I've ordered tea."

He released her and took a seat across from her chair. "I saw you, your mother and sisters shopping this afternoon on Bond Street. I took the chance to pay my respects and say goodbye before I leave for the Continent."

"How nice of you, Mr. Sykes. We received your note a few days ago. How brave of you to help fight with Wellington."

His mouth twitched. "*Brave* is not a word often associated with me, Duchess."

She sensed otherwise, but didn't contradict him. "Dalton was detained by estate business, and hadn't planned to join us for several more days. But I've decided to cut my visit short. I'll be returning to Havencrest in the morning. I hope you'll visit us before you depart. Dalton will miss seeing you."

Disappointment clouded his face. "I'm afraid that's not possible. I'll be sailing at first light." He shrugged. "Tell Dalton I'm sorry to have missed him. But I'm very pleased to have the chance to see you again."

He leaned back, taking in her appearance. "Well, is my best friend treating you well? Remember, just one word from you, and I'll beat the man bloody."

She laughed, enjoying the friendly banter between them. "Yes, we're quite happy, Mr. Sykes."

"I'm sure that he is." The smile that started in his eyes spread to his face.

She glanced nervously at the open door. She hoped her mother might not interrupt them before Alicia had a chance to apologize. "I was hoping to have a few private words with you, Mr. Sykes. You see, there's something that's troubling me."

"Of course. Your wish is my command."

"I'm offering an apology, not a request. You see, I'd like to tell you I'm so very sorry for the way I misjudged you."

He cocked a brow as though surprised. "I beg your pardon?" Then his mouth quirked with unrepressed amusement, and he shrugged. "Ah, you have nothing to apologize for—"

"Oh, but I do. You see, I never gave a thought to how maligned you were the night we were erroneously reputed to have..." She glanced away for a moment before meeting his gaze. "I think you know."

Justin nodded, his face serious. "But you have done nothing for which to apologize," he said softly. "Under the shocking circumstances, your behavior to me was as any young lady of quality would react." He regarded her with searching intent. "But only a woman with your kind heart would think to care for my feelings. True, the charge was unfounded, and to be privy to the downfall of a young, innocent maid was a burden I found quite distressing, even for such a rake as myself."

When he stood and reached for her hand, she rose and came beside him.

"I'm most thankful that your name was cleared and the matter finally set straight," he said, her hand in his.

She smiled. "Yes, for both of us."

He gave her a courtly bow. "I must be leaving, Duchess. I am expected for a late supper with several of the officers who'll be sailing with me. I'm so very glad we had this opportunity."

The smile he gave her was dazzling, and she could only wonder how many young ladies' hearts would be broken when they learned he was leaving for war. "For what it's worth, Mr. Sykes, I believe you rather enjoy your reputation as a rake." She smiled at his huff of laughter.

He looked as if he were seriously weighing the idea. She

huckled. "You quite enjoy thumbing your nose at the ton. But I don't think you're as naughty as you try to make people believe."

"You don't?"

Shaking her head, Alicia continued. "No, I'm quite sure of it, Mr. Sykes. I sense you have a very kind heart, too. I think that's why my husband values you so highly as a friend."

"Perhaps it is *you* who brings out the good in me, Alicia. You do that to Dalton." It was the first time he had used her given name—a bold stroke. She watched him measure her for a moment, and she realized that the intimacy was born of their new, mutual friendship.

"Since we're confessing secrets," he said, his voice low, "I have an apology to convey to you, as well."

"Really, Mr. Sykes?"

"Hmm. When Dalton said he was getting married, I must admit that I didn't take him too seriously. But after talking with you and seeing the change in Dalton, I know that he truly loves you."

She turned away. *You're terribly mistaken*, she wanted to cry out. "You know nothing of what you speak, Mr. Sykes."

He placed his hands gently on her shoulders and turned her to face him. "You don't believe Dalton loves you?"

Yes, I want to believe you, but I can't. "I don't wish to discuss this with you, please."

His hands dropped to his sides. "Of course, I'm sorry." He stared at her, then as if to restore their earlier mood, he winked, his mouth lifting in a teasing smile. "I warned you that I was a rake. Completely incorrigible."

She couldn't help return the smile. Tilting her head, she looked at him. "I thought I brought out the best in you?"

"Just think what my worst must be!"

She laughed. "Touché, Mr. Sykes."

Justin took her hands in his. "If I return from the war, I hope I find a woman like you to share my life."

For a split second, she saw her own fear for his future mirrored in his eyes. Her throat tightened with emotion. "Of course you'll return to England, Mr. Sykes," she said with confidence. "And you'll find love waiting for you when you least expect it." She touched his cheek, her eyes suddenly stinging with the threat of tears. "Return to us safe and sound. May God keep you in the palm of His hand."

Justin took her hands and kissed them. "Thank you, my lady."

"Goodbye, Justin." She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. In the few moments of their silent embrace, she sensed something that nearly took her breath away. She could almost see the blood, hear the gunfire, mens' agonizing screams. Yes, she could sense the danger that he would soon face.

When she pulled back and their eyes met, something flickered far back in his dark gaze. If she didn't know better, she would have thought he knew he might not return.

