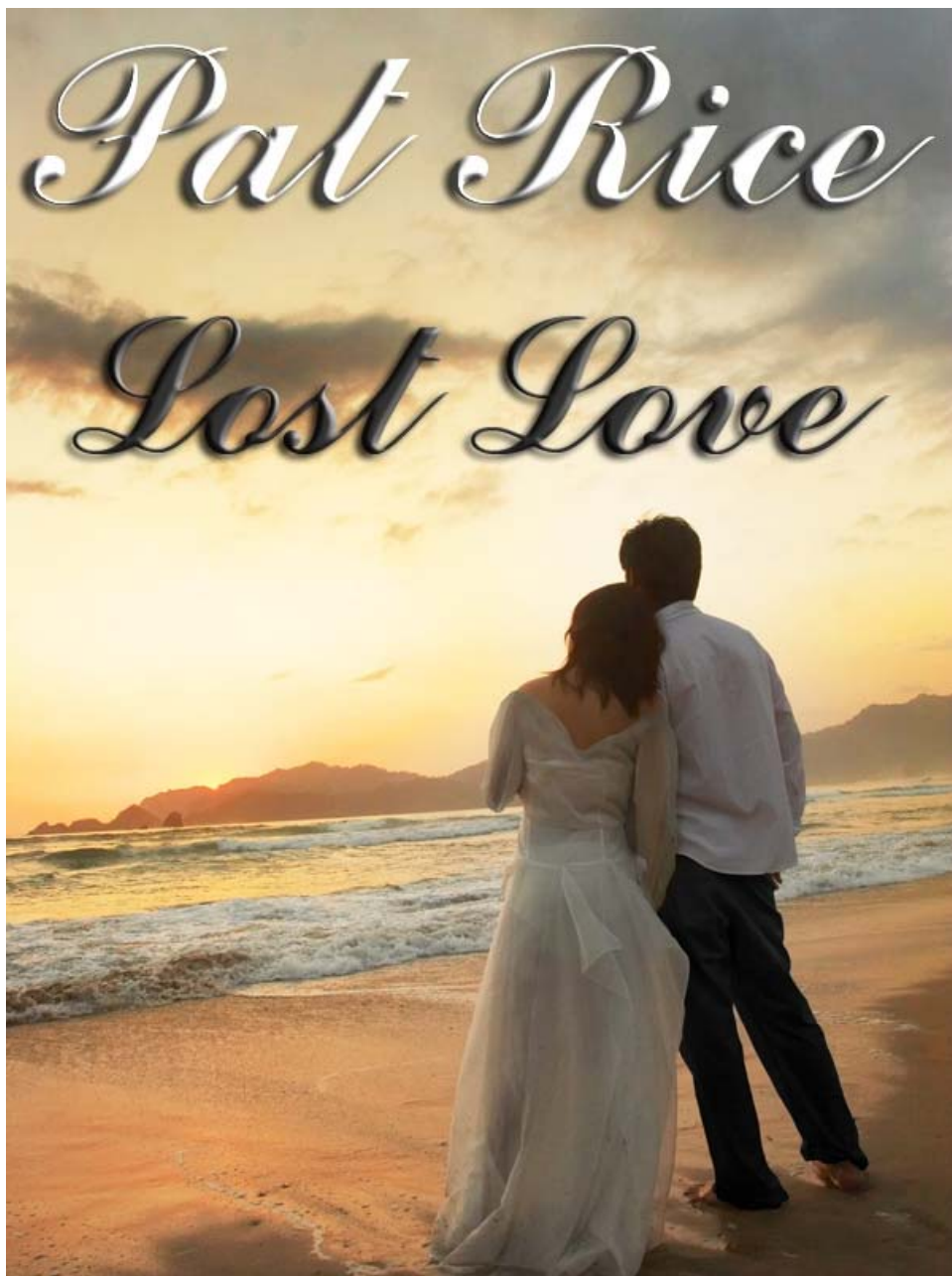


*Pat Rice*

*Lost Love*



*Love Lost*

*by*

*Patricia Rice*

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“Something Borrowed” first published in A WEDDING  
BOUQUET, Penguin Group

“Fathers and Daughters” first published in CAPTURED  
HEARTS, Penguin Group

“Golden Crocus” first published in BLOSSOMS, Penguin  
Group

“Keeping the Fire Hot” first published in SECRETS OF  
THE HEART, Penguin Group

## Something Borrowed

The dusky light from the high church windows created an aura of stillness through the stone nave. Melanie savored the quiet, the dusk, the scent of lighted tapers, and the small bouquet of wild roses she had wrapped in her handkerchief before entering the church. She didn't think Jane would remember flowers, but weddings ought to have beauty.

Already seated in her dark pew, she watched as the two elegant gentlemen paced the nave, and she sighed contentedly. She refused to envy her lovely older sister's good fortune in capturing a man like Damien Langland. With her beauty, wit, and vivaciousness, Jane could grasp the world by the hand and dance with it. Surely, after marrying that old man for her first husband, she deserved a handsome young man for her second. It didn't matter a whit that Damien, Earl of Reister, had always been the next best thing to penniless. Jane had fortune enough for both of them. And Damien not only had a title and looks, but he also possessed intelligence, character, and the kindness not to scorn his fiancée's crippled sister.

The wooden bench made Melanie's hip ache abominably. She should have brought a pillow but she had thought the service would be quick. She didn't know what was keeping Jane. Surely she knew Melanie's

absence would be discovered soon and their parents would go looking for her. She was flattered and more than a little surprised that Jane had even thought to ask her as witness knowing how difficult it was for Melanie to escape their parents' dotting care. She understood Jane's secrecy, though. Their parents had prevented this marriage once before. A penniless earl wasn't good enough for their diamond of a daughter.

Melanie shifted uneasily again and noticed the gentlemen glancing impatiently at the closed church doors. They had arrived fashionably late. Jane was even later. Only Melanie had arrived on time. She hadn't relished hurrying up the aisle with her clunking cane. The vicar had assured her she could remain in her pew throughout the service. She didn't literally have to stand up with Jane, just witness the ceremony.

The vicar in his vestments excused himself to see to a parish matter, assuring them he would return as soon as he saw the carriage arrive. Melanie couldn't blame the man for tiring of standing idly between these cold stone walls when the sunshine beckoned outside. She cast a worried glance to the anxious groom who had taken to staring at a sunbeam through the stained glass window above the altar.

The earl's best man pulled out his pocket watch and whispered something to Damien. The earl stopped his staring long enough to check his own watch and shake his head. He wouldn't leave yet. Melanie gave a sigh of relief. Damien wasn't the faint-hearted sort. He would trust in Jane. Idly, she let herself drift into daydreams of herself as bride. A husband like Damien could take her to London, show her the sights, introduce her to people who would appreciate her character and not scorn her disabilities. A husband would give her freedom.

As the hour grew later, Melanie became as increasingly nervous as the groom, who now paced back and forth in front of the altar. In his cutaway frock coat

and tight pantaloons, with the long tails of the coat flapping, Damien made an elegant figure as he strode back and forth. She couldn't imagine why Jane tarried so long. She worried some accident had overcome her between here and London. She worried their parents would discover Melanie's prolonged absence and come after her.

Occasionally, it had occurred to Melanie to wonder if her parents' suffocating concern for her had more to do with their embarrassment at having a lame daughter than any real anxiety for her welfare. Most days, she shut off those ungrateful feelings. Today, her fear for Jane's happiness made her resentful of her father's refusal to allow Melanie to do anything on her own.

She didn't really think her father would prevent Jane's marriage a second time. After all, Jane was thirty years of age now, an independent widow. Surely this time she could marry for love and happiness. Melanie didn't know why Jane had insisted on this secrecy, or involved Melanie in it, knowing the disaster that would happen if their father found she had left the house without his knowledge. It was almost as if Jane wished the worst to happen.

Melanie breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of a carriage arriving. And then she had the panicky thought it might be her father after all. He could still interfere with the marriage. Or he could just drag Melanie away before Jane could get here.

She had never done anything on her own in her life. From the day she had contracted the fever that had left her left leg withered and weak, her parents had hovered over her every movement. They had never returned to London, choosing to send Jane to an aunt for her Season rather than leave Melanie by herself in the country. She had never gone to London, or any farther than the village church. She had no life of her own, no friends other than those from the village thought suitable by her parents.

She had wealth enough for a hundred people and nowhere to spend it since her parents saw to her every material need. She ought to be grateful, but she was twenty-five years old and as frustrated and rebellious as any adolescent.

Melanie's hands tightened around her walking stick at the thought that the carriage's arrival might signal an end to this precious moment of stolen freedom. It took only a moment to react to a lifetime of frustration, bringing Melanie to her feet without shyness. Damien had seen her limp before. Though five years older than she, he had visited their neighboring estate often enough that she needn't hide from him. As she limped into the aisle, he cast her no more than a worried look when others often looked away to hide their repulsion or embarrassment. His best man gave her a friendly smile as he hurried to the church doors to escort the bride.

"Damien!" Melanie whispered urgently, catching the earl's nervous attention. "It sounds like my father. I will have been missed by now."

He looked momentarily alarmed, no doubt remembering the last occasion he'd had the audacity to ask the wealthy baronet for his daughter's hand. Sir Francis respected only wealth, and the Earl of Reister had none.

"Where can Jane be?" she whispered with concern, accepting his arm to help her up the step to the raised area before the altar.

"No doubt enjoying herself too much somewhere to break away," the earl replied bitterly. "Do not harbor any romantic illusions about this affair, Miss Melanie. Your sister and I have been old companions for too long."

At the sound of loud voices outside the door, Melanie feared the worst. The worried look the other gentleman sent their way after he peered through the leaded glass confirmed her fears.

For this past hour or more she had sat here idly

dreaming how it would feel to stand beside a well set-up gentleman like the earl and to share vows sealing them for a lifetime. It really didn't matter to her if the earl's flaxen hair did not curl rakishly like her daydreams, or if his classically bridged nose had a hump in it.

Appearances meant little to her. She craved companionship. She craved freedom. She craved a life of her own. The Earl of Reister represented all that—only he belonged to Jane.

Almost. The earl's friend slipped out the door to delay the family longer. No doubt her father raked the poor vicar over the coals for not notifying them at once that their poor, lame daughter had wandered loose, unaccompanied. What in heaven's name did they think could happen to her in a church?

Outside her own anger, Melanie felt sympathy for the man beside her, dressed in his finest blue frock coat with his cravat gleaming white and elegantly starched and folded. She had always thought him handsome, but then, she admired any man who could talk to her without averting his eyes. She felt his arm stiffen beneath her fingers and knew he braced himself for the tongue-lashing to follow. She could curse Jane for her thoughtlessness. Damien deserved better. She wished she could borrow him for just a little while. Jane had so much, and she had so little ...

The instant she thought that, a notion of such amazing audacity overcame her that Melanie nearly staggered beneath the impact. Her father would deliver a scathing tirade no matter what they did. Why not gain some advantage for both of them out of it?

She had never uttered a bold thought in her life. She thought them all the time, but she never had anyone to speak them to. She knew she could say them to Damien. He was too devastated at the moment to scold her.

She clutched her bouquet of roses against his arm and tugged a little to gain his attention again. She saw



him dart a look to the side door and knew his desire to depart, but he wouldn't desert her to the hands of her parents. Damien wasn't that kind of coward.

Gathering her courage, Melanie whispered, "We could walk out there now and pretend the service is already over. I think if you slip the vicar a few coins, he will keep quiet. My father is very clutch-fisted when it comes to charity. The vicar knows I had to contribute my own funds for the church roof."

Damien looked at her, but he didn't seem to comprehend. He wasn't a stupid man. He just didn't see things the same way she did. She'd had lots of experience developing devious means of escaping her father's authority. The elegant Earl of Reister had never done a devious thing in his life. She had no doubt whatsoever that this secretive marriage was all Jane's idea.

"We can pretend we're married, Damien," she explained impatiently. "We can go into London and took for Jane. My father can't stop us if he thinks you're my husband. I'm of age."

"Melanie Elaine Berkeley! Have you lost your wits? If you go into London with me without benefit of vows, you will ruin your reputation. Devil take it, woman! No wonder your father keeps you on such short strings if that's the way your mind works."

She took no offense. Damien had always treated her like a little sister, scolding her deservedly more than once. She shrugged off his protests.

"What is a reputation for but to catch a husband?" she asked carelessly. "They'll never let me marry. So what is the purpose of maintaining something of no value? If society scorns me, how would I know while locked up in the library staring out at the lawns day after day? I just want a little freedom, Damien. You needn't shackle yourself to me for life. I'm not quite as wealthy as Jane, but I have enough to pay your ticks, I daresay. While Jane was spending her allowances, I was saving. I'm willing to

share."

She saw a wild look of hope and incredulity flare in his eyes, and she knew she'd finally captured some small measure of his interest. "Just imagine walking out of here with me on your arm. My father's face will fall clear to the ground. He'll turn too purple to speak."

A chuckle escaped the earl's compressed lips at the picture she painted, but he immediately followed it with a frown. "Of all the irresponsible behavior — "

"You need the blunt, don't you?" she pointed out inexorably. "And I want to see London. I don't care how long we get away with it. I just want to see parliament, and the libraries, and a museum or two. And Hatchard's. Maybe Elgin's marbles. Anything, Damien. I'm quite desperate."

He stared at her a moment or two, absorbing the despair that must have driven her to such a plea. Melanie knew she wasn't spectacularly beautiful like Jane, but she wasn't hard to look upon. Her plain nut-brown hair couldn't compare to Jane's glorious blond tresses, but their features were similar, except Jane's lips always smiled and laughed while her own often pulled tight with pain. She could learn to laugh easily enough, given an opportunity. She felt her lips quivering now while she waited for his answer, but not with laughter.

"If you mean what you say, Melanie Elaine, I'll marry you in truth," the earl answered fervently, covering the hand holding the roses with a strong brown grip. "Let's get out of here before your father rips James into shreds."

Melanie felt she could float down the aisle on winged feet. She heard angels sing and church bells ring as they solemnly proceeded through the empty church as if it were filled with well-wishers weeping happily. She couldn't have felt more married had the special license in his pocket had her name on it instead of Jane's. She was going off to London with the Earl of Reister!

The scene outside dampened some of her joy, but Damien had learned a few things in the years since he'd last encountered the baronet, she realized. He took control of the situation immediately.

With a firm air of authority, he placed Melanie's hand in the care of James. "See my lady to the carriage, please, James, while I speak to Sir Francis."

The vicar gaped. Laughter lit his friend's eyes as he bowed over Melanie's hand. Sir Francis went so purple he couldn't speak, just as Melanie had predicted.

In that brief, shocked silence, Damien turned to the vicar, pressing a small pouch of coins — the last to his name — into the vicar's hands. "I'll take care of her properly," he promised with an urgency he hoped the other man understood. "The lady has told me of her love for this church. We will return often. If you ever have need of anything, you must let us know."

The man was shrewd enough to know a bribe when he saw one, but cautious enough to check on Melanie first. When she threw him a kiss and waved before climbing into the carriage, the vicar pocketed the coins and nodded. "I'm certain you'll do what's proper, my lord. I've never known you to do otherwise."

"Proper!" Sir Francis shouted, finally coming to his senses. "This young pup knows nothing of proper! That's my daughter he has there! My little Melanie. He hasn't a twig to light on and he thinks he can take care of a young female of her delicate constitution —"

"Melanie's constitution is about as delicate as Jane's," Damien interrupted rudely. "It's her leg that's damaged, nothing else. I'll not cosset her, for she doesn't want it, but I'll see her safe and happy. They aren't always the same things, you know."

Without waiting for any further reply, Damien strode off in the direction of the waiting carriage. He'd borrowed it from another friend, the upkeep of carriages much too expensive for his hollow pockets, but it made a

good appearance now. He could still hear old Francis screaming as he climbed in and James shut the door behind him. There wasn't a damned thing the old man could do this time.

It felt good to know he'd bested the surly old goat for a change. With a smile of exaltation, Damien sat back against the squabs and turned to share his pleasure with the dainty woman beside him. As the driver took up the reins and the carriage lurched forward, he found himself looking into vivid violet eyes instead of pale blue ones. Staggered at the immensity of what he had just done, Damien wondered what in bloody hell he'd got himself into now.

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"I meant what I said about marrying you."

Melanie turned her gaze from the thrilling melee of carriages, horses, carts, and wagons threading through the London streets back to the man who had remained stoically silent most of the journey. She gave him an understanding smile and reached across the aisle to pat his arm. "You'll marry Jane, just as you wanted. I'm certain there's a good reason for her delay. Shall we stop at her house first and see if she's in?"

"It's four of the afternoon, Melanie. If she's in London, she's driving in the park. She has her own rig. I don't think it wise for us to take a closed carriage into the park right now, still wearing all our travel dirt. You'd never escape the scandal. As it is, there is some chance we can keep this quiet if Jane will take you in."

Melanie wondered if perhaps Damien was ashamed to be seen with her. She had worn her best rose-bedecked bonnet and a cunning sprigged muslin that draped her figure rather nicely, she thought, but she was well aware she looked as wilted as the roses in the seat beside her. She nodded agreement to his decision not to go to the park, but before he could give the driver directions, she disagreed with his second notion.

"Jane never invited me to visit, my lord," she said quietly, hoping a soothing voice would make her refusal go down easier. "I would not wish to intrude where I am not wanted. I have a house of my own. My aunt left it to me. I asked the solicitor not to let it this year. I had hoped to find some way to see it for myself. Now seems an excellent opportunity."

He'd moved to the seat across from her to give her more room as they journeyed. Now she wished he hadn't. The position made it much too easy for her "husband" to glare at her.

"You're near as wicked and deceitful as your sister," he declared. "If I hadn't happened along, who would you have chosen as victim?"

He was beginning to feel uneasy about his role in this charade they played. She could understand that. She just didn't know how to reassure him. The enormity of the city passing by their window overwhelmed her. Would she be able to get about by herself?

"I'm not certain," she answered honestly. "If I could have learned to handle the ribbons, I could have taken myself off, I suppose, but father wouldn't hear of my learning any such thing. I thought of bribing one of the stable boys to borrow the carriage and take me here, but I feared my father might have him transported or some such. Besides, they're all terrified of him; they would never agree. But I would have found some way. I am determined to see something of the world before I retire to knitting stockings for Jane's children for the rest of my life."

"That certainly wouldn't keep you busy for long," Damien responded dryly. "Jane isn't particularly fond of children. I can't imagine she'll want many."

Melanie gave him a surprised look. "Jane couldn't help it if George was too old and ill to father more than one child. I'm sure she'll be happy to give you an heir or more. I'm looking forward to meeting Pamela." She sat

eagerly upright in her seat at just the thought of meeting Jane's only child.

Damien shook his head and regarded her strangely. "When was the last time you saw your sister?"