"You'll be in my prayers, Justin." In his embrace, she felt as though she were sending off her own brother to war. For all the time they stood there, she felt a terrifying sense of something dreadful happening.

"Did you hear something?" he asked, looking around.

Justin sensed it, too. It was more of a feeling than a sound. She glanced at the open door. "Perhaps it's Jamison with the tea tray," she said lightly, hoping he believed her.

Justin shrugged, the mood broken. He squeezed her hand. "I must dash. Thank you, again, special lady."

Alicia watched him leave, a deepening sense of disquiet still nagging her. *I wish Dalton were here*, she mused, hugging herself against a sudden chill.

Dalton stood in the shadowed hall alcove and watched Justin leave the withdrawing room and hurry past him.

Dear God, if he hadn't seen them with his own eyes, he'd never have believed it.

His wife and his best friend.

Dalton balled his fists, fighting the urge to run after Justin and tear him apart. But that would be too good for him!

He had to get away. Leave before the servants noticed him. He couldn't face Alicia or anyone before he had a chance to think.

He stumbled down the back steps and waited in the bushes, like some wounded animal, until Justin's carriage wheeled off into the fog. The dampness clung to his face, to his clothes, but he didn't feel it. All he could think of was what he'd just seen. *His loving wife in the arms of his trusted friend.*

For a twisted moment he wondered if he was living his father's life. Had he somehow been transformed, by the powers of Satan, to relive the sins of his parents?

God, he was stark raving mad! He had to get away. He ran through the thick fog until he was beside the coach. He pulled open the door and bolted inside before the footman even saw him. "Drive!" he ordered, barely aware when the coach picked up speed.

Justin's letter, alerting Alicia when he would be in London. Her sudden decision to accompany her mother to London. Her feigned reluctance to leave without her husband.

What a fool he was. Just like his father!

Chapter Nineteen



When Alicia arrived at Havencrest to learn that Dalton was in London, her heart sank. If only she had been more patient to see him and remained in town, they would be together now. Her disappointment dragged on into the next day when she found Olivia with her son in the nursery.

Alicia brushed her finger across Drake's plump cheek. "I stopped for only a moment, Olivia. I'm on my way to go over the menus with Cook. Then I must see Penn, who's waiting to bring me up to date with Bashshar's progress."

"Stay and play with us for a while," Olivia said with a coaxing smile. "Little Drake loves your company. I was about to line up his toy soldiers."

While Olivia chattered, a sudden wave of nausea swept over Alicia; she steadied herself on the back of the chair.

Olivia's smile faded. "My dear, you're unwell!"

Alicia caught her breath and took a seat beside Olivia. "No, I'm quite fine. You're going to become an aunt, is all."

Olivia gasped. "I'm so pleased. Does Dalton know?"

"No. That was one of the reasons I was so eager to see him."

Olivia put her arm around Alicia. "He'll be delighted!" Suddenly, the image of Dalton's child, sleeping and play-

ing in this very nursery where generations of Warfield children had played sprang to Alicia's mind. She wanted to see her child ride Old Cobbie and watch him play with toy soldiers. She wanted to grow old with Dalton. But she had no right to this dream.

She blinked back tears as she rose from the chair. "I can't stay, Olivia. I'll see you tonight after my evening ride."

"If you're with child, Alicia, you shouldn't ride horses."

Alicia whirled around, her hand at her throat. "Oh, Olivia. I hadn't thought of that. Who will ride Bashshar in the Classic?"

Olivia quietly stroked her son's gold hair. "That's not important, now. You must do everything to get your rest and take care of yourself and your baby."

"Of course, you're right." Tears blurred her vision as she dashed from the nursery and fled down the hall.

After supper, Alicia was preparing for bed when she heard Rufus bark from the stairway. A rush of excitement filled her with joy. Dalton was home! Before her hand touched the knob, he opened the door. Her spirits soared as she flew to his arms.

Although he had braced himself against the onslaught of rage he would feel at seeing her again, Dalton wasn't prepared for his overwhelming need to hold her once more.

She clung to him, and he caught her scent of wild roses. For a second, he wanted to rip from his mind the image of what had occurred between her and Sykes, and never let her go. But just as quickly, reason returned, and he released her.

"Oh, Dalton, I've missed you." She pulled back, her gaze searching his face. "What's wrong, Dalton?"

He should have known she would sense his mood. "I've some news I must tell Olivia. I'd hoped you would help me."

"Of course, Dalton." She waited for him to continue.

"Templestone was the man who had ordered the shooting." He ignored her gasp of surprise as he continued. When he told her about his visit to his mother, he waited for her reaction.

"Dear sweet Olivia. This will break her heart."

"I thought she might want you there when I tell her."

"Of course, Dalton."

"No use putting off what must be done," he said finally.

Olivia and Robert were playing cards in the drawing room when he and Alicia entered the room. "I'm glad you're here, Robert," Dalton said, closing the doors. He ordered the hall butler to leave, then ordered that they were not to be disturbed.

When Alicia took a seat beside his sister, Olivia's face paled. "What's wrong?" Olivia asked, her gaze fixed on him.

"We have something to tell you, Sister." Dalton sat across from Robert, who folded the cards and put them to one side.

Dalton explained all the events leading up to his visit with the dowager duchess.

"But why was Templestone blackmailing Mother?" Olivia asked.

Dalton hesitated, then glanced across the table at Alicia.

"Olivia," Alicia began gently. "Before your parents were married, your mother was in love with another man. But she was forced to marry your father, the firstborn son."

Olivia stiffened. "That's not true. She loved only Father." Olivia glanced at Dalton as though looking for support.

"Yes, she loved Father," Dalton said gently, "but not in the same way she loved his younger brother, George."

"That's slanderous!" Surprise and fear crossed Olivia's face. "I don't know if I want to hear any more."

"You must, Olivia." Dalton fixed his eyes on her.

"No." She stood and stepped back, almost tipping the chair.

Robert rushed to his wife. "See here, is this necessary?"

"I'm afraid so." All Dalton could think of was the image of Alicia in Justin's embrace. His gut ached as though he'd been kicked. He wondered how long she had known Justin. The next question burned in his mind. *Were Alicia and Justin innocent when found together that fateful night? Or was it a lover's tryst? Dear God, what if the dowager had been telling the truth?*

"You've always been cold and unfeeling to Mother." Olivia spat the words at him. "Ever since I can remember, you and she—"

"Sit down, Olivia," Dalton said, his voice gentle.

Robert put his arm around his wife, then frowned at him. "I'd like to speak to you privately, Dalton."

Dalton sighed. "There's no easy way to say this." He looked at his sister. "Olivia, your father was not the man you've come to know as your father. Your real father was Uncle George."

Olivia laughed. "What did you say?"

Robert pointed at Dalton. "See here, that's about enough—"

Alicia rose and came beside Olivia. "Try to understand—"

Olivia stared at her. "Is this some sort of cruel joke?"

"It's true, Sister." He leaned in his chair and stared at the three of them. "Mother and George were lovers."

"No! You're wrong." Olivia shook off Robert's hand and stepped back. "Who would dare tell you such a lie?"

Dalton met her challenge. "Mother told me."

"I don't believe you!"

"Dalton doesn't want to hurt you, dear. You must know for your own protection." Alicia's warning caused Olivia to falter.

"What do you mean?" Olivia snapped at Dalton.

"Templestone found out the truth and was blackmailing Mother." Dalton's voice held none of the heartbroken emotion he felt. "Not satisfied, he insisted Mother marry him. She accepted to keep her secret safe."

Tears welled in Olivia's eyes. "How long have you known?"

Dalton felt a new stab of anguish. "I've known since I found them together when I was a lad."

"And that's why...?" The truth hung heavily in the air. Olivia's expression hardened. "Did Drake know?"

Dalton shook his head. "I never told a soul except... Alicia." He was awash in pain as he remembered their newfound closeness he'd felt when he confided the secret. Alicia had appeared so sympathetic. He glanced at her now, her lovely face concerned for his sister. Damn, she was the perfect actress!

"Olivia," Alicia said softly. "Your mother must be grief-stricken by this. We can't judge that which we do not know."

Dalton bit back a bitter huff of laughter.

"I still can't believe it!" Olivia shook her head, then put her head on Robert's shoulder and sobbed.

Anger and betrayal crushed down upon him again, like an icy ocean wave.

"No wonder you treated her with such disdain," Olivia said bitterly. "I never want to see Mother again."

"Your mother loves you, Olivia." Alicia pulled a folded lace square from her pocket and gave the handkerchief to Olivia. "Imagine how hard it must have been to live with this horrible secret."

"I hope she was miserable!" Olivia muttered.

"Try not to judge her, my dear," Alicia said, putting her arm around her. "It will only make you bitter."

Dalton couldn't stand another minute of this. Did Alicia expect that he should look the other way, too? Forgive her trespass with his best friend?

"I think you need time alone, Sister." Dalton strode to the door. Before he opened it, he turned to his wife. "I'd like to speak to you, privately Alicia. Immediately."

Alicia glanced at Robert. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Robert nodded, enfolding his sobbing wife in his arms.

"I have something I wish to discuss with you, too," Alicia said when she came beside Dalton in the hallway. Her fingers brushed his hand, but he pretended not to notice.

"We'll have privacy in the bedroom." He hurried up the stairs and strode to their suite without waiting for her.

"Dalton, what is it?" she said when she entered their room. "Is there something else you're not telling me about Olivia?"

"No," he said, rounding on her. "Not about my sister, anyway." He inwardly tensed. "I know about you and Justin. You kissed him, right in my own town house."

Her face froze. "What are you talking about?"

Dalton felt a cold rage squeeze his heart. He expected denial, or a hysterical protestation. But he hadn't been prepared for the anguished look of her sweet innocence.

"I was there. I came in just before he left, but I saw enough—"

"Dalton, you don't understand. Please sit down while I—"

"I think it's you who doesn't understand." He felt the hammer of betrayal pound on him, again and again, just as he had those many years ago, after having found his mother with her lover. "I'll not play my father's role. I want you gone. Our marriage contract is finished, as far as I'm concerned."

Alicia grabbed his sleeve. "I hurried from London because I missed you, Dalton."

"You left London because Justin was leaving the city."