Indignantly, Melanie replied, "She writes every chance she gets. She tells the most amusing stories! I can't wait to see her again. What time do you think she will return from the park?"

Damien leaned forward and tapped her forehead with his finger. "You aren't listening to me, sugar plum. When did you last actually see your sister?"

He had already given the driver directions to her own home, so Melanie didn't resent his attitude. Men had to feel as if they had the upper hand once in a while. Still, she squirmed uncomfortably before giving him the answer he wanted.

"Well, she must visit her in-laws at Christmas because of Pamela," she hedged. "And she never did have a fondness for the country. She swore she'd never return once she escaped."

"You haven't seen her since she married, have you?" he answered for her, leaning back against the seat with his hands on her walking stick as if it were his own.

"But she writes," Melanie protested vehemently. "I know all about sweet little Pamela and how she looks just like Jane. It is just as good as visiting. Better, since I don't have to listen to her argue with our father."

Damien nodded and glanced idly out at the street they now traversed. Melanie could see tall stone homes adorned with expensive windows and iron fences to keep out the uninvited. This street had considerably less traffic than the others they'd traversed. They passed a stately barouche with an elderly lady being helped into it by a footman in scarlet livery. Even in her inexperience, Melanie realized they had reached a wealthier part of town.

"We're almost there, I think," Damien murmured,

not looking at her. "Will you have servants in residence?"

"The caretaker and his wife. We can hire some tomorrow." She watched him anxiously. "You do know how to hire servants, don't you? I have no notion at all."

He finally sent her that warm smile she remembered so well. "You've left your wits to let, gosling. I'll see if I can borrow someone's chambermaid for the night so you can pretend you have some sort of chaperonage. I'll come back around in the morning and we'll talk of hiring a real companion for you then."

Alarmed, Melanie stared at him. "You're not staying? You'll leave me alone with complete strangers? You can't do that to me, Damien Langland." She hesitated instantly, realizing of course he could do that. They weren't really married. She'd let her daydreams get the better of her. A feeling of mixed resentment and fear welled up within her as she realized Damien had no obligation whatsoever to continue this charade. Fear was a great motivator, however. Shrewdly, she asked, "Have you somewhere to go? You must have thought you would be returning to Jane's."

She caught the earl's bleak expression before he carefully shuttered it behind his gentlemanly demeanor. If her lameness had taught her nothing else, it had taught her to sit quietly and watch how people really felt. Damien was in hot water right now. She sensed it immediately.

"I have friends. You needn't worry, Melanie. I've been on my own for quite some time now. I fend for myself."

Melanie set her lips and ignored this foolishness. "Well, I haven't and I can't. Come in with me now so I don't look a complete ninnyhammer. We'll send someone around to Jane's house to see if she's there and what she wants us to do. If she's not there, there's no reason we can't continue this a little longer. I can't get about London on my own, and it is rather senseless for me to come all

this way and not see the sights. Couldn't we pretend just a little longer, Damien?"

As the carriage came to a halt before a stately town house, Damien gave her a long, thoughtful look that made her shiver in her shoes. She'd never particularly noticed how long-lashed and brown his eyes were until they seemed to penetrate her very soul. She feared he wouldn't very much like what he saw there.

"Melanie, you are twenty-five years of age and perfectly cognizant of what will happen shall I stay here with you. Jane left me standing at the church today, so I owe her no obligation. No one knows of our betrothal. We never announced it. I am perfectly free to marry you. Since, as you have obviously surmised, I am in dire need of the ready, I am more than willing to marry you instead of Jane. Actually, had I thought of it sooner, I might have sought you first, but Jane knows the way of things and you're an innocent. I hate to tar you with the same disillusionment that we suffer. After spending some time in London and in my company, you may wish you had never come. I would not tie you or your dreams to someone of my ilk if it can be prevented. If I go into that house with you now, I go in as your husband, with all the accompanying folderol. I will allow you some time to decide if this is what you want, and if you choose otherwise, we'll find some way to get you free of both me and your parents. But I warn you now, I will spend these next weeks trying to persuade you that we should wed in truth. I have sunk just about as low as a man can go, Melanie. I'm quite capable of seducing an innocent at this point."

Melanie felt a momentary frisson of alarm at the warning tone of his voice, but then she looked up and saw Damien's familiar face—neither threatening nor seductive—and she relaxed a little. No man would want her for a wife when Jane was available. He was just being gentlemanly as usual. She managed a smile and took back



her walking stick. "That sounds quite enticing, Damien. Shall we begin?"

A shadow of a smile curled his lip, and he shook his head at her obstinacy, but he climbed down from the carriage and helped her alight.

When the caretaker finally opened the door, Damien caught Melanie's waist in a strong grasp, stooped to catch her behind the knees, and literally swept her off her feet to carry her across the threshold. So totally startled by his action that she nearly dropped her cane, Melanie managed to grasp it with one hand while clinging to Damien's strong shoulders with the other. She had never thought of Damien's greater height and weight in comparison to her own smaller stature. The manner in which he casually carried her into her own home made the differences terrifyingly clear. It was a good thing she wasn't afraid of Damien.

As it was, he left her so breathless she couldn't speak to the astonished servant stepping back from the door. Damien had to do the honors.

"We realize we have caught you unprepared, but my lady needs to rest and wash after her journey. Some clean linen and hot water, if you would. We will make amends later." He spoke courteously but with firm authority, never doubting that the poor man could produce what he wanted without question or complaint.

Marveling at the ease with which he took command, not only of her house and her servants, but herself, Melanie grew restive in Damien's hold. He declined to put her down but carried her easily up the stairs, following the caretaker to a room adorned in Holland covers. By this time, the caretaker's wife had appeared, taken in the situation, and started stripping back the linens.

"We were not apprised of your arrival, Miss Berkeley," the woman said breathlessly, hurrying to ball up the huge sheets and remove them to the hallway, "or

we would have hired staff and had all prepared." She sent them a look of curiosity over her shoulder.

Once Damien set her down, Melanie could speak again, but he spoke for her. "Miss Berkeley is now the Countess of Reister. You need not apologize for lack of preparation. We will see about staff in the morning, or if you know of a few willing to come in this evening, send around for them. We will fend for ourselves for now."

Melanie watched in amazement as he drove the servants out, leaving her alone in a strange bedchamber with this man who had suddenly begun acting suspiciously like a husband. Wide-eyed, she watched as he turned back to her. She watched for an amorous or determined glint in his eyes, remembering his warning all too clearly. It had never occurred to her that Damien might take advantage of the situation to do that to her. She didn't think any gentleman had any such inclination toward a cripple like herself. An odd feeling crept through her midsection as he inspected her thoroughly with hooded gaze.

Then he nodded, gave a smile of approval, and indicated a delicate blue velveteen chair. "Sit, gosling. I'll not woo you yet, although I admit, I felt quite possessive carrying you up those stairs like that. Is that how a husband feels, do you think? You roar so loudly sometimes, I thought you much stouter than you are. You're a veritable feather."

She gave this ingenuous monologue a look of suspicion, but took the chair offered so he might sit. "Don't you begin treating me like some fragile piece of porcelain," she warned him. "I am quite stout. It is just that my one leg is weaker and slightly shorter than the other. It tires me to walk any distance hobbling about like that."

He took a large wing chair across the fireplace from her and regarded her through narrowed eyes. "A horse's gait can be corrected with the proper shoes. I see no

reason we cannot do the same with people. You'll have to see a modiste first thing in the morning. You have no clothes. We'll find a bootmaker at the same time."

Melanie brushed aside the mention of boots but smiled with delight at the idea of new clothes. "I will have my choice of the latest London fashions! That hadn't occurred to me. Oh, Damien, do you know the very best modiste? Or will Jane? I want to feel like the best dressed female in all London. The Countess of Reister ought to be, don't you agree?" Then reining in this pleasant fantasy, she added, "Should you go 'round to Jane's now? We really can't continue this silliness until we know what happened to her."

"I know perfectly well what happened to her," Damien replied dryly, "but I shall go around and verify it for your sake. Have a bit of a rest, and I'll see what your caretakers can do about summoning up some food. Do they have a household account?"

From that, Melanie quickly deduced that bribing the vicar had cost Damien his last coin. For a proud man, that must be an embarrassing circumstance. She nodded toward the reticule she had left on the night table. "The grocers and such send the bills to my solicitor for payment. I don't believe the Harrises have much coin. I certainly have enough for a meat pie or two. I had hoped to find Jane a pretty present in the village, but I got away too late."

Nodding curtly, he rose and emptied the reticule into his pocket. "As a fortune hunter, I soon must get used to this, but for now, I shall just relish the thought that I am spending Jane's wedding gift on something that we will appreciate more than she would."

He walked out, leaving Melanie with little opportunity to find words of reassurance. She ached for the pain he must feel, finding some similarity with her own. In a way, they were both handicapped, but Damien's disability crippled his pride more than hers. She

had grown accustomed to pitying looks. He never would. She must find some way to help him stand on his own, as she did.

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Damien watched with amusement as his new “wife” exclaimed over the multitudinous bolts of cloth set before her. She behaved as if he had just given her Christmas a hundred times over. Silks and satins, velvets and muslins lay scattered around her chair in a rainbow of colors, and still she squealed with delight each time the modiste brought forth a new one. He hadn’t known spending someone else’s money could be so pleasant.

He knew himself for a cad and a bounder, an unscrupulous fortune hunter with every intention of trapping this enchanting innocent in his web. He’d thought he’d lowered himself as far as he could go by persuading Jane she would make an excellent countess, that the title would add to her prestige. He and Jane were two of a kind, predators in the society that fed them. He had come to loathe her as much as he loathed himself, but he needed the money and she was the quickest way to it. To substitute Jane’s innocent sister for Jane was the most caddish thing he could do, but it was too late to turn back now. Jane had escaped his net. Melanie wouldn’t.

He rationalized his actions by telling himself he would do everything in his power to make her happy, but he knew ultimately, he would destroy that happiness. It couldn’t happen any other way. The reason he needed Melanie and her money would be the very thing that destroyed her.

Still, he would give her what he could, while he could. She had time to run away. The one thing he wouldn’t do was take her to his bed until the vows were said. He could seduce her with a million little lies, but not the final one. He would return her whole to her parents if she chose against him. Unless he behaved like the cad he was, he didn’t think she would go against him. Melanie

had a loving heart. She would have him.

As they left the modiste and headed for the bootmakers, she looked up at him anxiously. "Should we check at Jane's again? Perhaps she has had second thoughts and returned home."

He'd told her Jane had left for an extended stay with a friend in Hampshire. In reality, he'd returned to his former rooms and found a message in Jane's furious scribbles calling him every name in the book and some he hadn't heard before. Some bastard had obviously revealed his little secret ahead of schedule. Damien wondered who hated him that much. Or perhaps the fates worked against him, as they always had. He wondered how to keep the apostles of fate away from Melanie. Keeping Jane away from Melanie wasn't any problem. She'd gone to Hampshire just as he'd said, only the friend she went with wasn't female.

"Jane may send 'round a note when she returns," Damien answered doggedly. "I have sent the appropriate announcements to the papers of our marriage. Your father will be expecting them. I daresay you'll hear from Jane then." It took every ounce of his pride to keep from asking her to marry him in truth again. He didn't know what Jane would do when she discovered her little sister had fallen into his clutches.

"It's so unlike Jane." Melanie fretted beside him. "Are you quite certain the note was in her writing? Perhaps someone has abducted her to keep her from marrying you. I know she must still love you. I just cannot understand this at all. Are you sure we shouldn't wait a while on those announcements? She will simply be devastated if she sees them before we have time to explain."

Damien leaned forward and tipped her chin upward so she met his gaze. She had the most amazing heart-shaped face, with wide violet eyes and the sweetest lips when they weren't pursed with concern as they were

now. He wondered what she would do if he kissed her. He had no wish to diminish his prospects by rushing his fences. He merely brushed his thumb reassuringly over her bottom lip and watched it tremble. Good. She wasn't immune to desire.

"You have not seen your sister in ten years, sugar plum. I assure you, Jane knows precisely what she is doing. We meant to marry this time around for the same reasons we meant to marry the first time: my title and her money. I don't like to hurt your harmless dreams, Melanie, but love is not a commodity easily traded in society's market. Should you and I marry, the trade is the same one, only perhaps I can earn my way a little better with you since I can also trade experience. Jane never needed that."

She gave him one of those shrewd looks that reminded Damien all too uncomfortably of her papa, and he removed his hand from her chin, sitting back in his seat. He knew she'd led a sheltered life. Her parents had seen to that. He just kept forgetting that innocent face disguised an all too creative mind.

"You are trying very hard to name yourself cad, Damien. A true cad wouldn't, you know. You ought to be whispering loving sentiments and stealing kisses about now. I'm certain I'm as susceptible to both as any other maiden."

He laughed. He couldn't help himself. He wanted to hug and kiss her and tell her he never was such a fool as to try to get past her. But he was, and he would, and she just made it that much more challenging with remarks like that.

"I shall do just that, if you wish, my lady. I aim to please. Shall we visit the bootmakers first or just repair to the park where I shall start on those kisses?"

"The bootmakers," she announced firmly. "I wish to be quite splendid before you're seen about with me."

By the time they returned to the house late that

afternoon, Melanie felt quite drained. She refused to acknowledge her exhaustion to Damien who had become more pensive as the day wore on. She knew she had spent an enormous amount in just a few short hours, but she thought it vindicated a lifetime of saving. He really shouldn't worry. She had more than enough for herself and whatever debts he'd run up. She supposed they should have gone to the bankers first, but the temptation of new clothes had diverted all good intentions. Besides, she kept waiting for her father to appear, roaring over his discovery of their lack of marriage lines. Or for Jane to come back and fall at their feet to plead her love and apologies. She just really couldn't believe all this was happening and wanted to grasp every opportunity as it was offered.

A groan from Damien made her look up from her ruminations to discover where his thoughts had strayed. When she saw he'd covered his eyes with his hand, she glanced out the window.

Strangers sat on her doorstep. Not elegant strangers, although she couldn't imagine even Damien's rakish friends stooping to sitting on a doorstep. These men wore round hats and garish waistcoats and smug grins as the carriage approached. They very much seemed to be waiting for them. Melanie sent Damien a questioning look.

"The cent percenters," he groaned. "They've come to collect already. Someone at the papers must have tipped them off. I'm sorry, Melanie. I'd meant to fob them off a while longer so you wouldn't need to see them."

"Oh, you mean loan sharks!" She looked out the window with curiosity at the smug, smiling faces grinning up at them. One man had a nose that looked as if someone must have battered it extensively. Another had a decidedly ugly red scar down the side of his face. Despite their smiling exteriors, she feared these were very rough men, indeed. "Well, I suppose it's too late to visit

the bankers. You will have to tell them to send their bills 'round to my solicitor in the morning."

Damien gave her a look of amazement. "You don't even know the extent of my debt. Why should you pay what you do not owe for someone who isn't really your husband?"

"Do you gamble?" she asked with upraised brows.

"With what?" he asked dryly. "With my life, with my good name, with my family's reputation? Yes, I do that. But with money? I haven't any."

"Then once these debts are paid, we'll have only our living expenses, won't we? It seems fair trade to me. Your time must be worth a great deal, and I mean to claim a good lot of it while I can."

"You make me feel lower than a snake's belly," he growled, flinging open the door. "Stay inside while I clear this lot away."

With a few curt words he had them scattering. Damien had a very forceful way about him when called upon, Melanie noted with almost as much satisfaction as trepidation. She had always thought of him as something of an elegant rattle, but he'd changed these last years. She'd encountered him once or twice in the village when he visited his family, but she'd not really noticed the changes until now. When he returned to lift her from the carriage, her heart did a strange little flip-flop inside her chest.

"I'm sorry to have embarrassed you like that, Melanie. I meant for your first day in London to be special."

He didn't murmur the words softly and sweetly in her ear but announced them coldly, as if by keeping his distance he could pretend they came from someone else. She thought he meant them. He just didn't want to admit it to himself. She didn't know what to make of that, so she ignored it all.

"I can't remember ever having more fun," she said



sincerely as they entered the house. "I feel like a fairy princess with a dashing prince for escort."

He gave her a flicker of a smile as he helped her with her pelisse. "Perhaps you ought to just keep me about for storybook time and pretend I'm not here otherwise. We might rub along quite well that way."

She frowned as she tried to determine the meaning behind that. She knew her own parents went their own ways most of the time. The only time she ever saw them in the same room together was when they entertained, or at dinner occasionally. They each had their own friends and pastimes. She had neither. Perhaps that's what he was telling her: he had friends and interests that he would pursue when she didn't want him around. She supposed she couldn't expect him to always be at her beck and call.

She didn't have time to dwell on this discovery. Mr. Watson, the caretaker, had hurried up to take their walking sticks and Melanie's pelisse. "The others are awaiting your convenience, my lord, my lady. Where do you wish to see them?"

Melanie blinked, unable to comprehend this request, but Damien seemed to have no problem. He gave her a concerned look and asked, "Do you wish me to do the hiring? You look as if you need a rest. Just tell me how many you want and I'll do what I can, but you'll have to choose your own personal maid."

The servants. Of course. Mr. Watson had called in staff. She really didn't wish to have to make these decisions now, but she couldn't make Damien do it all. Besides, she needed to learn the duties of a wife. Running a household was one of them.

She nodded reluctantly. "Just give me time to freshen myself, and I will join you."

Mrs. Watson had stripped off the covers in the salon. Melanie found Damien there a little while later. Mrs. Watson had brought in tea and sandwiches to

refresh them, and Damien now sipped at a cup while perusing a list of staff the caretaker had provided. He looked up at her entrance and smiled, but she saw a lingering look of concern behind his eyes. She wondered if her appearance made her look haggard, or if something else bothered him.

"Is it an enormous undertaking?" she asked lightly, taking a chair beside the tea table and serving herself.

"An expensive one. I should not think we'd need half these people." He handed her the list.

*We.* He'd said *we*, as if he truly thought of them as a couple. Melanie danced a quiet little jig in her head while pretending to gaze thoughtfully at the list. It seemed quite reasonable to her. She handed it back to him. "I cannot say I have a good grasp of my worth, my lord, nor do I have a sound understanding of my future income. I just know that my trust allots me more than I have ever been able to spend, and the cost of these few people will not change that to any degree. I should think it our duty to employ the less fortunate and keep them off the streets."

Grimly, he rang for Watson. "I think we had best visit your bankers as soon as possible. You cannot go along in complete ignorance forever."

She wanted to ask him what he knew of investments and such, but Watson showed in the first maid, and they had no time for further privacy. The only thing she accomplished in the next few hours was to make certain her own personal maid was young and cheerful and nothing like the elderly termagant she'd left behind who reported everything to her parents. Since Damien assured her he had managed to keep his own valet over all these years, she relaxed and watched him question the rest of the staff. She really would have been lost without him, she decided, as he turned away a handsome young footman who gazed on her with interest. She would have hired the fellow for his jolly

smile.

Before the next person could enter, she whispered across the tea table to him, "Why did you turn him away? He seemed quite a nice young man."

"Because he worked for Lady Douton last," Damien answered enigmatically, ticking off one more position on his list.

"That is a fault? I should think that meant he had experience."

Damien looked up with a sigh of exasperation. "Melanie, I'm not about to explain the deviations of an evil-minded woman to an innocent such as yourself. Just leave it understood that the man had ambitions above and beyond his duties as footman."

She didn't understand, and she didn't like being treated like a simpleton, but she realized he protected her because she was a maiden and not a wife. Wives apparently had a great deal of understanding of the world simply due to whatever the marriage act entailed. Melanie had only vaguely wondered about that in the past because she had long since given up any dreams of becoming a wife. Now entire new horizons opened before her. Damien said he would have her as a wife. She still didn't quite believe him, but the possibility existed for the first time in her life. She might actually learn the secrets of the marriage bed. The thought so amazed her that she scarcely noticed who Damien hired after that.

When the room finally cleared of the last potential servant, Damien turned and gave her another of his concerned looks. "I've exhausted you, haven't I? I should have sent you to your room to rest."

Finally waking from her trance, Melanie shook her head vehemently. "No, not at all. I am just learning that freedom involves a great deal of responsibility. I had never thought about it clearly."

He gave her an approving smile. "Some people never learn that, I fear. They live for the moment and

ignore the results of their actions.”

She thought he might be speaking of Jane, but she didn’t want to hear a word against her sister. She knew Jane had always been the tiniest bit selfish, but their parents had made her so, doting on her as they had. But Jane had never hurt anyone. She just knew how to enjoy herself more than Melanie did. She couldn’t find a flaw in that.

Damien stood and helped her from the chair. She found herself standing much too close to him, but he didn’t back away as was proper. He continued holding her hand and looking down at her with an expression she couldn’t quite read.

“If the modiste delivered that gown as promised, would you care to go to the theater with me this evening? I’ll send one of our newly hired footmen to a friend of mine for his box seats, if you’d like.”

Any thoughts of exhaustion vanished. With a cry of delight, Melanie hugged his neck. As she limped hurriedly from the room to check on the gown, Damien watched her leave, a look of sadness haunting his eyes.

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“I have never seen anything so absolutely marvelous in all my life,” Melanie said with satisfaction as she sat back upon the carriage squabs the next day after Damien had paid off his debts.

Damien gave her an indulgent look as he took the seat across from her. “You have never been to the theater in your entire life,” he reminded her. “You are scarcely a fair judge.”

She pouted playfully. “Then you shall have to take me every night to a different production so I might become one. Shall we go to the Drury tonight?”

Damien shook his head. “After the announcements appear in the paper today, you will find your drawing room deluged with callers and invitations. We will be the current gossip sensation. I think an evening of rest is

called for while we choose our next battlefield carefully."

Melanie's eyes widened. "Invitations? I don't know anyone yet. I haven't been presented. I haven't had a come out. Why would anyone send invitations?"

Damien just continued to shake his head at this ingenuousness. "You really do have crackers for wits, don't you? Perhaps I ought to find a place in the country and abscond with you there. Perhaps if I keep you to myself for a while, you'll see what an eminently wonderful husband I will be."

"You are already an eminently wonderful husband, albeit a borrowed one. Jane is the one with crackers for wits. Surely once she sees the announcements she'll return and all will be right again. I just hope it takes a few days for the papers to reach her. I really am enjoying this much too much." She gave him a look of inquiry.

"However do you mean to explain to the world that actually Jane is your countess and not me? Perhaps we ought to stay out of society until it is all straightened out. You could say the papers made a misprint."

"If I were not content to have you as my countess, I would not have put the announcements in the paper, Melanie," he informed her firmly. "You may deny it as much as you wish, but in the eyes of the world, you're mine. You need only say the word and we'll make it so in the eyes of God, also."

"Faradiddle," she said tartly as the carriage drew to a halt in a narrow city street. "You cannot take a cripple as wife. I cannot dance or ride or do any of those things your countess ought to do. I'm just being shamelessly selfish while I have the opportunity. I'm perfectly aware you'll return to Jane the moment she snaps her fingers. I'll quietly disappear from the picture when that time comes."

Exasperated, Damien didn't open the carriage door but glared at her. "If you have so little confidence in me, what are we doing at your solicitor's? You will have a

hard time explaining that to him when Jane returns and you turn me over to her.”

She scowled at him. “You’re not a pet dog. You said you would help me learn about my investments. He’s much more likely to answer questions from you than from me. We’ll just brush it off as a jest by bored nobility later. Who is he to argue? He works for me.”

He didn’t try to explain that she played right into his hands every time she introduced him to another person as her husband. He ought to feel more remorse at trapping her so callously, but as he sat before her solicitor’s desk a while later, he decided his trusting wife actually needed someone like him to look after her.

With incredulity, Damien flung the list of investments back on the desk and slammed his palm against them. “She is not making enough interest on these to stay ahead of rising costs! At this rate, you’ll have her living off assets in a year or two. Devil take it, man! You’ve got her invested like an old lady of ninety-three.”

The bespectacled man behind the desk squirmed slightly, cast a glance to Melanie who merely watched the scene with interest, then returned his attention to the Earl of Reister. “Of course, we always understood . . .” He squirmed some more, then looked again at a radiantly healthy Lady Reister. “Her father always made it plain... Well, we thought the lady an invalid, my lord. And since she never spent what she earned, it seemed unnecessarily risky to invest in anything but certain income.”

They’d thought her at death’s door. Grimly accepting that explanation, Damien stood and pulled Melanie up with him. “I’ll expect you and your banker in my office by tomorrow with a better plan of action than this. I have a few suggestions of my own I will make at that time. The lady will need to live off her income in the future, so keep that in mind.”

The solicitor coughed into his hand as they prepared to depart. Damien turned and raised a

questioning eyebrow.

"Ahem. There is the matter of the marriage lines, my lord. We will need them for confirmation that the lady's fortune is now in your hands. There are transfers to be made, you understand."

Damien gave a curt nod, placed a hand at Melanie's waist, and steered her out. He'd known the subject would arise. He had just hoped it could be postponed for a while. The awful danger of this whole scheme tumbling down on his head still loomed in the murky future. Melanie might not realize it, but this whole charade rested on a house of cards that could blow away with any gust of wind. He wondered how he would persuade the archbishop to change the name on the special license he still carried in his pocket.

Melanie glanced up at him uncertainly as they entered the carriage. "Does that mean we can't change the investments until we have the marriage lines drawn?"

"You would do better to look at it another way, gosling. Once I persuade you to the altar, everything you own becomes mine. Are you ready to run back to your papa yet?"

She stared at his blank expression with concern. "This gets very complicated, does it not? I'm of age. If we tell him we left our marriage papers with my father, will he let me sign the transfers until he receives them?"

"Not if you insist on saying you're married. I'll just go over with him the changes I want made, and you can make them if you decide to heave me out. I think I can earn my keep in the meantime just by increasing your return on investments. I wouldn't have thought your father would have been so bumble-headed."

Melanie shrugged. "The fortune came mostly through my mother's family, and he paid it little mind. He gave Jane a generous dowry when she married in addition to her own fortune." She gave him a wry smile. "Marriage papers or not, I don't think he'll do the same

for us. It's not as if we asked his permission or anything."

"I'm sorry, Melanie. Your generous act of saving me from myself will cost you more than you can understand. I wish I knew how to make myself a better man for your sake."

She gave him an appraising look. "I wonder how I should go about improving you? You are already dangerously good-looking. Any more so, and I would have to fear fighting off all the ladies in London for you." She ignored the way his eyebrows rose in surprise. "You take no exception to my lameness. I have yet to find a man capable of that particular piece of goodness. You are not a gambler or wastrel that I can discern. You are intelligent and not a coward. You have dealt very well with my domestic and financial problems. In what way could I improve you, sir?"

He was grinning now, laughing at her, she supposed, but she could not slight on honesty. Other than the fact that he wanted her beautiful sister, she could not think of a better man for husband.

"All right. You have me convinced. If you will not have me, I shall go into the marriage mart believing I am superior to all others. I will not need Jane. I shall no doubt find wealthy women aplenty ready to throw their fortunes at my feet."

"Don't be facetious," she returned, disgruntled. "I am only saying we are in this equally. Neither of us is perfect."

Since she had absolutely no idea how imperfect he was, Damien kept silent. When they returned to the house, he helped her inside, then departed to go about some long-neglected business. Knowing he had no right to the money in his pocket, he still went off with a lighter heart than before.

Melanie welcomed the opportunity for a few hours of her own. Accustomed to loneliness, she didn't know how to act with so many people about and so many



things to do. As she took off her hat, a maid rushed in to ask if she wished all the covers in the house lifted, or if she wished some of the rooms closed off for now.

Declaring boldly that she would have all the covers lifted, she limped up the stairs to her own chambers. She would like to see some of the ancient fabrics changed in there, but she hesitated about redecorating those rooms first. If she truly entertained the fantasy of marrying Damien, they would share the master chambers at the other end of the corridor. Now that she'd directed those rooms uncovered, it would look odd if she didn't see to them first. The servants would expect them to have adjoining rooms.

That thought made her exceedingly nervous. With the intention of overcoming her foolish fears, Melanie made her way down to the dark back chambers where maids were already dusting and polishing and sweeping. Someone had decorated the master's room in heavy browns and golds that faded with too much light. For that reason, apparently, they'd kept the draperies drawn. She ordered the draperies pulled back and the windows opened to air out this room while she inspected it.

If they were truly married, she'd ask Damien how he would like the room furnished. They could go out to the warehouses together. But if he had no intention of staying, it would be foolish to waste money on changing anything. She would never use this room on her own. The huge bed on the raised dais alone intimidated her. Or perhaps the thought of what must happen on that bed to make a marriage scared her.

She had no illusions about her lameness. Damien had had her fitted for a boot that would keep her from limping quite so much. She appreciated the gesture, but it did not undo the fact that the leg in question was twisted and ugly. Men didn't like taking ugly women to bed. She supposed Damien might do it for the necessary heir if they married, but then he would find someone whole and

perfect with whom to spend his time. She didn't think she could bear that.

No, better that she find Jane and bring the two estranged lovers together. She just hoped Jane would be forgiving when she discovered what Melanie had done.

She informed Mr. Watson that she would not be at home to visitors today. She had no desire to meet perfect strangers without Damien at her side. She didn't know if she ought to meet them until the matter of Jane got straightened out. She had only envisioned the freedom of seeing London. She had never dreamed of entering society as a countess. Her one act of rebellion had landed her into hot water deeper than she had ever dreamed.

But she wasn't yet ready to give it up. She hadn't seen all of London yet. She hadn't gone driving in the park. She wanted to see the opera and the circus. Perhaps Damien would take her to Hatchard's when he returned. If she only had a few days to enjoy this freedom, she would squeeze in everything she could.

She didn't even bother to go down and inspect the cards that had arrived while she hid on the upper floors. They were Damien's friends. He could decide what to do with them. She happily made lists of changes she wished to make in her new home.

When Watson actually came upstairs to knock on her sitting-room door, Melanie glanced up from her desk with surprise. "What is it, Watson?" She'd already approved the cook's menu, directed Mrs. Watson to the rooms she wished cleaned first, and given orders for the dinner hour. What else could they possibly need of her?

"There is a personage at the door, my lady," Watson intoned formally. "She insists that she must see you."

Melanie's hand instantly went to her hair. "Jane? Has Jane come?" She wished more of her new gowns had arrived. She wanted Jane to see her as a sensible adult, not the child she remembered.

"I don't believe so, my lady. She says her name is Pamela, and the hackney driver is awaiting payment."

Pamela! Pamela was just a baby. This couldn't be. Surely Pamela was with Jane. Or her nanny. Or someone besides a hackney driver! Thoroughly bemused, Melanie started to leap from her chair, and caught herself on the desk when her weak leg wouldn't allow such a hasty movement. Cursing softly, she emptied some coins from the desk drawer where she had placed them this morning, and dumped them in Watson's hand. "Pay the driver, Watson, I'll be there directly." She let him take the stairs at a faster pace than she could manage.

When she finally arrived in the foyer, a child of immense girth wearing a straw hat with ribbons streaming down her back watched her from small eyes lost in a pudgy face. Melanie could only stare. Surely this ... exceptionally large child could not be Jane's precious little baby.

"You must be my Aunt Melanie," the child stated with satisfaction. "I have come to live with you."

Melanie thought she might sink to the chair beside the hall table to catch her breath at this declaration, but she thought better of it. The child didn't look scared, but surely adults shouldn't show weakness at moments like this. Taking a deep breath, she asked carefully, "Where is your nanny, Pamela?"

"Oh, I got rid of her a long time ago," she said with that same satisfaction. "And I told the maid that I received a letter from you asking me to come. Mama read me your letters. You do want me to come, don't you?"

Oh, my. Oh, dear. Melanie looked helplessly to Watson, who remained as stoic as ever, seemingly not heeding this conversation at all. She glanced back at the child who didn't look at all like the lovely Jane of her memory except for the long blond curls. Despite the child's much too adult complacency, she sensed a certain wariness behind those small eyes now. Without another

thought, Melanie offered her hand.

"Why, of course. I have wanted to meet you for ever so long now, just as I've said in my letters. Let us go up and find you a room, and then we shall have a nice coze over tea, shall we?"

She could practically see the miniature giant fight back an expression of relief as she nodded haughtily and took her offered hand. When Melanie used her cane to help her up the stairs, the child looked at her with interest. "Mama said you was a cripple, but you have a stick to help you walk. Does it have a sword in it like Lord Aberdeen's?"

Leave it to a child to consider a handicap as something excitingly innovative. Melanie bit back a smile and answered seriously, "No. One needs two good feet to fence with a sword. How did you know to come here?"

"I heard the maids whispering that Lord Reister had married Mama's sister. When he came to call, I went down and took his card. He'd scribbled this address on the back. I showed it to the driver, and he took me right here," she answered proudly.

Alarmed at the precociousness of a child who could only be ... Melanie tried to count back. Nine? Surely not already. Jane always spoke of her as an infant. But she'd been married ten years ago... Shaking her head, she returned her thoughts to the child now following her down the corridor. "That was a very dangerous thing to do," she warned in her sternest voice. "Ladies never go out by themselves. Hackney drivers might sell them to the gypsies if they catch them alone. Don't ever, ever do that again. Do you understand me?"

She could see obstinacy welling up in Pamela's face, but Melanie refused to back down. She didn't know who had responsibility for raising this entirely too clever child, but someone had to put a firm foot down. "I want your promise, Pamela. If you're to stay with me until your mama returns, you have to listen to what I say. Even

grown-up ladies daren't go out in the city by themselves. We could have lost you. Do you know how unhappy that would have made me? I've wanted to meet you forever, but what if the gypsies had stolen you before I could?"

"You could have come to meet me sooner," she answered defiantly, her bottom lip stuck out. "Nobody comes to visit me."

Melanie handed the child into a chair in her sitting room, then rang for a maid. "One is supposed to wait until invited before visiting. Your mama knew I couldn't come, so she didn't invite me. Would you like some tea?"

The child's face brightened immediately. "Oh, yes, please. Will we have little cakes? I love the ones with thick frosting Cook makes."

Cakes with heavy frosting were definitely not what this child needed. How could Jane let her eat so inappropriately? Or had Jane even noticed what her child ate if she was not there to supervise the meals?

Not wanting to think a thought that sounded too much like something Damien might say, Melanie ordered the maid who appeared to bring up some lemonade and watercress sandwiches.

Pamela's expression immediately grew mutinous. "I wanted cakes. I don't like nasty old watercress. And I like tea with lots of sugar. And cream. Nanny says cream is good for the complexion."

"Sugar is bad for the complexion. It makes it all spotty. And my cook doesn't know how to make cakes because I can't eat them. We shall have strawberries for dessert if you eat your sandwich all up."

Torn between the desire to have her way and curiosity at the lady who couldn't eat cakes, Pamela wiggled restlessly in her chair. "Why can't you eat cakes?" she asked sullenly.

Good question. Lying to a child wasn't as easy as she thought. Frantically, Melanie tried to come up with a reasonable answer that wouldn't pull her deeper into a

web of deceit.

“Because if she gets too fat, she won’t be able to climb the stairs,” a voice from the door responded.

“Hello, Pamela, what brings you here?”

The child in the chair brightened perceptibly, turning to peer around the chair’s wing to investigate the newcomer. “Damien!” she cried happily, leaping from her perch and rushing to meet him.

With ease, he caught all six stone flung at him, whirling the child up in his arms before depositing her back in the chair where she belonged. Amazed at the lordly gentleman so apparently at ease with the difficult girl, Melanie merely sat back and watched as Damien placed both hands on the chair wings and trapped Pamela between them.

“Now tell me what you are doing here. Did your mama bring you?”

Pamela immediately became belligerent, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring back. “No, and the gypsies didn’t sell me either. I’m going to stay with Aunt Melanie. She told me I could.” She didn’t even look at Melanie for confirmation.

Neither did Damien. He merely stared disapprovingly at the child. “That is very good of your Aunt Melanie, but she doesn’t know what a spoiled little brat you are. If you’re staying here, you will have to behave yourself. You’ll do exactly what your Aunt Melanie tells you, or I’ll personally paddle your little bottom.”

“You would not dare!” she shouted back. “My mama said she would shoot your brains out if you take one hand to me, Damien!”

Shocked, Melanie could only stare. Damien had no right to punish the child, although admittedly, the child needed firm guidance of some sort. But Damien’s behavior was no less shocking than Pamela’s. She’d never heard a child talk to an adult so. And how could she

possibly have heard Jane say such a horrible thing?

"Then if you want your mama's protection, you can go right back to her," Damien informed her. "I will not have any spoiled brats in my house."

Deciding this was the point where she ought to interfere, Melanie interrupted smoothly, "I'm certain Pamela isn't a brat, Damien. She just misses her mama. Now have a seat, do. We're just about to take tea."

Damien straightened and gave her a glare. "You have no idea . . ."

"I'm certain I will soon enough," she interrupted before he could continue. "Pamela's nanny has apparently left her with a maid, so she is more than welcome to stay with us until her mama comes home. You can show Lord Reister how well you behave, can't you?" She asked this last of the child who clearly absorbed every word said.

"If you feed me cakes," she declared promptly.

"Strawberries," Melanie reminded her firmly. "And perhaps Lord Reister will take us to Astley's. I have always wanted to see a circus."