Ignoring him, she spoke over his words. "I couldn't wait to see you because—" she took a shaky breath "—I'm

pregnant." She shivered under his glare. "We're going to have a child."

Dalton clenched his jaw. "Do you know who the father is?"

Alicia gasped and reached for the wall to steady herself.

He felt sick to his stomach. Dear God, he felt like he'd struck her! He turned and left the room while he still could.

Dalton left Havencrest that night and did not return. Alicia had planned to pack and leave for Marston Heath, but she was afraid to leave Olivia. In her heart, Alicia had hoped Dalton might return, but on the third day, she knew that wasn't going to happen. The morning of the fourth day, Olivia finally agreed to leave her room and accept Alicia's offer to stroll in the garden.

Rufus dashed ahead, barking after a squirrel. Alicia drew her shawl about her shoulders and stared at the heavy grey clouds overhead. "I hope it doesn't rain again."

"I know. Everything is so gloomy." Olivia snipped at the spent dahlia heads along the flower border. "I thought I might take your advice and try writing a letter to Mother." She gave Alicia a sidelong look. "Will you help me compose it?"

Alicia smiled. "Of course. Your mother would like that." She shivered with the morning chill. "She probably has no one to confide in. She must be lonely." Although she spoke of the dowager, it was Dalton who was in her thoughts. Where was he?

Olivia shook her head and gazed at Alicia in wonder. "How can you be so forgiving? You, of all people. When I think how miserably Mother treated you."

Alicia felt a sting of hurt. "I'm not noble. But I believe that we should try to understand before we judge. With understanding comes forgiveness. And forgiveness can be the beginning of healing." She turned to look at her sister-in-law. "Not every woman is as lucky as you, Olivia.

You've married the man you love, and Robert is devoted to you." The words caught in her throat as she thought of her own marriage.

"Alicia, I know my brother loves you." Her blue eyes darkened. "He's behaving like such a fool."

A fool in love. "We can't have a birthday celebration with Dalton away. Besides, he's never told me he loved me." She glanced at Olivia. "I'll help you draft your letter. Then it's time I left for Marston Heath."

Olivia frowned. "Maybe Dalton thought of your marriage as an arrangement at first, but I know he loves you now."

Alicia paused in front of the hidden bench in the rose garden and took a seat. "Our marriage wouldn't have lasted. In time, he'll tire of me. I imagine he's in London, this very minute. He's probably renewed the acquaintances of..." Her throat constricted with regret.

"Why don't you go to him and explain what happened between you and Justin?"

"I don't know where he is. Besides, he may not see me."

Olivia's gaze was sympathetic. "What if I went to my brother and explain what happened? I'm sure Robert can find out at which club Dalton is staying."

A swell of gratitude rolled through her. "Thank you, dear Olivia. That's very kind of you, but..." She hesitated searching for the right words to explain how she felt. "But if Dalton can't find it in his heart to understand that I'd never be unfaithful to him, then—"

"Dalton is so proud. You'll have to go to him, Alicia."

Alicia took a deep breath. "I have my pride, too." She patted Olivia's hand. How she would miss this good friend. "It's time I leave Havencrest. I've given instructions to Penn for Bashshar's further training. If I pack now, I can leave tomorrow."

"What can I do to convince you to stay?" Olivia pleaded.

Alicia shook her head. "Nothing. But come and visit me, and bring Rufus."

The wolfhound barked when he heard his name. Alicia patted the dog's wet coat, tears welling in her eyes. She turned and hurried along the stone path just before the rain began to fall.

Chapter Twenty



Robert glanced up from the copy of the *Times* and scowled at his brother-in-law, who had just entered the breakfast room. Rufus whined, then sprang from under the table to greet his master.

“Egad, Dalton! You look as though you haven’t shaved for a week.” His scowl deepened. “I don’t know what Olivia will say when she sees you.”

“I don’t need a lecture, Robert.” Dalton strode toward the breakfast table, averting his glance from the steaming platters of poached eggs, sweetmeats and sausages. He took the seat at the head of the table. He gave Rufus an affectionate pat, then his hand dropped when he saw the floral arrangement on the table. “Remove these vases at once,” he barked to the maid. “And I don’t want to see any more flowers in this house!” The young girl hurried to remove the arrangement, then scurried from the room.

“You’re in a foul mood. Your bark is louder than Rufus’s. Did you just arrive from London?” Robert asked disapprovingly.

Dalton’s only answer was another dark scowl. He frowned at the groom who hurried to fill a plate for him. “Only black coffee,” he muttered. The lad’s hand shook

as he poured a cup and placed the steaming brew in front of the duke.

“Olivia and I worry about what’s happening to you, Dalton.” Robert folded the newspaper and laid it aside. “It’s been almost a week since Alicia left, and—”

“I don’t wish to hear *her* name.”

“Drat it, Dalton. Your sister and I care about you. I can’t believe you would hang about London and—”

“For your information, Robert, I wasn’t in London.” How he wished he could return to his old life, and be free of Alicia’s memory. God, how he tried. He went as far as to approach the lane outside Lady Celia Fresham’s town house. He’d sat in the coach for the longest time. What was he doing? he’d finally asked himself. It was then that he knew he’d never find what he was looking for outside Alicia’s embrace.

Dalton glanced at Robert. “I’ve been holed up right here at Havencrest. I’ve been staying at the old hunting lodge, working with Jupiter. I’m determined to see that horse win the Newmarket Classic in three weeks.”

“Upon my soul!” Robert glared at him as though he had three heads. “Why not leave that up to the grooms?”

Dalton gave him a dark look. “No reason, except that I believe in following through with what I start.”

“So, you’ve been under our noses while your sister has worried herself sick about you.” Robert picked up the silver honey tray and spooned a thick golden daub on his toast.

“I prefer to keep away from people.” He shot Robert a sharp glance. “And since I can see the question on your face, yes, I’ve been faithful to my marriage vows, even though my wife hasn’t.”

“Damn it, Dalton!” Robert threw down his napkin. “You know there was nothing between Alicia and Justin.”

Dalton stood, almost knocking back his chair. “I warned you, Robert. I don’t want her name mentioned.”

"I think someone should speak up for her." Olivia strode into the room, her heels clicking on the tiles. She held a letter in her hand as she stood beside Dalton, her face reflecting her obvious displeasure with him.

"Sister, I'm in no mood..." He paused, taking a deep breath as she glared at him. "You and Robert are my guests. Although you'll always be welcome at Havencrest, I will remind you that you're here at my generosity."

Olivia huffed. "Don't you dare bully me, Brother."

Dalton's mouth quirked. "As if I could."

She placed the letter on the table. "I came to tell you that I've received this note from Mother." She took a seat, then glanced at her brother. "She's accepted Alicia's invitation and she's arriving this weekend for your birthday." She unfolded her napkin and placed the linen on her lap. "Although you're another year older, you're certainly none the wiser."

Dalton gritted his teeth. "I'll be returning to the hunting lodge."

"Hunting lodge?" She looked from Dalton to Robert.

Robert shrugged. "I'll explain later, my dear."

Dalton was halfway across the room. "I don't wish to see Mother, or anyone." He was at the door when Olivia stopped him.

"Dalton, you may leave when I finish." Olivia glanced at her brother leaning impatiently against the doorjamb.

"It's taken me a while to sort out how I feel about Mother, and I'm still not certain if I ever will understand. But with Alicia's help, I wrote and told Mother that I love her." Olivia turned to Robert, her hand on her husband's arm. "And once I did, I felt that some day I might be able to forgive her." Her lip trembled slightly. "Alicia said that we must have faith in those we love. Blind faith, Dalton." She glanced back at her brother, and the sadness in his eyes touched her heart.

"In the short time that I've known your wife, she's

taught me so much about love and forgiveness. She's shown you, too, if you weren't too proud to see it."

Dalton tore from the breakfast room, Rufus running playfully at his master's side until they were out of sight.

Olivia clasped her husband's hand. "Oh, Robert."

"Dalton may never be ready to take that blind leap of faith, my dear." He squeezed her hand. "I know it pains you, but there's little any of us can do to help him."

Tears welled in her eyes as Olivia looked at the empty chair at the head of the table. "I'm afraid Alicia is the only one who can heal Dalton. And she's as stubborn as my brother."

Dalton tossed another log in the grate. Red sparks flew into the angry draft up the chimney. Despite the cheery fire, he felt chilled to the bone. Walking to the window, he glanced up. The sky was leaden, the day looked as bitter and desolate as he felt. Rufus whined, watching him. It was as if the wolfhound were pining for her, too.

He glanced at the tapestry again. Potnia, surrounded by her woodland animals. The sight tore at his heart. The goddess reminded him so much of Alicia. The silken chestnut hair, the dew-fresh innocence...

Rufus lifted his head and growled. He heard the horse's hooves, too. *Who the hell was bothering him now?*

He twitched back the drape, but he couldn't see anyone.

"Keep back, Rufus!" He ambled to the door and gruffly pulled it open.

"Mother!"

The dowager, dressed in a wool cape covering her riding habit, glowered back at him. "You look like you've just seen Saint Peter." She trudged inside, without waiting for him to invite her. "Don't look so surprised, Dalton. I'm not so ancient that I can't ride a horse, you know."

He glanced out the door, expecting to see a carriage, a coach or drivers. Instead, Cinnamon Rose stood waiting at

the gate. He glanced back at his mother, who was pouring herself a brandy. She grinned at his surprised amazement.

"I've come to wish you a happy birthday, Son."

"My birthday! I'd completely forgotten."

His mother raised a brow. "Alicia had invited me, personally." Her eyes measured him with an astute, questioning gaze.

He then remembered that Alicia had invited the dowager for the celebration. She'd been so happy. A raw sense of grief almost threatened his control.

"I'm not celebrating this year." He could feel her gaze on him as she took a seat in front of the fire. He refilled his brandy snifter. "I imagine you've already spoken to Olivia." Robert or his sister must have told her where he was staying. He straddled the chair opposite where she sat. "Olivia told me that she had written you." He reached out and squeezed the bony hand. "I'm truly glad."

The dowager lifted the brandy crystal in salute, the firelight casting blue prisms of light from the hand-cut snifter. "To you, Dalton. Birthdays are too precious not to celebrate."