Distracted by this happy thought, Pamela bounced in her seat and sounded almost like an excited child as she bombarded them with questions while eating the dreaded watercress sandwiches. Damien raised a puckish eyebrow but genially complied with the undertaking, although he consumed almost everything on the tea tray in the process. Watercress and strawberries did not appease a hungry man.

Once they finished tea, Melanie sent her niece off to a hastily prepared room, sent a footman to inform Jane's servants where the child could be found and to fetch some clothing, and rose from her seat to follow Pamela to see that she got settled. Damien stood in front of her, blocking her path. She looked up at him with surprise.

"I can't think of another woman in the world who could manage that obnoxious child so well, or who

would even take the time to bother," he said softly, with almost an air of puzzlement. "Do you have any idea at all what you have let yourself in for?"

Melanie bit her bottom lip and looked skeptical. "I'm afraid a great deal more than I am able to handle." She turned a defiant look to him. "But I could scarcely do less, could I? She's just a child, Damien. A shamefully neglected one, I fear to say, I don't understand Jane at all."

"No, someone as good as you wouldn't," he murmured.

Then before she had any notion what he was about, Damien pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Too utterly surprised to protest at first, Melanie was quickly caught by the myriad pleasures of Damien's embrace. She leaned against his strength, absorbed the masculine scents of tobacco and shaving soap, and fell headlong in love with the sensation of his lips pressing along hers. Before she knew what she was doing, she circled his neck with her arms. He rewarded her with a low groan as he lifted her closer against him, and his tongue stroked along the seam of her lips. Before she could part them in an exclamation of excitement, he stiffened and set her carefully back to the floor.

"I apologize, Melanie. I should not have done that. As much as I wish to convince you to marry me, I don't want you to feel as if you must."

Dazed, she gazed into the stark lines of his face, searching for answers that neither of them possessed. "If marriage means more kisses like that, I think you've convinced me," she answered somewhat breathlessly. "I had no idea, Damien . . ."

Lifting one eyebrow, he grinned a trifle rakishly. "That good, am I? Behave yourself, and I'll give you another for dessert."

Laughing shakily at his ability to take such a soul-racking moment and reduce it to a jest more easily dealt with, Melanie stepped away from his dangerous



proximity and picked up her walking stick. "Then we shall have to have dinner half a dozen times a day," she replied, striving for the same light tone. She didn't think she was very successful.

Damien stood straight and tall as he watched her stride bravely away, her weak foot dragging only slightly. Only when she was completely out of sight did his shoulders sag, and he crumpled helplessly into the nearest chair.

She had taken in Jane's obnoxious child without a qualm. Drawing a shaky breath, Damien wished for a cigar and a glass of port right now. He needed to do something to calm this wildly escalating wave of hope. Of course she would take in Jane's child. Jane was family. She would feel obligated to help family, no matter how much she despised the burden. He'd rather thought of his "wife" as a helpless child herself, but she wasn't. Lord, after that kiss, he couldn't convince himself she was a child anymore. She was more woman than Jane would ever be. More woman than he deserved.

He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on his plans to seduce her and sweep her into marriage, but he couldn't get any further than the feel of her slender waist in his arms, the warm, eager pressure of her lips on his. The realization that she knew no other man but him in that way made his lungs constrict with the burden of responsibility laid on him. She would be completely, wholly his. He'd never possessed anything untarnished and complete before. He'd scarcely known his drunken father. His mother's memory faded into the distant past. He'd had to put his home out to let when his father died because he couldn't afford the upkeep. He'd lived off that small income and his wits ever since. He had nothing. Melanie could give him everything.

If she never learned of his reprehensible past.

That didn't seem very likely. He could try to keep the truth from her until the vows were said, but then he

fully meant to present her with the facts in all their dismal glory. That was one of the main reasons for his decision finally to sell his title in marriage. He didn't need just the money. He needed to establish a real home, a place to live, with a woman to run it properly. He would be the first to admit that Jane made a mighty poor bargain in that department, but he didn't have a great deal to trade beyond his title. The possibility of obtaining someone like Melanie nearly took his breath away.

She still thought of herself as inferior to Jane. He would have to show her otherwise, then perhaps he could convince her that he really, truly wanted her for his wife. He felt as if he grabbed for the stars, but a man couldn't be blamed for trying when they seemed so close at hand. She thought her lame leg put her beyond the pale, but he didn't see her lameness at all. With specially constructed shoes, she could even learn to dance if she wished. He didn't ask for perfection in bed either. He needed forgiveness and understanding and a great number of other things, but he didn't need perfect physical beauty. He, above all others, knew the uselessness of beauty.

He didn't know if he was adequate to the task. He'd spent the better portion of his life idling it away in pursuit of pleasure like the rest of society. He couldn't do that any longer. He had responsibilities he meant to uphold. If it meant waiting on Melanie hand and foot, he would do it. The odd part was, she really didn't know how much she could demand of him right now. She had some strange idea that they were equals. Sooner or later, events would dissuade her of that notion.

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"I heard you got shackled, Reister, but did you have to grovel for a cripple with a kid? Even the fair Jane would be better than that."

Melanie gave the man credit for not intentionally saying the words loud enough for her to hear. They just unfortunately fell into a lull in the crowd noise and some

trick of their surroundings sent them wafting her way. She couldn't imagine why a fop like that stood outside with the noisy throng entering Astley's, but she didn't pretend to understand the whims of society. She just muffled a gasp when Damien caught the man by his starched cravat, hauled him to his toes, and nearly throttled him.

Staring avidly at the food vendors noisily selling their wares to the crowd, Pamela noticed none of this. Hastily, to divert her own attention as well as the child's, Melanie signaled for an orange vendor. Surely an orange couldn't hurt anything but the front of her niece's dress.

When Damien finally caught up with them as they pushed into the amphitheater, Melanie pretended she hadn't noticed anything, but he caught her elbow in a tight grip and whispered in her ear, "I apologize for the scene. I keep meaning to curb my temper, but there are times . . ."

"You needn't explain to me, Damien," she answered without inflection. "I realize I have asked a great deal of you. I do not wish to be a burden to your conscience as well. Do not change yourself for my sake."

She had to find some way to distance herself from him. He had wreaked chaos with that kiss, but it had been a thing of the moment, some spontaneous action that he couldn't control, like his temper, no doubt. She wouldn't allow herself glorious dreams of love and happy-ever-after. Damien would do as he pleased, and so would she.

Beside her, Damien fell silent. As he helped them into their seats, Melanie felt as if her words hadn't met with his approval. She had tried to release him from any obligation he may have felt to defend her, but he didn't seem particularly pleased about it. She didn't like being at odds with Damien. With curiosity, she watched his stony expression.

"I heard what the man said, Damien. I am a cripple.

You needn't take his head off for stating the facts. You are kind to pretend that I am the countess you deserve, but you needn't, you know. Anytime you wish to call off this charade, I will understand."

Damien exploded. She couldn't put it any other way. He slammed his hands down on the seat in front of them, clenched his fingers into his fists, and bit back a reply with such difficulty that his jaw muscles strained from the effort. He finally leaped to his feet, and still clenching his hands in fists, stared coldly into the crowd rather than at her.

"I will fetch some lemonades and be back directly."

Melanie gaped at this display, but she said not a word as he strode off into the crowd. She would never understand the male mind, she decided, as the first horses rode into the arena and she turned her attention to the performance.

Damien sat on the other side of Pamela when he returned, pointing out the clowns dancing in the wings, explaining how the riders did their tricks, agreeing that she needed a pony of her own if she wished to learn to ride properly. He would really make a wonderful father, Melanie thought sadly. And for just a moment, she felt a bitterness that Jane had all the luck.

But she let the excitement of the performance and Pamela's enchantment sweep away the bad thoughts. How could she feel bitter when she was having the most exciting time of her life? She would have these memories to cherish forever. She could even allow herself a little hope. Perhaps now that she had reached London, her father wouldn't have the power to drag her back home, even when it became obvious that Damien belonged to Jane and not to her. She thought Damien might help her stay.

He remained silent on their return journey when Pamela fell asleep in his arms. In sleep she did not seem so much a giant as a lonely little girl, and Melanie pushed

the blond curls back from her childish brow with affection.

"You would be a better mother for her than Jane," Damien said coldly from his corner of the carriage.

Startled, she glanced in his direction, but the carriage lantern only sent his face into shadow. "Jane needs to remarry and settle down. A child needs two parents."

"I agree a child needs two parents. Jane isn't even one. I'd thought she might change, but I made a very large mistake. I think Jane realized that before I did."

Puzzled, Melanie tried to find the meaning behind his words, but it was late, and she was tired. She shook her head. "I don't understand you at all, you know."

He sent her an enigmatic look over the head of the sleeping child. "Don't call yourself a cripple anymore, Melanie. You are far less crippled than most. Your flaw is just more obvious than others."

"Is that what is bothering you?" she asked with relief. She smiled a little. "You can't catch me by my cravat and shake me when I call myself names. It must be very frustrating."

He raised his expressive eyebrows. "I'll find other ways of stopping that sharp little tongue, my lady. Beware."

The thought of just how he might do that sent a pleasurable shiver down Melanie's spine. She met his gaze boldly, and felt the stir of something sensual below her middle when Damien's gaze drifted to watch her mouth. He was trying to seduce her, just as he'd said!

She really thought she would like to be seduced. When would she ever have another opportunity? So with more courage than sense, she smiled back, and let her own gaze drop to his mouth.

He didn't touch her. He couldn't, not with his hands full of Pamela. But by the time the carriage stopped, Melanie felt warm all over just from the things his gaze

spoke. When a footman rushed to take Pamela, and Damien lifted Melanie from the carriage and carried her to the house, she felt more than warm all over. She felt she might turn into steam.

He returned her to her feet at the top of the stairs so she might see Pamela settled into her room for the night, but Melanie found Damien waiting for her in the sitting room when she returned. He had a bottle of wine and two glasses in his hands.

"Will you share a drink with me before we retire?" he asked politely, but she didn't think there was anything polite about the look he gave her. He made her feel as if she wore a daring evening gown, or nothing at all.

"If I do, what do you mean to do with me?" she asked without shyness. Damien had never said anything to discourage her from speaking as she thought.

He filled the glasses and handed one to her. "Kiss you, probably," he replied in the same tone as she used. "I fully intend to employ what is usually the woman's ploy to trap a man. I'll flirt and tease and drive you to want more, but I'll refuse until you agree to marry me."

Melanie's eyes widened as she sipped the wine and absorbed his message. He wouldn't seduce her completely. She could encourage his kisses and still remain a maiden. She found the thought somehow stimulating. She had no understanding of the marriage bed, so she feared it. But she understood kissing.

A few minutes later, with Damien's wine-flavored breath mixing with her own, Melanie decided she didn't know anything about kissing either, but she was more than willing to learn. She stood on tiptoe and wrapped her arms around him and let him play with her tongue again. Desire shot swiftly and surely through her veins, and she nearly lost her balance. Only Damien's strong arms kept her from falling.

He trailed his kisses from her mouth to her ear to give her a chance to recover. "There's more I can teach

you, sugar plum, but I think I'll make you wait for another night. I want you eager and anticipating each step of the way," he murmured against her ear.

"You plan on telling me in advance how you mean to seduce me into marriage?" she asked with a slight laugh, not moving away from his hold. Her breasts felt oddly full yet somehow deprived as they rubbed against him.

"I don't want to be a complete scoundrel." Damien raised his hand to release some of the pins holding her hair, capturing a tendril between his fingers. "I may be a gazetted fortune hunter, but I'll be an honest one."

"It's not honest if you truly want Jane and I'm just a substitute," she pointed out implacably. "I think we'd best send Jane an urgent message to return home."

"Do that," he answered, visibly annoyed as he stepped away from her. "If calling Jane home is what it takes to convince you that I am not a complete imbecile, then do so. I've made my choice. It is up to you to make yours."

He left the room, taking the bottle of wine with him.

Utterly amazed, afraid to believe a word he said, Melanie stared at the closed door until her knees folded and she had to sit down.

Damien Langland, Earl of Reister, declared he wanted her for wife and not the glorious Jane. Something did not ring at all true here, she just couldn't figure out what it was. She would have to wait for Jane.

In the meantime, he left her longing for something she didn't understand except to know that she couldn't have it.

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"'Tis a pity a man of such noble countenance and title must be reduced to marrying an unfortunate cripple for money. I suppose she can claim no family, either?" the voice behind Melanie asked haughtily.

"Her father is a country baronet, but exceeding

wealthy. Lady Morgan is her sister. Reister will survive," the second voice replied dryly. "They all do somehow."

The women moved on, leaving Melanie sitting on the park bench staring at the overhanging leaves of a maple in front of her. She supposed the women hadn't seen her there. She doubted they would recognize her if they did. They just gossiped as all society must gossip. They meant nothing by it.

They just left a hollow yearning behind. Melanie knew she was no match for an Earl of Reister. She had never held any such illusions. Damien deserved a beautiful woman like Jane on his arm. Pamela needed a father like Damien. Had she truly ruined his chances at having the countess he deserved?

She watched as Pamela ran and chased a hoop with some other children by the river. Melanie had brought one of the younger maids along so she might keep up with the child better than she could. With a little exercise and a proper diet, Pamela would be lovelier than Jane one of these days. Why had Jane neglected her only child so that she thought of food as her only companion?

It didn't make good sense. Since she had allowed her dreams to drive her to the altar with Damien, very little made any sense at all. She had made a childish decision and found herself burdened with adult responsibilities for the first time in her life. She had thought to help Damien out of an awkward situation and help herself in the process. Instead, she had unwittingly trapped him as well as herself. But he appeared not to mind while she spun dizzily, not knowing what she dared to ask.

She carried the pain of the women's scorn with her as they left the park to return to the house. Damien wished to introduce her at a grand social occasion, but Melanie couldn't do it. She would wait for Jane. She wanted Damien and Jane to be happy. She didn't want to feel responsible for destroying their lives. She wasn't at all



certain anymore that could be arranged, but she'd have to try.

She found her men of business just coming out of the study when she returned to the house. They took off their hats and bowed to her as if she truly were a countess, and Melanie had to smile at her own playacting.

"You are very fortunate to find a man of intelligence like the earl, my lady," the banker declared boldly. "He will double your fortune within the year, mark my words."

She didn't know what to do with the wealth she already had, but she supposed Damien knew how to spend it. She had never thought paying his debts a bad bargain, but he seemed determined to square them somehow. She smiled in agreement, not knowing how else to respond. She watched as Watson let them out, then turned to find Damien in the doorway, studying her.

"I have more business to attend to this afternoon," he said politely, as if they hadn't exchanged passionate kisses the night before. "Will you ride with me in the park this afternoon when I return?"

She didn't want the whole world to despise him for his unfortunate "marriage," but she hated to refuse him anything. Carefully, she asked, "Isn't a traveling coach a little unfashionable for the park?"

"I had to return that one to its rightful owner. I thought you might enjoy a landaulet. I know of one for sale. I hoped you might like to try it out."

Melanie's spirits rose at the notion of owning her very own carriage. She stared at him anxiously, not certain how to take his toneless suggestion. "Do you think you could teach me to drive?"

This time, a smile lightened his demeanor. "Not a landaulet. You will need a driver for that. But once you've decided how you mean to go on, we might find something a little smaller for you." He frowned as she bounced with delight. "You will still have to take a tiger

with you. You cannot go about alone."

"I will! I will, I promise. But if I could just learn quickly — "

He caught her hands and stilled her bouncing. "You cannot learn quickly enough to avoid your father should you choose to denounce me. There are still some things you have to face."

That still didn't bring her down completely. She envisioned many happy days before her father learned anything. And now that she was happily ensconced in her own home, perhaps he could do nothing at all but rant and rave. Even Jane might teach her to drive.

"Denounce you! As if I would ever do such a thing. Where do you come up with these words?" she asked mockingly, standing on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I shall love you dearly for the rest of my life."

The Earl of Reister held a hand to his cheek long after his innocent "bride" swept happily to her room.

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The ride in the park had been a glorious success, Melanie concluded contentedly as she sipped her morning tea and perused the stack of invitations that had assembled on the hall table these last few days. She knew she didn't have herself to thank so much as the modish carriage gown of luscious peach with the flattering neckline that made Damien look at her as if she truly were a peach ripe for eating. And of course, sitting in that lovely landaulet with all the plush velvet seats, no one could see her hobble, so perhaps she almost did look good enough to be Damien's countess. He'd showed her off proudly to everyone they met, and his friends seemed to greet her graciously. Perhaps she wouldn't be so very bad for him, after all.

Of course, that was last night talking. Melanie sat back dreamily and remembered how he'd held her as they sat on the love seat. He'd talked of the future of steam engines, if she remembered correctly, not precisely

a romantic topic of conversation, but one she'd found as intriguing as he did.

He'd told her how he'd like to invest in a company that had produced a particularly workable engine suitable for moving wagons of coal, but by that time, she'd been listening more to the sound of his voice than the actual words. Damien's hands had taken to straying, and the occasional kiss to the nape of her neck or the lobe of her ear had her tingling in more places than she'd thought possible. He hadn't undressed her, but she'd wanted him to before the evening ended.

She blushed at the indelicate dreams that had flourished in her sleep after that. Damien had a way of making her feel as if she were the only woman in the world for him. She knew she wanted to believe that so strongly that she could easily fool herself into accepting him. She wanted to accept him. She wanted to ask him to take her back to the church and the vicar and repeat the vows in truth. But she wasn't a foolish child anymore. She knew Damien hid things from her. She knew Damien wanted her for her money. She wasn't quite certain that Damien still loved Jane, but she found it hard to believe that she would make an adequate substitute. She needed to know the truth, and she thought Jane would have it.

So while Damien went out on his mysterious errands of business and Pamela slept happily in her bed upstairs, Melanie perused stacks of mail addressed to the earl and countess and indulged in daydreams.

The clock had only struck the noon hour and Pamela had just come down dressed for another romp in the park when Watson came to Melanie to announce callers. She had left standing orders that they were not to be at home to callers, so she understood that these were not the usual type who left their cards and passed on to the next house on their list. She lifted an inquiring brow as she'd seen Damien do.

"Lady Morgan and Sir Francis Berkeley to see you,

my lady. I put them in the yellow drawing room."

Jane and her father, together! Oh, my. That didn't bode well at all. Jane and their father did not get along at all. The fact that they came together raised clarion calls of alarm. Nervously, Melanie glanced down at her new morning gown, removed a scone crumb, adjusted a ribbon, and pushed herself carefully to her feet. She hadn't quite learned to adjust to the higher heel of the new boot Damien had the cobbler make for her, so she held her walking stick as usual. She gave an anxious Pamela's a reassuring smile, as if Jane's appearance here was perfectly natural.

"Shall you come down and make your curtsy before your grandfather, my dear? Or would you rather wait in the library and read a good book until your mother calls for you?"