He knew, in a way, that his brother, Drake, was in her thoughts, too. "Thank you," he said gently. No doubt this day held many memories for her, as well. "Finish your brandy, and I'll ride back with you to the manor."

"Not before I've said what you need to hear, Dalton." The familiar authority was back in her voice. "Of all my children, I never had to worry about you, Dalton. Even as a baby, you always knew what you wanted, where you wanted to go, and how to charm your nurses and nannies into more than what was good for you." She sat up straight, her blue eyes leveled evenly with his. "This foolishness has gone on long enough."

Dalton drained his glass. "Mother, I know you mean well—"

"Go to her, Dalton." His mother's voice was strong but

gentle. "You know you want to. Swallow your pride, Son, before it's too late." She shook her head, her voice tight. "Life is so short. So very short."

"I don't want to hear this, Mother." His voice was firm.

"You've never wanted to hear, even as a tad, when you were wrong."

He sighed.

"Alicia has shown you, shown us all, her love through her gentleness and her ability to forgive. Oh, Dalton, don't be stubborn. You know very well that child she carries is yours. Any fool can see that Alicia loves you. And if you weren't so damn much like me, you'd see it, too."

Dainty lilac flowers of vervain trembled in the breeze as Alicia filled her herb basket with the lacy blossoms. Since medieval times, maidens stuffed the delicate flowers under their pillows as a love potion. She fought back the deep sadness that had become her constant companion since leaving Havencrest. Although she knew someday she'd face her future alone, she wasn't prepared for its grim reality. But can one ever prepare for the loss of love?

Her hand trembled as she picked up the basket and moved along the flagged walk. The smell of mint surrounded her as her slippers crushed the tiny leaves of pennyroyal growing along the cracks. Before she married, she'd reconciled herself to her single life. She'd been resigned to healing animals and improving her racing stock. But after falling in love with Dalton, she could never go back to who she was before loving him. Tears stung the backs of her eyes.

It was no use. She couldn't keep her mind on herb gathering. She sat down upon the garden bench and looked up at the mercurial sky. Far to the west, rain clouds gathered, but overhead the sun shone. She looked for a rainbow, then stopped herself. She should run for the house before the rain started, instead of waiting for rainbows. Yet she was

reluctant to leave her garden—the one place she had always found serenity. Until now. Perhaps in time...

A pair of golden butterflies fluttered among the yellow lilies. Inhaling the sweet fragrance, she was reminded of the lily gardens at Havencrest, and for another fleeting moment, wondered where Dalton was and what he was doing before she stopped herself.

A hard lump formed in her throat. Without even trying, she could hear his rich laughter and smell the sandalwood infused in his clothing. She was bedeviled by another flood of memories.

Suddenly, she heard a soft nicker, then a velvet nose nuzzled her ear. Startled, Alicia jumped and turned to catch Cinnamon Rose's wet kiss across her face.

"Cinnamon Rose!" The basket of herbs dropped from her lap, as Alicia almost fell off the bench. She glanced around for an explanation. Had one of the servants brought the mare from Havencrest? No one was in sight.

She rubbed the mare's satiny chestnut nose. The animal tossed her head, the black mane ruffling in the breeze. Alicia stood, looking toward the manor house grounds from where the animal must have come.

Alicia grabbed the mare's bridle and strolled from the garden. At the curve of the drive stood the ducal carriage with six white Lusitano horses. Her heart constricted with yearning. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if she might be dreaming.

"I was hoping I would find you in the garden."

Alicia froze. Her heart hammered. She was afraid to move. She forced herself to face him.

Dalton leaned against the trunk of the willow, his blue eyes heated with unspoken desire.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I've brought you Cinnamon Rose." His voice was rich and low. The sound warmed her blood. "Don't you remember our agreement?"

Her throat ached with disappointment. What had she expected him to say? She could only nod, afraid to trust her voice.

"You look much like you did the first time I saw you," he said. "Do you remember, Alicia?"

She nodded, hoping to keep the tears at bay.

"I thought you were the most hard-hearted vixen I'd ever met. You accepted my offer to heal Bashshar on your own terms, remember?"

What was he doing? Tormenting her? Didn't he know how the sight of him filled her with yearning? She refused to cry. "As my legal husband, Cinnamon Rose belongs to you." Relieved that her voice sounded strong and steady, she had no sooner spoken when she wondered if he had somehow arranged for a divorce. A shudder of disbelief coursed through her.

Why hadn't she thought of that before? He would have legal grounds if he believed she had been unfaithful.

She rounded on him. "Why are you really here?" She braced herself for his answer. Dear God, when had he become so cruel as to confront her with a plea of divorce?

"I'm here to say that my first impressions of you were wrong." He bowed, and when he stood, he was smiling. "And my last impression of you was also wrong, Alicia. I know that now, and I'm here to ask your forgiveness." His smile faded and the expression on his handsome face was deep with remorse.

She turned her back to him, rubbing the mare's satiny coat. "What changed your mind, Dalton?"

After a very long silence, he finally said, "Memories. Memories of you. I remembered your grace and your goodness. I remembered your sweet smile and how you brought sunshine to everything around you. You're everything bright and beautiful in my life, Alicia. And when you left, my world went dark. My darling, I can't go on any longer without you."