The worried look didn't go away. Pamela glanced at the door as if ready to bolt, but she bit her bottom lip and said politely, "I shall wait in the library, if you do not mind, Aunt Melanie." She sent Melanie an apprehensive glance. "You will not send me away, will you? I will behave, I promise. I shall not even chase away a governess if you wish to find one."

Melanie found that an extremely odd sentiment, but too worried about her own problems, she didn't pursue it. She merely pressed a kiss to her niece's hair and sent her off in the company of the young maid. She would prefer to have the explosion over with before she brought the child into her grandfather's company.

She almost had the rhythm necessary for keeping her new shoe in line by the time she reached the yellow salon. Clutching the walking stick but not relying on it, Melanie allowed Watson to open the door for her, and she did her best to glide in without a hitch to her step. The two people waiting for her didn't even seem to notice.

"Melanie! My baby sister! I'm so dreadfully sorry I

have got you mixed up in all this!"

The woman rushing toward her in no way resembled the young girl who had so eagerly departed the country for the city sights ten years ago. Jane's lithe young figure, creamy complexion, and bounteous curls had somehow matured to a caricature of that long-ago image. Powder and a hint of what appeared to be rouge created the complexion. The curls had an oddly brassy shine which did not precisely duplicate the health and vigor of youth. But it was the figure that held Melanie speechless. Jane's once perfect hourglass figure now more carefully resembled their father's stout barrel shape. Melanie blinked and allowed herself to be wrapped in the suffocating envelope of French violet perfume and Jane's arms.

"You poor baby! We'll get you right out of here. I cannot believe that man! Of all the cruel, callous, despicable — " The tirade threatened to continue, but Melanie politely pulled herself away, casting a glance to her father.

"Hello, Papa. What brings you here?" She had the frightening notion that she knew, but she refused to admit anything. He had only to ask the vicar, and the vicar would have to tell him. She dreaded the disappointment she expected to see in her father's eyes, but she was prepared to stand up to him. She would tell him that she and Damien planned to marry as soon as they had the license. Unless Jane protested he belonged to her. That thought made her tremble.

"I've come to take you home, child. I'll not allow any daughter of mine to be slandered by the likes of that young cur. If he were worth anything, I'd have the law on him now. As it is, I'll just make it so hot for him here that he will have to flee to the Continent for the rest of his born days."

She didn't like the sounds of that at all. Nervously, Melanie bit her bottom lip much as Pamela had done ear-

lier. Her father's side-whiskers quivered as he spoke, not a good sign at all. Reminding herself that this was her home, she took a seat in the yellow damask chair nearest her. She would hold out much better if she didn't fear her legs would crumble under her.

"If you speak of Damien, he is my husband, Papa. If you drive him to the Continent, you drive me with him." She thought she said that very well. The fury rising to her father's eyes did not confirm her opinion.

"He is not your damned husband! Do not give me that faradiddle, girl! He is a fake, a scoundrel, a fortune hunter who has ruined your good name and made us laughing stocks in front of all society. Were I not too old, I'd call him out and have done with him entirely. Now call your maid to pack and we'll be gone from here."

Knowing better than to argue with her father in one of his tirades, Melanie turned her attention to the sister she hadn't seen in ten years. "Do you wish me to call for Pamela? I'm certain you must have worried about her, but I didn't know if my message had reached you."

Jane gave an impatient huff and threw herself into the nearest seat. "The child is a trial. I think she'll be better off in the country with you. You can take her with you when you go. I don't know why it didn't occur to me before. Ring for some refreshments when you ring for your maid, will you? I declare, I'm quite exhausted by my exertions. I cannot believe you have done such a thing as to run off with Damien. Papa's quite right. He's a thorough scoundrel. When I read the announcement in the papers . . ." She rolled her eyes and shook her head as if the effort to continue was too much for her.

"You left him standing at the altar," Melanie reminded her, making no effort to summon anyone. "That was very badly done of you. If you did not want him, you should have told him so to his face." She found herself growing angry in Damien's defense. How could they call him names like that when he was the only man she'd ever

met who had treated her as if she were a real person and not a broken doll to be kept in a corner? If anyone were to blame for her current situation, it was herself.

Outrage identical to their father's rose in Jane's eyes. "Do you know why he wanted to marry me? Do you?"

Melanie shrugged. The reason seemed quite obvious to her now. She didn't think it included beauty or love. "For the money?" she suggested.

"For the money, yes!" Jane screamed. "So I could raise his bastard child because he didn't have the money to support her. Your charming earl already has the woman he wants. She just doesn't have the money he needs."

Melanie thought the blow of those words must have pounded her into the seat. After that, nothing else seemed to quite register. She didn't remember calling a maid. She didn't remember ordering her bags packed. These things just miraculously happened around her until she found herself bundled into her father's traveling coach with Pamela, rumbling down the road out of London.

She thought she'd left a lot of things undone, but she couldn't quite recall them now. She was still trying to come to terms with the notion of Damien having a child and a woman he couldn't marry because he couldn't support them. The pieces fit awkwardly. She'd known he had secrets. She'd known he needed money. He'd made no pretense of that. He had made small objection to taking in Pamela when she supposed another man would have raised an uproar. That made a little more sense now if he expected her to raise another woman's child of his own. She just couldn't believe Damien would do that to her without telling her.

And she couldn't believe Damien had made such sweet love to her while keeping another woman behind her back.

It did not seem quite credible somehow, but then, it hadn't seemed quite credible that the Earl of Reister

would take a plain spinster with a crippled leg as his bride either.

Melanie felt sick as the carriage churned on down the road to the house she'd lived in all her life, the prison she had so briefly escaped. She had known her freedom would be brief, but she had expected to turn Damien safely over to Jane. She hadn't expected this. She hadn't expected this at all, and she didn't know how to handle it.

Across from her, Pamela still looked worried as she watched the passing scenery, but the child remained blessedly silent. The notion that she would have Jane's child to raise helped relieve some of her anguish. She wouldn't be entirely alone again. She would have someone who needed her.

She supposed she'd had a narrow escape, that Jane had saved her from a dreadful mistake. She just wished she could make her heart accept that as her brain must. She had played the part of foolish, idle dreamer, allowing Damien to seduce her as he'd said he would. She just couldn't believe his kisses could lie so well.

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Damien held the precious bundle in his arms, watching a milky breath breathe in and out of tiny bow lips, occasionally caressing a tiny silken curl. He'd given his heart at first sight of her, opened himself up to the onslaught of emotions he'd denied the better part of his life. Because of this tiny bundle, he'd learned to love. It made him feel awkward and vulnerable at times, particularly now that he'd been stricken twice by this malady, but it made him strong in ways he'd never been strong before. He didn't know how to deal with the emotion very well. No one had ever showed him how to express it. But he knew the iron courage it gave him when it came time to protect the women he loved. He needed it now, as he prepared to open his heart and let it bleed before the one woman he wanted more than any other.

He closed his eyes and gave a silent prayer as the



hackney pulled up in front of Melanie's town house, the town house he prayed she would share with him and this innocent bundle he held in his arms. He had thought to wait until he had her bound safely to him before giving her this evidence of his perfidy, but he found he couldn't do it. He loved Melanie too much to treat her that way. He loved his daughter equally. The battle to protect her first had been a strong one, but he didn't think he could live with himself if he sacrificed one love for the other.

The way Melanie had taken in Pamela had given him hope. Surely she couldn't reject this innocent child, despite the ignominy of her origins. He knew Melanie too well to believe that. The woman who couldn't leave him standing at the altar or starving in the streets, the woman who would take in an obnoxious child she didn't even know, that woman couldn't deny a babe in arms. He counted on that as much as he counted on his own ability to make Melanie the happiest woman alive once she accepted him with all his faults and flaws.

Nervously, he carried the infant into a strangely silent house. The child's wet nurse straggled shyly along behind him, staring up at the grandeur of her new surroundings. With a strangely pattering pulse, Damien took the steps two at a time. Watson appeared in the lower hall before he reached the top.

"Lady Reister has gone, my lord," he intoned cautiously from below, eyeing the young nursemaid askance.

Damien's heart sank. He recognized that tone of voice as well as he recognized the man's disapproval. Whatever Watson had learned this morning, the sight of the child and nursemaid had confirmed it. Slowly, he turned around and walked back down the stairs.

"Where did she go, Watson?"

"With Sir Francis and Lady Morgan, my lord. They left orders for the house to be closed up and the servants turned out. I believe Sir Francis mentioned selling."

Ah. He had something the old fraud wanted after all. Watson wouldn't want to leave his comfortable position. He'd no doubt padded the payroll with half his relatives. He might disapprove, but the servant would do whatever necessary to keep this house open. Damien smiled cynically.

"Thank you, Watson. In my wife's behalf, I countermand those orders. You will keep the place open and staffed. I greatly fear my wife has been abducted by well-intentioned fools. She will have need of you when we return. Send for her maid. I want her to travel with Miss Snipes here. I'll send around for the coach directly. Send one of the footmen for my horse."

Damien snapped out the orders curtly, quickly, as he made a mental list of all he would need to do. He'd had the world in his hands just hours ago. He wouldn't let it escape again without a fight. He didn't know what Jane had said to Melanie to make her flee like this, but he could very well imagine. She wasn't going to get away with it.

He hated to drag a child and a nursemaid across country roads in pursuit of a dream, but he couldn't leave them behind. Melanie had to see the truth with her own eyes, not wait until he carried her off and brought her back here. He wanted her to come willingly, with eyes wide open. He patted the pocket with the newly acquired special license in it. He wanted her full agreement this time.

He rode ahead of the carriage, leaving its lumbering gait well behind as he raced his horse past fields and meadows on the course toward home. Home. The house he'd inhabited as a child had never been a home. He'd vowed never to raise a child of his as he had been raised, but that had been when he'd never had any intention of having children. Now that he had one, the vow became even more important. A child needed two parents, Melanie had said. He could amend that somewhat.

Children needed parents who loved them, who gave them the attention they needed. He didn't want to fail at that, but he might. Melanie wouldn't. And Melanie could keep him from failing too.

Damien didn't even have to repeat that refrain as the miles rolled beneath him. Melanie filled him. She had seeped into his soul and stayed there. He could feel her in every fiber of his being. He didn't know how it had come to pass, and he wouldn't question it. Melanie could save him. He had to save Melanie first.

That's how Damien looked at it as he rode up to the front door of the country manor he'd known since childhood. He'd used to ride up here to court Jane in his heedless youth. He thanked God he'd failed at that as he'd failed at so many other things over the years. He refused to believe he could fail at his current mission. He couldn't let all that life and loveliness that was his Melanie languish behind those cold doors and dark draperies.

He pounded the knocker and pushed past the butler when he asked for his card.

"Where's Melanie?" he demanded. "Where is my wife?" The butler stared at him blankly. "The family is not at home to callers, my lord."

So the blamed man recognized him, Damien thought coldly. Good. Let him see the Earl of Reister breathing fire and fury. "I'm not a caller, man, I'm family. If you do not tell me where my wife is, I shall tear the place down until I find her."

The butler stepped back passively. "I'm sure I cannot say, sir."

"Fine then. Stay out of my way." Roaring with rage, Damien stormed down the hall, flinging open doors right and left. The library, she had said. She spent her time in the library, staring over the lawns. The library must be in the back of the house or she would be out here now. Melanie wouldn't ignore him. "Melanie!" he screamed at

the top of his lungs. She would hear him. She would come running. It would just take her a little time.

He found a second passage leading to the rear of the house. He ought to remember where the blamed library was, but Jane hadn't spent much time there. Neither had he, for all that mattered. Where did one hide the blamed library?

He was aware of heads peering around doors and peeking down stairs at him as he rampaged through the silent corridors. He didn't care. He needed Melanie. He needed to explain. He needed to make things right with her. Even if she didn't want him, he had to explain. He wouldn't have her thinking badly of him, or of herself. He knew that was what it was all about. Jane had said something to make Melanie doubt herself.

That thought filled his head as a familiar figure suddenly darted from the shadows at the rear of the hall. Too round and too large for flitting, the child merely pointed at a closed door and sat heavily on an antique boot bench by the side door. Damien blew Pamela a kiss and threw open the door indicated.

With draperies drawn, the room held only dusky shadows at first. Gradually he made out the floor-to-ceiling shelves, most of them half empty. Sir Francis didn't spend much time reading, nor had his limited selection of ancestors, Damien suspected. No one used this room, he knew instantly from the uncluttered library tables to the unburned wicks in the lamps — no one but a lonely woman who escaped into her own fantasies amid its dreariness.

He stalked to the drapery-covered windows. He didn't yell anymore. He would never yell at Melanie. Or maybe he would, occasionally. She had a stubborn will that needed opposition once in a while. But he could think of much better ways of opposing that will than by yelling.

Gently, he drew back the drapery hiding the

window seat. She slept curled against the window frame. Tears sprang, unwelcome, to Damien's eyes. He wanted to pick her up and carry her out to the carriage that would arrive shortly, take her away from here, and never come back. But she wasn't a child like the one he'd held in his arms a few hours ago. She was a woman grown. She was entitled to make her own decisions.

"Melanie?" he spoke quietly, not wanting to startle her.

Her lids flickered, and her glance first went to the window. Perhaps he should have climbed in the window after her, Damien thought with amusement. That's what a gallant knight would do. He wasn't any gallant knight.

Then she woke more fully and turned to look up at him as if she'd expected him there all the time. "Damien," she said flatly.

"Not Sir Lancelot, I'm afraid," he apologized, jerking back the drapery so the sun flooded the dismal room.

"But I've come for you anyway. You should have waited. I didn't want you to have to face your family alone."

"They're my family. I have nothing to fear from them." She watched him with curiosity now. She sniffed delicately as he sat beside her. "You smell of. . ." She tried to put a name to the odor she no doubt would have difficulty associating with him.

"Babies," he supplied the word for her. "My daughter spit up on me on the way to the house. I didn't exactly have time to change when I found you gone."

He loved the way those lovely violet eyes widened with surprise. In some ways, she was still a child. He thought that might be a good thing when it came to raising children. One needed to think like a child sometimes.

"Your daughter?" she asked questioningly, not coldly, not with condemnation, just asking explanation.

Damien took her hand and traced the delicate lines of her palm. "I thought I made it clear that I'm a cad

without scruples. I'm sure Jane confirmed it for you. I had every intention of doing the same thing to you that I did to her. I was afraid if you found out before we were wed, that you would turn your back on me. I couldn't afford that. I was willing to do anything for my child. Her name's Arianna, by the way. She's three months old today."

"Arianna." She stared at him blankly. Damien knew he was doing this badly, but he didn't know any other way. He didn't want Sir Francis running in here shouting before he'd had time to explain. He had to speak hurriedly.

"I was bringing her to you when you disappeared. I couldn't lie to you, Melanie. I didn't want our married life to start out on a lie. I gambled my daughter's future for yours. But I lost before I had either. I'm not only a scoundrel, I'm a failure at everything that meant anything to me. I can see why you would turn your back on me. But don't turn your back on yourself, Melanie. Give yourself a chance. Go back to London. Call yourself countess. I won't contradict you. I can find a small place in the country for Arianna and myself. I've seen enough of London to last me a lifetime, but you deserve more than burying yourself here and wasting away. Find someone you can love. You deserve that. You deserve far more than I can offer you."

Tears streamed down her cheeks and Damien had the ridiculous impulse to kiss them away. He held himself back, though. He had to. If he ever had her in his arms again, he would never let her go. Love might have given him courage and strength, but he was only human. He wanted her too much to let her go. Right now, she wasn't his, so he could find the strength to hold himself back somehow. He'd forget all reasoning once he held her.

"You're doing it again, aren't you?" she asked, spoiling the coolness of her tone with a small hiccup at

the end. "You're calling yourself names. Shall I grab you by the cravat and shake you?"

He managed a smile at the thought. "I could think of much more pleasant things to do if you'd like to grab my cravat, but if shaking me makes you happy, please do. I deserve far worse than that."

"Oh, stop it," she said crossly, starting to swing her legs down from her perch only to discover he blocked her way. "You can't seduce me anymore, Damien Langland. Babies don't come into this world by magic. Where is Arianna's mother? If you truly want to take care of your daughter, you will marry her mother. The three of you can live just as easily as two in some cottage in the country. Perhaps you could take a position as someone's bailiff. Or I could give you some kind of commission for taking care of my investments. There are any number of alternatives besides shackling yourself to a wife you don't want. You ought to be quite glad Jane left you at the altar. She's become a terrible harridan since I saw her last."

"She was always a terrible harridan," he answered mildly. "I just had the strange notion that money would make life easier. I know better now. And if you won't have me, I'll accept your offer to make a commission on your investments. I'll gladly swallow my pride for Arianna's sake. But I want you. Perhaps I didn't make that clear enough. I don't want any other woman but you. Arianna needs a mother, but I need a wife more. I suppose, if you are happier looking for someone more honorable, I could learn to live with that. I might even find some comfortable farm woman to teach Arianna all those things about love that you already know. But it won't be quite the same as having two parents who love each other. Would you care to live in a cottage with us? I really don't need the town house or the carriages or such. I just need a wife, a lovely wife, a loving wife who understands I'm not perfect but loves me anyway. Do you think you could ever love me?"

She clenched her hands in the muslin of her skirt and looked out the window again. "Arianna's mother? Why can she not give you these things?"

"I'm not doing this very well, am I?" He sighed. "Arianna's mother is a" — he sought for a polite term — "a soiled dove. She took off shortly after Arianna's birth. She knew I couldn't keep her the way she wished to be kept, and she'd found an old man who would. Of course, he wouldn't keep the child. I've spent everything I had finding a wet nurse and providing them with a place to stay. It's extremely expensive living in London. I had no notion how much it took to raise a child. I had to borrow from the cent-percenters when Arianna ran a fever and I had to hire a doctor and buy medicines. I'll find some way to pay you back over time. Now that I have those debts off my back, I'm certain I can find a place for us where my income can support us. For that alone, I owe you. I will gladly do anything to see that you have the life you want, Melanie. Just tell me what you want."

She jerked her leg away from where his hand so casually rested upon it. "You can't make me whole again, Damien. You can't make me the kind of countess you deserve. You'll need an heir someday, and as much as you may protest now, I'm certain I'm not the woman you would choose to provide one. I mixed you up in my foolish dreams and made a hash of everything. I'm sorry I've caused you such confusion, but I won't go back to London and pretend to be your countess any longer. You need one in truth. Tell them I died, if you wish. Tell them the truth, if you prefer. And find a lovely mother for Arianna, one who will love you for who you are and not for your blasted title. You have a lot to offer, Damien. Don't sell yourself cheaply."

Damien suffered a brief flare of anger, and he clutched his fingers into his fists. He controlled it, however, when he saw the streaks of her tears. Catching her chin with his hand, he made her face him. "I don't



want to sell myself cheaply. I want to sell myself to you. I'm the one who's making a hash of it. I love you, Melanie. That's what I've been trying to tell you. I couldn't lie to you because I love you too much. You have no idea how easily I could get an heir on you, if you wish to be crude about it. If it makes you happy to hide your leg, then hide it for your own sake, but not for mine." Boldly, he jerked up her skirt to expose two stockinged limbs sprawled across the pillows of the window seat. He ran his hand up the withered one, contrasting the brownness of his skin to the whiteness of her stocking. "You have nothing to hide from me." He kept his hand on her leg but met her eyes firmly. I want you as my countess in all sense of the word. I want you in my bed, Melanie. I want you to bear my children. I need you to save me from everlasting damnation. Marry me, Melanie."

The library door slammed open, revealing a furious Sir Francis wielding an ancient battle-ax and a bevy of stalwart footmen carrying cudgels and muskets. The baronet's roar of rage filled the room as he discovered the Earl of Reister with his hand up his daughter's dress.

"You bastard! You son of a fiend! You bloody damned —"

Melanie brushed her skirt back down and leaned over to wrap her arms around Damien's neck. "I think I've borrowed Damien long enough, Papa. I want him for my own now. Do you think we might ask the vicar to do it proper this time? I want flowers and my family there. And Pamela can be my flower girl." She turned a loving look to Damien, who sat still and watched the armed footmen warily. "Will you need time to ask your friends?"

As he saw the way his little devil had brought her father and his army to a standing halt, Damien relaxed and wrapped his arm tightly around her waist. "What if we just ask your father to stand up for me this time? If the vicar isn't busy, we can have the business done by

evening. I'll pick the flowers personally."

A maid ran frantically down the hall crying, "There's a carriage coming, sir. There's a carriage and a baby!"

Damien sought her eyes questioningly, and Melanie smiled back. "Let us go meet your daughter, my lord. Perhaps Pamela would hold her while we take our vows."

Sir Francis and his army of footmen stood back, gaping, as Damien helped her to her feet and the couple glided through their ranks without a hitch, looking for all the world like expectant parents as the sound of a crying baby wailed through the previously silent corridors.

As they reached the astonished baronet, the Earl of Reister placed his arm around Melanie's shoulders and held his hand out to her father. "I want to thank you for raising such a beautiful daughter. I hope I can do half so well as you have."

Melanie pinched him for this conceit, and Damien laughed. He was a scoundrel, no doubt, but there was no reason he couldn't be a charming one.

As if she read his mind, she whispered heatedly, "One more whopper like that, Damien Langland, and I'll make you change your daughter's nappies."

"May I still have kisses for dessert?" he whispered back.

The look she gave him in return made him thankful he had a license in his pocket. He didn't think this groom could wait much longer for his wedding night.

## Fathers and Daughters

"I would like your permission to marry your daughter, sir." Lord Edward John Chatham stood nervously before the older man's desk. From his crisply immaculate white waterfall cravat to the elegantly tailored dove-gray pantaloons tucked correctly into a pair of gleaming Hessians, he was every inch the proper young gentleman. A thick head of burnished brown curls cut fashionably to fall forward over his forehead did not disguise the bleakness of his eyes as he watched the other man turn his back on him and walk away. The fact that he had been offered neither brandy nor a chair spoke ill for his hopes.

"I've been expecting this, Chatham." A small, slender man, Henry Thorogood opened a drawer in a nearby cabinet and withdrew a sheaf of papers. As an astute businessman who had turned his family's dwindling estates into an extremely profitable and lucrative career, Thorogood was always prepared for every eventuality. The neat study in which they stood bespoke his natural methodicalness. He threw the papers on the desk. "Your vouchers, Chatham. Do you have any idea of the sum total of their worth?"

"Considerably more than you bought them for, I wager," Lord Jack replied wryly, acknowledging

Thorogood's shrewdness in obtaining large discounts on practically worthless pieces of paper. Some of those vouchers had been so long outstanding that his creditors would gladly have taken a ha'penny on the pound.

"Enough to have you called before the court, in any case." The older man came to stand behind his desk again. The Thorogoods were an old and respectable family, but no title attached to their name, and Henry's immersion in trade had tainted their welcome in the highest echelons of society.

Lord Jack, on the other hand, was the son of an earl and younger brother of an earl, the current holder of the title, in direct line to the succession, and an eminently eligible bachelor.

The young man paled slightly at Thorogood's threat, but he remained steadfast, clenching his hands at his side. "I realize I have overspent my income for some time, but I have already given up my expensive habits and begun to pare down my debts. Except for repaying what you hold there, my allowance from my late father's estate is sufficient to keep Carolyn comfortably, if not quite in the style to which she is accustomed. She understands and has no objections to the modest life we must lead."

"You have already spoken to her? That was unwise. She is much too young to know her own mind. You should have known that of all the wealthy young girls available to buy you out of penury, my daughter was the least suitable. I have no intention of further financing your extravagance at my daughter's expense."

Thorogood's voice was harsh and cold as he glared at the lordly young man before him. "You will stay away from Carolyn or I shall have you in debtors' prison so fast your family will not know where to find you."

Or even care, the young man acknowledged to himself. His elder brother had more debts than anyone could repay, but no one dared charge an earl with unpaid bills.

He was on his own, as he had been since his father's death, when he was still a schoolboy. The present earl couldn't fish him out of prison any better than he could save himself from going. Lord Jack's jaw tightened at this new obstacle to his happiness.

"I love Carolyn, sir, and I have reason to believe she returns my affections. I will repay those debts in time. You need settle nothing on Carolyn. I will keep her on my income. We will be able to live comfortably in my mother's dower house in Dorset. She will come to no harm at my hands, I assure you." Although he spoke with confidence, Jack was beginning to relive the doubts that had plagued him ever since he had realized his idle pursuit of an heiress had become something much different and totally uncontrollable. He meant every word he said, but he couldn't help remembering Carolyn's youthful innocence. Did she have any idea what a modest life in Dorset meant? How long would it be before she grew restless and bored, deprived of the extravagances her wealthy father had led her to expect of life?

"She will come to no harm at your hands because I will not allow you to lay hands on her!" Thorogood shouted.

He had expected the young lordling to crumple with his first shot. This obstinate refusal to acknowledge the facts gave Henry some admiration for the lord, but not enough to surrender his eldest daughter into the young fool's hands. If the man thought his title and family name fair trade for Carolyn's dowry, he would learn otherwise. Carolyn's happiness did not rest on titles, but on character. Lord Jack's profligate habits did not display the kind of character required for Carolyn's happiness.

Resolutely Henry pressed his point. "I will call my daughter in here and you will tell her before my face that you will not see her again. In return, I will not call in your debts. Should you so much as show your face at my door,

however, I will hand your vouchers over to the magistrate. Do you understand me?"

Jack heard and understood. Beneath his fashionably pale complexion he turned a shade grayer, but his eyes hardened and took on a light of their own. "I understand you are destroying your daughter's life as well as my own. As you say, she is young and perhaps will recover. For myself, as long as you hold those vouchers, there is no hope for me. If you truly wish me to leave, I request a loan so that I may set about finding a means of repaying those debts." And of returning to Carolyn—but he did not say those words aloud; they held his last flickering hope of a life worth living.

The older man looked at the younger contemptuously, seeing the request as a bribe to ensure his silence. There were very few ways a gentleman could turn money into wealth without land and still remain a gentleman. The loan would be wagered at a card table in a mad attempt to win it all back and would never be seen again. If that was what it took, so be it. Henry nodded tersely. "You will sign a voucher for the sum."

Curling his fingers into his palms and feeling all his plans crumble to bitter ashes inside him, Jack waited for the servant to fetch Carolyn. They had known each other only a few brief months. Perhaps for her it had been a carefree lark, part of the experience of coming out into society. For him it was much more, but he had been careful not to let her see how deeply she affected him. He had never known such quiet, kind affection and cheerful joy as she had brought to him. It should be enough to treasure these few months of happiness they had shared. He tried to fix a careless expression on his face as he heard the unmistakable light patter of her small feet in the hall.

She floated into the room, a brilliant expectancy upon her face as she smiled into Jack's warm gray eyes. Her smile faltered somewhat as she met an unfamiliar

cold barrier there, but she did not hesitate. All fragile grace clothed in pale green gauze and ribbons, her light brown hair piled artlessly above a slender throat and velvet eyes, she advanced bravely to kiss her father's cheek. In her hand she carried what appeared to be a red paper-and-lace heart. She turned and gave Jack another reassuring smile.

"Lord John has something he wishes to tell you, my dear." Henry rested a comforting hand on his eighteen-year-old daughter's shoulder. He had five daughters and no sons. Their mother had died giving birth to the youngest just two years ago. Carolyn had been his right hand and biggest comfort during these last two years of grief and chaos. He would not surrender a gem such as this to a man who would not appreciate or care for the gift. The temporary pain he was about to inflict could in no way measure the misery of a lifetime of poverty and depravity. Someday she would understand that.

Carolyn turned the trusting blue of her gaze to Jack's irregular but handsome features. She knew the story behind the crook of his once-patrician nose, knew the tiny scar above one arched dark eyebrow had been earned during a childhood tantrum, knew he had inherited the Chatham pugnacious jaw and his mother's sharp Spanish cheekbones. She knew him with all her heart and soul and was ready to give the words that would allow her to share his life forever. The promise appeared in her smile as she waited for him to speak.

"Carolyn, I just wished to tell you that I am going away and won't be able to see you again," Lord Jack said.

She continued staring at him as if he hadn't spoken, waiting for the words that would surely follow. The red-and-white heart in her hand crumpled a little beneath the pressure of her fingers.

Steeling himself, telling himself it was for her own good, Jack tried again. "Your father has refused to give me your hand. I cannot keep you in the manner to which

you are accustomed."

That, she understood, and the light returned to her eyes as she turned to her father. "That does not matter, Papa! You must know that I have no care for silk gowns or balls or jewels. I should love to live in the country and will be quite content attending village affairs rather than London society. I know you mean well, Papa, but you must see that I love Jack too much to allow so small a thing as money to stand between us."

Henry turned a threatening look on the paralyzed young man. "Tell her, Jack. Do one decent, manly thing in your life."

Realizing he was being asked to cut his own throat, Jack threw the older man a murderous look, but as Carolyn turned questioningly to him, he ruthlessly whipped out the knife. "You don't understand, my dear. My debts are such that I would have to sell my home to pay them. Your father refuses to give you a dowry if you marry me. Without your dowry, we cannot marry. I must seek my fortune elsewhere."

Twin spots of color tinted Carolyn's cheeks as she absorbed this self-serving speech, and the blue of her eyes hardened to a more crystalline color similar to his own. "You are saying you courted me for my dowry? That you only meant to save yourself from debt and never meant any of those promises you made? That your pretty words were nothing but lies?"

Jack said nothing, but remained stoic as she wielded the knife he had given her. Carolyn could by turns be pensive and gay, serious and flirtatious, but never had he seen her in a temper. At his lack of reply, her anger seemed to boil and explode, heightening her color, making her eyes more vivid, but not once did it remove the ladylike melodiousness of her voice.

"They were all lies, weren't they? The courtly gestures, the sweet flattery? Did you go back to your friends



and laugh at how easily I fell for them? Did they wager on how soon you would woo my wealth? All those promises . . ." Her voice broke and her eyes glittered with unshed tears when he did not deny her charges.

To compensate for her lack of words, she stalked across the room to stand in front of him and waved the fragile confection of red and lace before him. "I don't want to know how much my father had to pay you to do this. You must have realized I would have run off with you anywhere. I loved you. *Loved* you!" Her voice cracked again, but temper had loosed her tongue. "Fool that I am, I believed your lies! I gave you my heart, and you had no idea what you possessed. You will never know now. No one will ever know. I'll not be such a fool ever again."

Before his stony gaze she ripped the paper heart in half, then tore it again and again until it was in tattered pieces on the floor at his feet. She flung the last few bits at his snowy cravat. "There's my heart. See what good it does you now."

Carolyn stormed from the room, her large store of reserve severely depleted by the tantrum she had never indulged in to such extremes before. She slammed the door, rattling the precious Meissen vase on the hall table, and halted in the shadowed doorway to compose her face and hastily wipe away her tears.

Even as she stood there, she heard her father's low voice through the door. "I'll have the money for you on the morrow. I'll send my man around. I don't want to see your face here again."

Shuddering with dry sobs, she raced toward the stairs, no longer caring who saw her. It wasn't just a lovely valentine lying in torn pieces at the feet of the man behind her, but her heart. There would never be any repairing it.

Behind the closed door, the tall lord bent to pick up the flimsy pieces of paper heart that he had not deserved. He could see snatches of the fine penmanship of the child

he had loved on the pieces as he gathered them. In his own heart, he knew they would never be whole again.

Grimly he pocketed the torn valentine, nodded curtly at his nemesis, and strode out, his long legs carrying him away as quickly as the laws of physics and nature allowed.

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"I cannot get it to look lacy like the picture." Frustrated, Blanche threw down the tattered paper amongst the scraps already littering the library table. An unexpected ray of sun gleamed through the open curtains, catching her golden hair in a coronet of light that illuminated this dusky corner of the library.

Smiling at the lovely sight, the woman in the corner chair set aside her book and rose to see what task her younger sister had set herself now. Pale brown hair arranged unfashionably in an elegantly simple chignon, she moved with quiet grace and sureness as she came to stand beside her sister.

Blanche glanced up in relief as competent fingers took up the misshapen piece of paper. "It is not at all like what you and Mama used to make. I thought I could follow the instructions in this magazine, but it is not the same. Show me how to make it lacy."

Carolyn held the tattered valentine, glanced at the magazine, and drawing on the strength she held in reserve for just such occasions, sat down and picked up the scissors and a clean sheet of paper. "You have to cut the heart first, if I remember correctly."

Blanche watched in silence as the plain square of paper shaped itself into a heart finely threaded with intricate designs and elegant scrollwork. Breathing a sigh of happiness, she eagerly took up the scissors when her sister laid them aside. "It is beyond everything, Lynley!" Her newly discovered grown-up manner disappeared briefly to let this childhood appellation escape. "Will you

make one for George?"

Carolyn carelessly set the beautiful lace heart aside. "George would not know what to do with it. For whom are you making a valentine?" Hoping to encourage her sister's confidences, she lingered to help fold the paper correctly and to pencil in cutting lines. Blanche had come out during the Little Season last fall, but she had shown no preference among the many suitors who swarmed around her.

"Why, for the first bachelor to appear at my door on St. Valentine's Day, just like the magazine says!" Laughing eyes lifted to meet her older sister's. "Why don't you make one too? Wouldn't fussy old George have a proper fit if you gave a card to someone else?"

"He is Lord Hampton to you, child. He would swallow a maggot if he ever heard you talk so. And one does not play childish tricks on her suitors. The marquess would have every right to be peeved should I start handing out love notes to someone else."

Instead of being chastised, Blanche laughed gaily at her sister's admonitions. Five years her senior, Carolyn still managed to combine her motherly advice with just enough humor to keep the camaraderie of their sisterhood lively. "I think you should have married when you were my age, Lynley. You have grown as crusty and dull as old Lord Hampton. You deserve each other. I can see the two of you on your wedding night. He will bow stiffly at the waist and offer you his arm to take you to bed, and you will make a deep curtsy and ask, 'Are you certain this is proper, my lord?' and the two of you will debate it until dawn."

"Blanche!" Equally mortified and amused at her eighteen-year-old sister's unruly imagination, Carolyn bit her tongue and began improving the lacy confection she had created earlier. "You should not be thinking such things. Besides, Lord Hampton and I are not officially betrothed. If you are going to do that properly, you must

learn to make smaller cuts." She pointed the tip of her pen at the offending design in her sister's hand.

Blanche shrugged and reached for a new sheet of paper. "Everyone knows you will be as soon as his curmudgeon mother comes back from the Continent. And it's about time. You are twenty-three, Carolyn. Gossips will have you on the shelf. And just think what grand balls you can have when you are Lady Hampton! I think I shall have another Season just so I might meet all the noble gentlemen I have missed this year. Then, when I have found a duke or a marquess, we will both be able to bring out Alice and Jane. Why, with such high connections, we should find them princes, at least. Then they can introduce Penny to society, and she shall have to marry a king."

Carolyn smiled at these high-flying flights of fancy. "I cannot think of a prince I would allow in the same room with Alice and Jane, and while I will admit not having consorted with many kings, I daresay they will all be a trifle derelict for Penny. At the tender age of seven, she may have difficulty finding a king who will play at patty-cake and hobbyhorse with her."

Blanche made a rude noise that one of her suitors would find quite startling from so demure and innocent a miss. "You didn't used to be so prim, Lynley. I remember when you first came out and you and that fellow with the broken nose made up the most horrendous tales to tell when you knew I was listening. Whatever happened to that gentleman? He was quite fun. Much more the thing than stuffy old George."

Proud of her hard-won self-control, Carolyn smiled and laid aside her pen and valentine. "We both grew up. Now, if you need no further —"

A gentle rap at the door signaled an intruder, and Carolyn swung around to greet the footman bearing a card.

"The gentleman's come to see Mr. Thorogood, Miss

Carolyn." He held out the card for her inspection. "He asks that he be made known to the ladies while he waits."

When Carolyn's expected reply did not come, Blanche looked up in time to see her sister's face turn pale and her lips compress in a manner she had not seen in years as she stared at the card in her hand. Before Blanche could inquire as to their visitor's name, Carolyn regained her composure. "Tell the gentleman we are not at home," she announced firmly.

Blanche gave her sister an odd look. Carolyn very seldom stood on ceremony with their visitors. She was friendly to young and old alike. Who could this be that she would refuse him? Smitten with curiosity, Blanche waited for Carolyn to return to her reading, then excused herself to disappear down the hallway after the footman.

Garbed in a heavy sable-lined cloak against the January cold, the gentleman waited in the salon doorway. As the servant repeated his message, the man bent his top-hatted head in acknowledgment and removed himself to the privacy of the salon until the master of the house could see him.

Curiosity thoroughly whetted now, Blanche slipped into the small family parlor behind the salon. The connecting door between the rooms had not been recently used and creaked as she pulled it ajar, but a quick glance told her the stranger had not been disturbed from his pondering by the noise. He evidently did not mean to linger long, for he had not surrendered cloak or hat but held them on one arm as he stared at a porcelain figurine on the mantel. She could see by the dim light that his hair was sun-streaked and his complexion weathered, as if he were one of her father's ship's captains, but his richly tailored clothes were of the finest cut and not those of a poor seaman. The sable cloak alone bespoke his lack of commonplaceness. When he finally turned at the entrance of a servant, Blanche barely concealed her gasp of surprise. The man with the broken nose!