She must be dreaming. This wasn't the proud and aloof Dalton she knew. "How do you know you won't tire of me?" She turned and met his gaze. The look of surprise on his face shocked her.

"Tire of you? Could I tire of moonlight? Of rainbows? Of birdsong?" He took her in his arms. "You mean that to me and more, my darling. I love you, Alicia. Please say you forgive me."

"You love me?" She wanted to see his eyes when he said those words again.

He smiled. "Of course I love you. I've loved you since the first time I saw you, beneath the willows with Cinnamon Rose. I thought you were the most magnificent filly I'd ever seen."

She smiled. "You've never said the words before."

"Alicia, my sweet. What we have between us goes beyond words." He kissed her with undisguised longing.

When he pulled back, his heated gaze made her head spin. She felt some of her old doubt return. "You believe me this time. What about the next time you see me with a man...?"

His smile faded. "I've asked myself that very question. I knew in my heart that you've always been faithful to me. It was as though...fate had left me in the same situation as my father. When my mother helped me overcome that problem—"

"Your mother?"

He smiled. "She most assuredly convinced me that I was a stubborn fool if I let you get away."

Joy bubbled up inside her.

He kissed her fingers. "In my heart, I've always known that, but my foolish pride wouldn't let me see the truth."

She smiled, her hand cradled his strong cheekbone.

"I love you, my darling." His voice was raw. "I'm so sorry for what I said. Please find it in your heart to forgive me."

She smiled, unable to keep the tears of joy from spilling.

His mouth came crushing down upon hers. Cinnamon Rose nickered softly, pushing her head in between them. They drew back, laughing.

Dalton hooked his arm through hers. "I'm sure about something else." He drew her close again. "I'm not going to be able to control myself much longer." She smiled and his mouth settled upon hers again.

"When can we leave for Havencrest?" she asked when he finally released her.

"Immediately. Your father said that he will lend me fresh horses. I can only hope he won't trade away my Lusitanos."

She chuckled. "Don't tell me you've come to trust my father, too?"

"I'm in love, my darling, not senile." Her honeyed laughter sounded like music to him. "I invited your family to go to the Newmarket Classic with us. Your father will drive my team to Havencrest, and we'll leave for Newmarket from there. Mother will be there. Olivia and Robert will join us, too."

"I can't wait." She closed her arms around his neck, her heart nearly bursting with love for him.

The sun shone brightly as carriages of every description lined the racing course at Newmarket. From the open carriage, Alicia raised her parasol and studied the jockeys and racing entries line up for the next race.

"Here comes Jupiter," Dalton said, peering through a set of binoculars. He handed them to her. "Watch the people in the carriages," he said with pride. "Look how every eye is on him."

From the next carriage, Neal Spencer sat beside his wife, watching the string of entrants. "That mystery entry is quite a long shot, Wexton. Willing to wager a little side bet on an unknown against Jupiter?"

Dalton shrugged. "Probably some flea nag the racing board thought might help raise the odds." His blue eyes warmed as he smiled at Alicia. "Don't worry, my love. Jupiter is favored to win."

Alicia sent a warning look to her father. He winked back, enjoying the rare chance to try to best his wary son-in-law.

Frankly, she was worried. She should have word from Ulger by now, assuring her that Bashshar had arrived and had taken well to the handlers. What if Bashshar's old fear were to return?

No, everything would be all right, she assured herself. It had to be. Just then, she caught the eye of Ulger across the field standing with a group of stablers. He tipped his hat to her. She wondered if Dalton would see him. She had a pickle of a time getting Dalton to leave early enough so the handlers could bring Bashshar to the race without alerting Dalton's suspicion.

"Here comes Robert and Olivia," Dalton said as a shiny black two-horse carriage approached. "And the dowager duchess is with them," Alicia said.

Alicia leaned over and whispered in Dalton's ear. "Has Templestone been brought to trial?" she asked.

Dalton chuckled. "No, my dear. To save a scandal, we came to an understanding. I wouldn't press charges if he promised to leave the country. Besides, he knows I have proof that he's a blackmailer. He won't want his next widow to know of his shady past."

She and the dowager exchanged pleasantries, and Alicia felt a surge of relief and happiness.

Dalton squeezed her hand. "You've given your healing touch to all of us. The family will always be indebted," he said, his eyes shining with gratitude.

A trumpet blared and the horses began to line up. The crowd hooted and shouted as the mystery horse and rider rode in line with the other horses.

The dowager peered through her opera glasses at Bash-

shar, disguised in a handsome black silk covering. All but his black ears and legs were hidden. The jockey was disguised in a matching black uniform, cap and mask.

Neal Spencer's ruddy face beamed. "Not too late to place a wager, your ladyship."

The dowager sniffed. "A wise woman only wagers on a sure thing." She smiled at Alicia. "Don't you agree, my dear?"

"Very sage advice," Alicia said, then winked.

Dalton studied the mystery entry with more than curiosity. "Here, darling, take a look." He held the glasses for Alicia. "I'd say that mystery horse hasn't raced before in England. I would have noticed. Good legs, from what we can see of them."

Alicia's pulse pounded with excitement. She could hardly think about what Bashshar was going through. *Oh, please let everything be all right*, she prayed.