She had no opportunity to learn more. The visitor followed the servant out and up the stairs to the master's private study.

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Five years older, Henry Thorogood still retained his slender build, although there was now a hint of a stoop to his shoulders and threads of gray in his dark hair. Lord Edward John Chatham observed these alterations as he entered the book-lined study. Little else had changed in these last years, in this room, at least. He wondered at the refusal of the ladies of the house to see him, but his had been a whimsical gesture at best. Thorogood could have remarried by now; his new wife would not know his name. Carolyn's younger sisters were not likely to remember him. He could not expect to find Carolyn unmarried and still in her father's home after all these years. He may have hoped desperately, and been tempted to find out what he could, but business came first.

With the self-assurance of an older, more experienced man, Jack seated himself without his host's permission. He noted the older man's brief look of surprise and the trace of amusement in the lift of his brow, but he had only one purpose here and he was eager to get on with it. He waited for Thorogood to take a seat before he spoke.

"I have come to repay my debts, sir. I have brought the sum of the loan, plus interest. You will need to name me the amount due on the vouchers you bought."

Thorogood appraised the sun-darkened stranger seated across from him. In the years since their last encounter he had not forgotten the arrogant young lordling; in fact, he had had good reason to remember him. The changes wrought by the years were dramatic, but he would have recognized those stony gray eyes and that arrogance anywhere. Lord John had come into his own, it seemed. The question remained, had his character improved with time?

Ignoring his visitor's demands, Henry responded with coldness. "I will not accept tainted money. I have not heard of your brother's estates improving or of any of your family dying and leaving you a fortune. I would know from whence your payment comes."

Jack made an elegant sneer and withdrew a large purse. "Thank you for your confidence, but my money is honestly earned. You may speak with my superiors in the East India Company. It is not tainted, that is, unless you consider trade a taint. I don't believe you are in any position to quibble about that. Name me the sum I owe you."

Thorogood weighed the bag of coins thoughtfully in his hand as he contemplated the young lord. Lord John would be nearing thirty now, not young any longer, actually. Whatever he had been doing, it had taught him a new authority and assurance that the callow spendthrift had not possessed. He propped his fingers together in an arch and named a sum that would have made royalty flinch.

Jack gave him a look of disgust. "That would more than cover the full sum of the original markers plus interest at a rate to make the shylocks cringe. If you think that is what I owe you for five years of my life, you are sadly mistaken. I will pay it, but I will have every marker I ever wrote in return. Should any more turn up at some future date, I will return them to you for payment."

Henry concealed his surprise with a brief nod. "I did not anticipate immediate payment. You may pay it as you are able."

Chatham rose abruptly. "I will give you a draft on my bank today if you can present the vouchers. I will not have your threats hanging over my head any longer than is necessary."

Fully astounded, Henry hurried to the drawer where the markers had been kept all these years. Something in the way Lord Jack had phrased that

sentence gave food for thought, but he would savor it later. He would step cautiously for now. He wondered if the careless name the young man had gone by in his youth still applied. "Lord Jack" no longer suited this imposing stranger.

The transaction completed, Jack threw the sheaf of papers in the fire and watched them burn before striding out without a polite word of courtesy to his host. Five years of waiting for this moment had left him expecting an elation he could no longer feel. The deadness inside remained even with the burden of all those old debts lifted.

He needed to seek some new stimulation now to keep his spirit from dying entirely.

Only recently arrived in London, he'd not had time to seek out old friends. With his business accomplished, he felt ill-at-ease and restless. It was time to rejoin society and see how his reputation had fared over the cleansing solution of time.

Jack walked into White's and found little different in the decor other than a mellowing of age. Perhaps the faces behind the newspapers were slightly different or older, the youths behind the gaming tables seemed younger, he knew fewer than he had expected, but on the whole, the changes were slight. He moved easily toward the group in the corner of the back room, using his leisurely pace to identify vaguely familiar features. One of their number looked up and gave a whoop of recognition. Jack grinned at this irrepressible greeting. Peter's hair might have retreated slightly from his sloping forehead, his yellow waistcoat might be tighter over his paunch, but the cheerful beam of his round face remained unchanged.

"Chatham, as I live and breathe! Back from the dead, old boy? Have you come to haunt us in these dismal corridors?"

They drew him back into their circle without



reproof, either glad of this diversion on a dull day or unaware of his fall into trade. Jack ordered drinks, joined in the genial jesting, and tested the waters. Many of their former number were not evident in this gathering place. Some younger, newer faces watched his homecoming with disinterest or an eagerness to be amused but he found no disdain. Yet.

Settling into a comfortably upholstered chair, Jack turned the conversation away from himself and encouraged gossip about those faces among the missing. His companions eagerly grasped the opportunity. In this time-honored fashion he learned how little things had changed beyond the names and the faces.

"And Beecham? Has his father stuck his spoon in the wall and left him all those barrels of gold yet?"

The slender young toff with the diamond stickpin, sitting beside Peter, waved his hand lazily. "The old Judas will never die. Last I heard, he was swearing to leave everything but the entailment to some young niece. Beecham's out courting her right now. She's a Friday-faced female if ever I saw one, not even been presented yet."

"The last lot of lovelies seem sadly lacking compared to those when we first came down, don't they, Harrison? They're all so demmed ... green, somehow," Peter completed his sentence weakly.

General laughter ensued at this assessment, but it gave Jack an opening to the topic closest to his well-concealed heart. "And the Incomparables of all these years past? Where are they now? What of our number have shackled their legs for beauty?"

This regenerated the conversation as they sought to remember the reigning toasts of other years and who had carried them away into marital bliss or discord as the case might be.

Peter summed it up best after a fevered discussion. "They're all married and surrounded by whining brats is

what they're doing. Seems a demmed shame to waste all that loveliness."

The gentleman with the stickpin shook his head in disagreement. "Not all. The Tremayne wench married some ancient baronet with a pot of gold, who popped off a few months later. She's sitting in splendor over on St. James's now, entertaining lavishly. I hear Bulfinch has been dipping his pen there."

Peter brightened at a renewed memory. "And the Thorogood eldest, what was her name, Jack? You used to be smitten with her. She's leading her young sister around this Season. She ain't never been wed that I know of. I'm surprised she ain't wearing caps by now, though she's still a lovely lass."

Before Jack could respond or even untie his tongue and allow his heart to drop from his throat after the shock of this news, Harrison made a deprecating gesture. "Hampton has her claimed. She's a smart one. She hung around for a title to remove the stench of trade. Wait and see, she'll have that brood of her father's married off to the cream of the crop as they come along. Watch your legs, men, they'll be in her trap before you know you're caught."

Jack peeled his fingers from the arm of the chair and reached for his glass. "George still unwed? He's older than any of us. How did the little Thorogood snare him?"

"He ain't snared yet. There's been no announcement. I wager it waits on his mama's approval, but if he don't come up to snuff soon, the chit will have her comeuppance. The ladies are raising eyebrows at his marked attentions without a ring on her finger. I daresay that devilish father will force the matter soon enough. Hampton was a fool to dabble in those waters. Thorogood's a shark."

Jack heard the stem of the glass crack beneath the pressure of his fingers. Forcing himself to relax and look bored, he rose and prepared to depart. "Maybe someone

ought to warn Hampton what he's getting into. Good night, gentlemen. It's been entertaining, but there's a certain little lady who's expecting me."

He walked off and was gone before they realized he had never explained what he'd been doing these past years.

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"No, don't add the gold pins, Blanche! They are very lovely, but you will have to save them until you're older. The pearls will do fine. You will be prettier than any other girl there."

"Fustian!" Blanche glared in the mirror at her reflection. "I shall look a simpering idiot like all the rest. Why can I not wear cloth of gold like yours? You look like an angel just down from heaven. I look like a frumpy mushroom."

Carolyn smiled at her sister's nervous starts. Admittedly, virginal white tended to be tedious, but the extravagant gauze and lace of Blanche's ball gown were not exactly the common touch, and the lavender sash and embroidery enhanced her slender charms daringly enough. She would be a sensation, as usual, but she would not be persuaded.

"I don't have wings and you're not edible. You already have more suitors than you need. I don't know what you're worried about. Is there someone special you wish to impress?"

Carolyn's practicality always put a damper on any nervous hopes. Swinging around to observe her sister's elegantly draped gown, Blanche offered a reluctant smile. "No. I just thought it might be a pleasant change if I could be as beautiful as you. Your suitors are so much more interesting than mine."

Carolyn laughed. She had not spent half the attention on her own preparations as she had on Blanche's. She had bidden her maid merely to loop gold twine through her upsweep, added a chain of silver and

gold to her throat, and, wearing a gown she had worn the year before, called herself ready. Admittedly, her maid had teased a few loose tendrils into curling about her ears and shoulders, but they did that normally enough before the evening ended.

She had no illusions about the men she would meet tonight. They had been attending her over five years now, and she was as heartily bored with them as they were with her. At one time or another, as fortunes waxed and waned, one or another of them would grow amorous and make an offer, but she had learned how to let them down lightly.

Among the older set, proposing to her had become a game of nothing ventured, nothing gained. Wagers had been won or lost in earlier years. Lately, there were few takers on a sure thing. Few had any interest in being rejected in an attempt to remove her from the shelf.

That was why Hampton's suit had caught everyone concerned by surprise, Carolyn knew. He had been an eligible *parti* on the Marriage Mart for a decade but had never shown any interest in the favors waved before his nose in attempts to catch his jaded interest. Wealthy, titled, and young enough to be considered well-looking, he made many a young girl weep with envy when he escorted one of society's more mature widows onto the floor. The gossip about his misalliances with these more worldly women was discreet. He never gained the epithet of rake, for he seldom spared a second glance to the innocent.

His studious courtship of Carolyn had the *haut ton* all agog and puzzled her as well. She was neither worldly nor a widow. Not a hint of scandal attached to their relationship except in the fact that the courtship had lasted a good six months without an announcement. That in itself was a record of sorts. Hampton had never courted any woman, young or old, for that length of time, and Carolyn had never allowed any courtship to go on so

long without a firm rejection. Wagers once more were rife.

Well aware of tongues flapping, Carolyn did nothing to encourage the wagers. She concentrated on seeing that Blanche was properly attended.

George Hampton's suit did not interfere with her goals, and aided it in many ways, so there was no reason to discourage him. She was well aware he had finally decided he needed an heir and had settled on her as older and more mature than the fresh crop of young innocents on the Mart. His less-than-romantic courtship caused her no pain. If she finally agreed to his proposal, it would be because she had finally decided she wished a family of her own, and he was wealthy enough for her not to fear he wanted her for her dowry. It seemed a good, stable way of venturing into the treacherous waters of matrimony.

But Blanche was still filled with romantic illusions and Carolyn had no desire to remove the misty film of fantasy from her sister's eyes yet. The time would come soon enough when the more objectionable suitors were weeded out and Blanche began to realize that marriage was a financial proposition and not a romantic one. For now, let her believe in love. It might happen. Even fairy tales came true upon occasion.

Blanche and Carolyn entered the ballroom that night on their father's arms. As a wealthy widower, Henry Thorogood was much sought after himself, and he had no difficulty in amusing himself while keeping an eye on his two beautiful daughters. Still, it was on Carolyn that he relied to act as chaperone for Blanche's high spirits. She was quite capable in dealing with overardent young gentlemen.

Thorogood watched her through half-lowered lids as she smilingly refused one notorious rake and deflected a debt-ridden young lord with a request for some punch. Carolyn had learned propriety too well. Her natural

happiness had become something much less animated, an artificial facade of smiles and gentle words that fooled the rest of the world but not her father.

Sipping his drink, he watched Carolyn's smile fade in weariness as she was momentarily left alone. The daughter he had known from infancy had been exuberant in her joy, passionate in her beliefs, dramatic in her sorrows. She had wept and laughed and infuriated alternately, until her eighteenth year. That was the year she had grown up, and he had not seen that girl again. As dutiful and pleasant as this new woman was, he rather missed the tempestuous girl. His eyes narrowed as he observed the two young men approaching her now.

Instantly aware that she was being watched, Carolyn raised her head with a renewed smile at George Hampton's approach. Garbed in sober black tailcoat and pantaloons, his immaculate cravat a masterpiece in simplicity, his stride one of noble arrogance and authority, he looked the part of wealthy aristocrat without need of the hauteur. He seldom smiled, but she sensed a pleased look on his face now as he caught her eye.

In idle curiosity, Carolyn turned her gaze to the man at the marquess's side. She knew George frequented White's and several other of the gentlemen's clubs, but he seldom introduced her to his male friends. She wondered occasionally if it was out of embarrassment because he had attached himself to a female without title whose wealth came from trade, but she did not let the question concern her much. He made a pleasant companion and they got along well enough. Still, she couldn't help wondering about the stranger he evidently meant to introduce to her.

At this distance Carolyn could tell only that the stranger was unfashionably weathered in a startlingly attractive manner. His rather longish brown hair had light streaks from the sun, and his eyes seemed much lighter than the rest of his bronzed face. His gray swal-

low-tailed coat fit comfortably to unfashionably muscular shoulders, and his impeccably tailored matching trousers did not hinder his long, eager stride. Dressed for comfort more than style, he exuded a self-assurance she found compelling. Unnerved by this sudden unexpected attraction to a stranger, she raised her gaze to search his face as they came closer. Shock brought her hand to her middle as if suddenly assaulted by a hideous pain, and the blood rushed from her face.

Her plight did not go unnoticed by the newcomer. Cold gray eyes swept over her without demonstrating any emotion, lifting in dark acknowledgment at accepting that he was the cause of her distress. At his side, Hampton seemed oblivious of her lack of response as he introduced his companion.

"Do you remember Chatham, Carolyn? I daresay he was before your time. He's been in India practically since you were in short skirts."

Carolyn managed a weak smile and extended her hand. "I am not so young as that, my lord. I remember Lord John from my first Season." As his callused brown hand closed around hers, she wanted to jerk away, but that would be demonstrating a childish emotion she no longer felt. She forced a more pleasant expression to her lips.

"He's a bit out of touch with the current crop of lovelies. I told him you would be happy to surrender a dance or two and introduce him to a few suitable misses. That sister of yours might be just in his style."

Carolyn's aghast expression went unnoticed by the nobleman pleased with his helpfulness to both friend and would-be fiancée.

Jack read her dismay without compunction and refused to release her hand. "I believe the musicians are beginning a waltz, Miss Thorogood. You were reluctant to try it when last we met. Shall we?"

With her intended standing by affectionately

rewarding her with his smile for her compliance, Carolyn had little choice but to follow Jack onto the dance floor. She remembered a time when she had stubbornly refused to indulge in the decadent dance sweeping the fast set, even when the man she loved offered to teach her. After he left, it seemed scarcely a point worth defending.

She had been waltzing for years now, but defiance returned with just the touch of Jack's hand. She wanted to stomp her foot and slap him and tell him to behave. It would have been apropos back then when he had been whispering sweet nothings in her ear all night. Such behavior now would be singularly inappropriate.

"You cannot kill me with looks, Carolyn. Smile and put a pleasant face on it before someone remembers old gossip and reminds George." Jack slid his arm around her slender waist with the possessiveness of familiarity, swinging her effortlessly into the steps of the dance as he spoke. "You're more beautiful than I remember," he added, searching her face when she did not respond.

"And you're more arrogant," she retorted. Under the intensity of his scrutiny, she felt a flush staining her cheeks for the first time in years. Her fingers itched to smack him, but his long masculine physique held her firmly, and the familiar sensations she had not felt in years swarmed alive and well through her rebellious body. He could hold her like this for the rest of the night, and not a muscle would stir in protest.

"I see your temper has not cooled with the passage of time. I suppose you are the one who refused to see me yesterday. I did not expect to find you still in your father's house. I thought you would be married by now."

She hated the speculation in his eyes. The arrogant fool was wondering if she had waited for him. She would disabuse him of that notion immediately, if only she could find her tongue. "I have grown more fastidious with age," she finally gritted out between clenched teeth. She could feel the heat of his hand even through his glove



and her gown. She hated him for reminding her of sensations better forgotten.

"So it seems. George is quite a catch. You cannot fear he is a fortune-hunter. When do you set the date?"

He asked that agreeably enough, and Carolyn glared up at him with suspicion. He seemed taller than she remembered, but then, George was nearly her height and she was accustomed to dancing with him. The white flash of Jack's teeth against his sunburned face irritated her, and she answered with as much aloofness as she could muster, "We have an understanding that suits us both, my lord."

"An understanding? How formal that sounds. Has he kissed you, Carolyn, or is that not part of the agreement? It would be damned hard to court you for long without stealing a few kisses, particularly for a man of George's rakish inclinations. How much longer before that understanding leads to something else, Carolyn? I'd like to lay my wagers on the winning side."

Rage rose in her, a blinding rage that made Carolyn want to scream and shout and kick and cause a scene right here in the middle of this elegant dance floor. Jack had always been able to rouse her ire with a word or a wink, but he had always appeased her quickly afterward. The memory of those tender scenes added fuel to the fires of anger. His insults this time would get no response from her.

"You have become an insufferable boor, Jack. It is lucky for us that my father intervened in time."

Carolyn's haughty disdain made Jack furious, and at the same time, her words pierced him like shards of hell. Five years he had worked and waited, abstaining from society, from the luxuries of civilization, from everything he had ever known, just so he might come back and look her in the eye once more.

He had been prepared to find her happily married with babes around her feet. She deserved that. He would

never have wished her unhappy. But he had never imagined her like this, cold and bitter and haughtier than any princess. Something wasn't right here, and he'd be damned if he would let her slip through his fingers again without knowing why.

He deliberately ignored her harsh words. "When George spent hours raving about your pleasantness and agreeableness, I thought he'd got the wrong sister. Agreeableness is not what I remember most about you. I can see you haven't changed, so who is this Carolyn that George is talking about?"

His spiteful remark deserved no reply, and as the dance ended, Carolyn dropped his hand like a hot coal. She turned stiffly in search of George and grew tense at the sight of Blanche waiting with curiosity at his side, watching her and Jack. When Jack attempted to take her elbow to lead her back, she shook him off.

"Stay away from Blanche, Jack. I'll not have you spoiling her life." She could have added, "as you spoiled mine," but she would never admit that out loud.

He sent her a swift look, as if he heard the unspoken end to that sentence, but her lovely blue eyes had grown cold and stony and he found no evidence that he had heard aright. He turned his gaze to the young blond beauty waiting beside Hampton and shook his head. "By Jove, it's hard to believe we were ever that young. Are you certain she ought to be out of the school-room?"

Carolyn flashed him a look of irritation. "She's eighteen." Just as she had been when she had fallen head over heels for this unscrupulous rake, but again, she left the words unsaid. He knew them as well as she.

Had she turned to see Jack's face, she would have seen the fleeting look of pain he could not conceal, but she was hurrying ahead of him. He would not allow her to leave the floor unescorted, but followed in her wake.