The trumpet blasted and the horses were off. The thundering hooves pounded the grass, and the carriages began to follow the horses along the field. From where Alicia and Dalton's carriage stood, the riders would race by in less than a minute. Her heart was in her mouth.

"Dalton, which horse is in the lead?" she asked, holding on to her hat.

"Jupiter's in the lead!" Dalton jumped up. "Look at him go!"

Neal Spencer cheered. "Quite a jewel in the crown for Marston Heath if our Jupiter takes the Cup."

Alicia forced herself to open her eyes. She stood up and looped her arm through Dalton's. The horses raced past, and Dalton took the reins and drove the carriage toward the finish line along with the horde of spectators.

Alicia sat back, praying only that the ordeal wouldn't harm Bashshar. What if the stallion panicked? What if entering Bashshar had been a terrible mistake?

The race was over as the horses pushed past the finish

line. Unable to see over the tall hats, she asked Dalton, "Who won?"

"And the winner is..."

"The winner is...the mystery entry!" Dalton's smile faded. He fell silent as he helped her from the carriage. "Come, my dear. I know you'll want to see Jupiter."

She took his arm as they moved through the jostling crowd. When they reached the winner's circle, Lord Teddy, the senior member of the racing board was speaking to the winning jockey.

"Congratulations, Dalton," Teddy said. "Duchess," he said to Alicia with a courtly bow, "my very best wishes to you both."

Dalton glanced up, confused. Teddy stepped forward, holding the large silver racing cup. "This year's winner's cup belongs to the mystery entry, Bashshar, the four-year-old Thoroughbred champion owned by Dalton Warfield, the duke of Wexton."

Amid the cheering crowd, Dalton shook his head. "I don't believe it."

"It's true, Dalton." She glanced to the winner's circle where the jockey dismounted, then pulled off the silk mask.

"Penn!" Dalton exclaimed. With the trophy tucked under one arm, he led Alicia to where the grooms were removing the final skirting from Bashshar. The horse tossed his head, whinnying as Alicia stroked his powerful neck.

Well-wishers circled them as Dalton congratulated Penn. The lad, his face as crimson as his hair, beamed with pride.

"I wanted Jupiter to win for you," Dalton said, his voice hoarse. She had sacrificed so much for him. All he wanted now was to take her home and show her how much he loved her.

"Dalton, look." She pointed to the runner-up bouquet of roses shaped into a horseshoe. "Jupiter came in second!"

A groom ran up and took the roses, and Dalton waved

to the cheering well-wishers as they made their way to their carriage.

"We should hurry, Dalton. Your mother has invited some of her friends and our families for a small celebration. You see, I had confided in her that Bashshar was the mystery entry. I felt it only fair since my father knew. Besides, I was afraid my father might take unfair advantage and haggle her into a wager."

He laughed. "That I'd like to see." He joined her laughter, and he realized what it truly meant to be happy. He lovingly stroked a finger across her cheek.

"I've just realized something, Dalton." Alicia looked up at him, her beautiful brown eyes brimming with delight.

"And what is that, my love?"

"No matter how the race turned out, we still would have won. For we have each other, my darling."

* * * * *

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7. Prizes: (1) Grand Prize—A Harlequin wedding dress (approximate retail value: \$3,500) and a 5-night/6-day honeymoon trip to Maui, HI, including round-trip air transportation provided by Maui Visitors Bureau from Los Angeles International Airport (winner is responsible for transportation to and from Los Angeles International Airport) and a Harlequin Romance Package, including hotel accommodations (double occupancy) at the Hyatt Regency Maui Resort and Spa, dinner for (2) two at Swan Court, a sunset sail on Kiele V and a spa treatment for the winner (approximate retail value: \$4,000); (5) Five runner-up prizes of a \$1000 gift certificate to selected retail outlets to be determined by Sponsor (retail value \$1000 ea.). Prizes consist of only those items listed as part of the prize. Limit one prize per person. All prizes are valued in U.S. currency.
8. For a list of winners (available after December 17, 2001) send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Harlequin Walk Down the Aisle Contest 1197 Winners, P.O. Box 4200 Blair, NE 68009-4200 or you may access the www.eHarlequin.com Web site through January 15, 2002.

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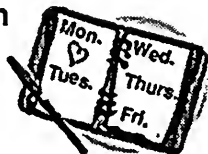
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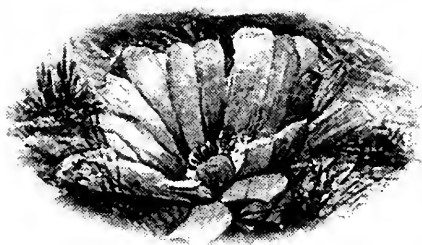


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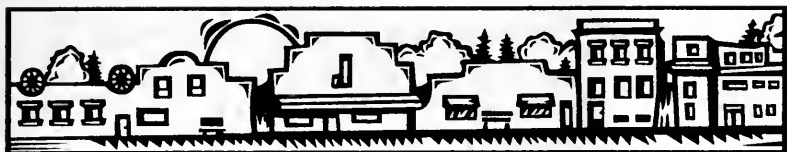
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