Once, Carolyn had looked at him with the same

wide-eyed dewy look as her sister possessed now. His heart pounded, but the palpitations weren't for the young girl, but for the memory of the girl he had known.

Blanche's glorious smile was nearly the same as Carolyn's had been, but the eyes were more cautious. She distrusted him much sooner than the young Carolyn ever had. Jack wondered what she knew of him, but suspected it was only curiosity that kept her gaze in his direction.

He felt Carolyn's tension as the introductions were made. Even George looked at her with curiosity when she made no pleasantries but insisted that she and Blanche must repair to the powder room. The demure woman Jack had observed from across the dance floor earlier had lost her composure, and the war of emotions in her eyes was plain to see for all who looked. Fortunately for her, George was blind to the nuances of female expressions.

Politely, Jack made his excuses and departed before he could drag Carolyn off to a corner and shake her until he received some explanations. If he needed time to gather his scattered wits, so must she.

Carolyn watched with a cry in her throat as Lord John's proud back retreated. How could he be even more incredibly handsome and wicked than she remembered? She had never known him for the devil that he was until that last day, but she had just seen him looking at Blanche in the same way he had once looked at her. He wouldn't! Heaven help her, but she would kill him with her bare hands if he so much as held Blanche's little finger. Surely he was not so beastly arrogant as to believe he could win this second round by using her sister?

By the time she arrived home that night, Carolyn's head pounded with the thunder of her memories and fears. For nearly five years she had maintained her composure, playing the part of doting older sister, loving daughter, and society maiden. For five years she had refused to think of Lord Edward John Chatham.

Just as she had thought herself fully recovered and

prepared to consider marriage from a more sensible viewpoint, he'd reappeared like some demon straight from hell. What was wrong with her that he could still make her feel like this after all these years? She *hated* him. How could he stir her into this writhing agony of need and chaos and uncertainty after all he had done?

It wouldn't do to ponder the thought too long. Soon, George's mother would return from the Continent, and they would obtain her approval, and Carolyn would be wedded and safe. With both her father and George to protect her, Blanche would be out of Jack's reach. There were too many other girls on the market for Jack to try his hand at another Thorogood.

Still, as she drifted off to sleep, Carolyn could not keep from dreaming of warm gray eyes and long legs striding eagerly toward her. So light those eyes had been, almost as if illuminated from within when they gazed on her. She felt them even in her sleep, warming her to the marrow.

When the enormous bouquet of impossible roses arrived early the next day, Carolyn nearly refused to accept them. Jack had been given to extravagance, even when he hadn't a ha'penny for food. She knew they had to be from him, but telling herself that there was some chance that George might have grown sentimental, she read the card. The words "I need to see you" had scarcely grazed her mind when she heard Jack's voice in the doorway.

"I told the servant not to announce me. I didn't want to be turned away again." His wide shoulders filled the salon doorway. The expensive tailoring of his deep blue frock coat emphasized the breadth of his chest and the slimness of his hips in their tight pantaloons, and Carolyn had to force her gaze to his sun-bronzed features. That was no relief, for the dizzying lightness of his eyes made her throat go dry, and her fingers longed to caress the blond streaks in his burnished curls.

The footman disappeared, leaving Carolyn clinging

to the roses. Jack properly left the door open, but they both knew there was no one but the servants to hear them, and they would not interfere. She tried to pry her tongue from the roof of her mouth as she measured the astonishing knowledge that he was here, in her house, in the same room with her after all these years, but she couldn't shake her disbelief. She felt as if she were still dreaming.

Dressed in a frail muslin of sprigged lavender, her hair tied in loose curls at the crown of her head, she had the grace and the startled velvet eyes of a gazelle. A hint of lavender scented the air around her, speaking of springtime and wildflowers and the beauty of an English rose. Jack could not take his eyes away, and all his carefully prepared speeches disappeared in a misty haze of yearning. For five years he had dreamed of this. He still could not believe he was so blessed as to find her unmarried. His hands actually shook as he reached to set the roses aside.

"We need to talk, Carolyn. I have so much I want to say to you, I don't know where to begin. I caught you by surprise last night. I'm sorry. I didn't mean those things I said. I had been listening to George sing your praises until I wanted to plant him a facer. That's why we have to talk. I want another chance, Carolyn. Will you listen?"

She flushed hot and cold hearing that deep, seductive voice again, feeling it wash over her with lingering promises of passion. She hated him for doing this to her again. She was old enough to know better. He had no right to come here and disturb her life all over. She wouldn't let him. She steeled herself against the impassioned plea of his voice, refused to see the pain and hope in his eyes. He deserved to suffer for what he had done. It was her turn to hand out pain.

"Get out, Jack," she told him coldly, meeting his eyes without flinching. "If I never see you again, it will be too soon. If you ever dare perpetrate this underhanded

trick again, I will have the servants bounce you out on your ear. You may take your vulgar flowers with you when you go. Try them on some poor cit who is desperate for a title. Don't ever try them on me again."

She swung around and started for the far door. Stunned, Jack could utter no word of protest. In all these years of envisioning this scene, he had never imagined the coldness of her reception. Too many hot summers, he thought wryly as he felt the chill of the unheated room begin to take over and shudder through him. He heard the door close after her, and still he could not move. He kept waiting for the blessed numbness that came with time, but it eluded him. He shook as if with fever.

He had expected anger at worst. Carolyn could be docile and patient and loving and understanding, but when she felt threatened, she retaliated with a temper that left scars. He could still feel the sting of her words from that night they had parted. They had lingered under his skin like some insidious poison for years. Those torn pieces of heart she had thrown at him had bruised as if they were stone, but her words had caused permanent damage. He had feared she would never forgive or forget, but never had he thought it would be like this.

She had meant it when she said he would never know her heart again. The woman who had just left this room had no heart. That was what he had sensed missing last night. All that loving, trusting innocence he had known had disappeared, bricked up behind a brittle facade of composure and disinterest. The Carolyn he had known had ceased to exist.

Aching as if with cold, Jack turned and retraced his steps to the front door. The roses lay forgotten in the icy salon.

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Blanche watched as her older sister paced the library, ostensibly in search of some volume of verse appropriate for the valentine they were making. It had been

days since the ball where the man with the broken nose had made his appearance, but Carolyn's complaint of the headache had kept them confined indoors ever since.

Blanche had little reason to object, since her suitors were overflowing the salons with their flattering lies of missing her, and flowers spilled over the furniture as reminders of their attentions in her absence. The social whirl was amusing, but she had spent most of her life in her father's country home and knew well how to entertain herself without need of constant attention. Her concern was more for Carolyn.

Blanche had learned nothing about Lord Edward John Chatham from discreet inquiries of her callers, but she had found his abandoned flowers and note in the salon the day after the ball. That Carolyn had refused to appear in public ever since was serious cause for concern. She had never seen Carolyn troubled or discomposed.

The time Alice had fallen from the tree and broken her arm had thrown the entire household in an uproar, but not Carolyn. She had directed servants, comforted Alice, and had everything calm before the physician arrived. Even their mother's death had not caused this withdrawal from family and friends. Carolyn had grieved terribly, but she had been the mainstay of the family throughout that tragic period. She had not bolted herself behind closed doors and refused to come out.

"Perhaps I shall write a poem of my own," Blanche suggested to divert her sister's attention from pacing. "Am I allowed to make personal allusions in poetry?"

Carolyn clamped her fingers into her palms and pulled together her distraught nerves. She was being ridiculous. After what she had said, Jack would never cross their portals again. There really was no cause for concern. Blanche was a sensible girl beneath her frivolous romantic fantasies. She would listen to reason should the opportunity be needed. Mouthing these platitudes to herself, she forced a serene smile.

"What personal allusions can you make when you don't know to whom the card will go? An 'Ode to His Shining Eyes'?"

Blanche grinned in appreciation of this sign of Carolyn's returning humor. "I can refuse to come down until someone meeting the description arrives. It's only the first man I see that day that counts. I shan't have to see anyone if I don't wish."

"Horrible child, that takes all the fun out of it. What if we had no servants? You would have to answer the door and accept the first man who entered."

"I should sneak around and see who it was before I answered. If it was someone unacceptable, I should just pretend I was not at home. I'll not give my favors for a year to a man with no wit to appreciate them."

"You are spoiled beyond redemption." Carolyn inspected the lacy creation of ribbons and paper that Blanche had painstakingly put together. "It is quite good without a poem. Do not give them any ideas." She set the heart down and squared her shoulders decisively. "It is a pleasant day. Would you care to accompany me for a stroll in the park?"

Blanche shuddered at the thought. Carolyn's idea of pleasant weather was a day without rain. Never mind that icicles still hung from the eaves. And *stroll* translated as a fast gallop on foot through deserted lanes at a hideously early hour, when there was no one to notice them. It did not strike Blanche as a particularly elegant way to spend the morning.

At Blanche's blunt refusal, Carolyn shrugged and went in search of her wrap. She had been confined inside for too long. She needed exercise to disperse these nervous fits and restless urges. A bruising horse ride would be more suitable, but that was not permitted in the crowded city parks and streets. A brisk walk would be just as beneficial.

Fetching her resigned maid to accompany her, Car-



olyn wrapped in a blue velvet pelisse lined with a fur that nearly matched the color of her hair and set out.

The last patches of snow were disappearing into the grass, and icicles were dripping rivulets from bare tree limbs. The Serpentine still held patches of ice glinting in the sunlight, and Carolyn turned her mind to the beauty of the day. It felt good to stretch her muscles and breathe fresh air again. She had been quite childish in hiding from the ghost of her imagination.

A bright red ball bounced across her feet, nearly causing her to trip, but she was adept at eluding such objects. With four younger siblings underfoot at various times of the year, she had learned to keep a tremendous store of patience. With a smile at this simple pleasure, she turned to find the runaway ball and return it to its owner.

With the object firmly in her gloved hand, she sought the youngster who had thrown it. To the side of the road and down a slight embankment stood a tiny figure garbed head to foot in warm furs and velvet, her pitch-black hair streaming out from a fur cap framing a strangely tawny face. She held back shyly, not willing to come forward to retrieve her toy from a stranger.

"Shall I throw it to you?" Carolyn offered, content to be playing at simple childhood games for a time.

When the girl nodded timidly, Carolyn heaved the ball toward her mittened hands. They caught the ball with an adeptness that signaled she had frequently played this game.

As the child smiled and clasped her ball, a dark figure unfolded from its relaxed position against a tree trunk and came forward. "Thank the lady, Amy."

The voice smote her with the swiftness of a rapier, and Carolyn stepped backward instinctively. "Jack!"

Only then did the top-hatted head lift to peruse her. Gray eyes shuttered, and a leather-clad hand reached for the small shoulder of the child. "Carolyn." He nodded

warily.

An awkward silence fell, of which the child showed no awareness as she held out the ball. "T'ank you, m'lady," she lisped carefully. "Will you play?"

As shaken by Jack's presence as by the dilemma of the child's appearance, Carolyn could make no reply. Dazedly she tried to orient herself, to find some perspective to approach the situation, but she could not. She only waited in bewilderment for Jack to rescue her.

Caught unaware, Jack, too, had difficulty surmounting a meeting that he had never anticipated. He had never intended to keep Amy a secret, but there had been no opportunity to mention her. His fingers squeezed his daughter's shoulder reassuringly as his tongue summoned some form of polite introduction.

"This is my daughter, Amy. Amy, say hello to Miss Thorogood."

As the two exchanged shy greetings, Jack regained some of his assurance, and he glanced around. "Are you with someone, Carolyn? Surely you did not come out here alone?"

Briefly puzzled by this return to the mundane, Carolyn glanced around for some sign of her maid. "Florrie was right behind me. I do not know where she has got to."

Knowing Carolyn's galloping idea of a walk from old times, Jack shifted his daughter to his shoulder and climbed up the small embankment to the path. "There are still some dangerous patches of ice. We'd better look for her."

Somehow, it seemed perfectly natural to be walking along at Jack's side, his shoulder marching at the same height as her eyes, blocking half the view, but without disabling her in the least. She knew his sharp eyes would find Florrie first, and she need only concentrate on watching her step, since his arm was occupied keeping

his daughter in place.

His daughter. How peculiar to think of Jack with a daughter. He must have married soon after he left London, to judge by the age of the child. Perhaps he had had someone else with a wealthy dowry waiting behind stage in case his first offer fell through. It pained her still to think these unkind thoughts of Jack, but she had to face reality. She had known he was in debt and would have to leave London. Now he was back and seemingly in funds again. There simply was no other explanation.

"That must be Florrie over there on the bench." Jack pointed out a woebegone figure in heavy wool and bedraggled bonnet. The maid looked up, but she made no move to rise, and her expression became even more pitiful.

Carolyn broke into a quick stride. "Florrie! What has happened? I only just missed you. Why did you not cry out?"

By the time Jack trotted up, Carolyn was already kneeling in the mud, ruining her pelisse and walking gown as she examined the maid's outstretched ankle. She glanced up as Jack set his daughter down and crouched beside her.

"She has twisted her ankle pretty severely. It's beginning to swell. I must get her home."

"My carriage isn't far. Will you be all right waiting here? You won't be too cold?"

His concern did not seem in the least feigned. Perhaps that was why she had believed in him so thoroughly all those years ago. He should have been an actor on the stage.

Carolyn quelled the haughty words. Florrie needed help. She had no right to question from whence it came. "I'll be fine. Why don't you leave Amy with us? You could fetch the carriage more quickly that way."

Jack helped her to rise and glanced from Carolyn to his daughter's trusting gaze. He had never left Amy with

strangers before. He and her ayah and Mrs. Higginbotham were all he had trusted with the child. But this was Carolyn. He nodded in agreement.

"I'll be back shortly. You'll take cold if you don't have a dry gown soon."

He strode off, leaving Carolyn to stare after him with perplexity. Why should he be worried if she caught cold? She turned her straying thoughts back to her injured maid and the curious child. She had no business trying to read Jack's mind.

By the time Jack returned with the carriage, Carolyn and Amy were laughing, and even the maid smiled at their antics. In her love for pretty and exotic objects, Amy had apparently charmed Carolyn out of the long, arched feather that had adorned her bonnet, and it now stuck absurdly from Amy's furred cap. They both looked like naughty children when Jack jumped down, and he couldn't help but laugh at their expressions.

"Had I dallied any longer, she would be parading around in your slippers with your pelisse flung over her shoulders and dragging in the mud behind her." He pretended to pinch Amy's nose, and the child laughed with the trill of a little bird. "She is dreadfully spoiled. Now, thank Miss Thorogood for playing with you and let me help Miss Florrie into the carriage, there's a good girl."

The pride and love on his face were plain to see and could scarcely be part of his theatrics. Carolyn felt a tug inside that she dared not recognize, and she turned away from Jack's uneven features to help Florrie to her feet.

Had it not been for Carolyn's father, that little girl could have been her own, and Jack would be looking at their child like that. It would not do to think along such lines. It was over and done and best forgotten.

Jack held Carolyn's hand no longer than it took to help her into the carriage. He kept the conversation general as they drove the short distance to the Thorogood

residence. Never once did he give any indication of the severed relationship between them. Carolyn was grateful for his discretion but left uneasy by it. He behaved the perfect gentleman. Could his disguise be so thorough?

He handed Florrie over into the care of one of the footmen who ran down the stairs to open the carriage door. He bowed over Carolyn's hand in parting, and he made no attempt to cross the portal from whence he had been barred. Carolyn stared after his departing carriage in something akin to shock. She had spent these last days thinking of him in terms of a devil in tailcoats. She could not twist her thoughts to consider him as a knight-errant.

The next day, however, she gladly accepted the call of a Mrs. Higginbotham and one miss Amy Chatham.

The child was garbed in layers of velvet and fur, as she had been the day before. Her hair had been pulled back in a coronet of braids and her hat no longer bore the swooping feather that had adorned it on parting yesterday. Mrs. Higginbotham held her hand as she grimly plowed into the salon. Carolyn held her breath, fearing the powerfully built matron might sit on the tiny child when they both attempted to occupy the same love seat.

"Good morning, Amy. Did you find a better hat to fit your feather on?" Carolyn offered the shy child a smile.

"That is the reason we are here, Miss Thorogood." The jarring accents boomed from the matron's massive chest, vibrating several figurines on the table. Carolyn tilted her head in curiosity to better observe this natural phenomenon.

Satisfied she had her hostess's attention, the woman continued, "His lordship insisted that his daughter thank you for the gift of the feather. She is much inclined to take things she admires, and he hopes she has offered no harm to your apparel."

Carolyn heard this with mild astonishment. Too well-bred to show her amusement at the woman's artificial attempts at elegance, she nodded and turned her attention to the child. "I thought the feather much more becoming on you than on me, Miss Amy. I used to have a doll that liked to wear hats. Do you have one like that?"

Dark eyes lit with delight, and she nodded with a shy smile. Before she could say a word, her companion intruded. "The child has far too many dolls, in my opinion. Her father spoils her, and she does not know her place. I've not had much time to take the matter in hand, but I assure you, it will be accomplished in time."

The woman's encroaching self-importance was a source of amazement, but Carolyn had met her sort before. It was interesting how people with no claim to name or fortune could adopt an immense snobbery when they came in contact with people who possessed accomplishments. Perhaps it was a means of hiding a feeling of inferiority, but in this case, the child was suffering for it. Carolyn permitted herself a small frown.

"Miss Chatham seems singularly well-behaved to me, Mrs. Higginbotham. I have four younger sisters, and not one of them ever behaved so properly on a formal call at her age." With this mild reproof, she returned her attention to the child, who had withdrawn her smile at the sounds of discord. "I would be pleased to have you to tea one day, Miss Chatham. My younger sisters are in the country, and I miss them. I should enjoy having your company. Would you like that?"

Again the dancing lights returned to the little girl's huge dark eyes, and a smile illuminated her brown face. Before she could utter a word, Mrs. Higginbotham rose in a grand flutter of shawls and lace.

"You are too kind, Miss Thorogood, but I cannot let her be foisted off on respectable company. I came only at her father's insistence. We would not think of intruding again. Good day to you." She sailed from the room with Amy in tow.

Visibly annoyed now, Carolyn held her temper in check until her guests had departed, then contemplated sitting down and sending Jack a scathing note on the unsuitability of his choice of governess, if governess she were. By the time she reached her desk, however, common sense prevailed, and she set the pen aside. She had given up any right of interference in Jack's life the day she had thrown him out of the house. He would only ridicule any message from her.

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The memory of her anger at the encroaching Mrs. Higginbotham and her concern for the timid child returned when next Carolyn next saw Jack. It was inevitable that she see him again. She could ban him from her own home, but not from every house in London. A seemingly wealthy, eligible bachelor was welcome anywhere he went. That he would attend many of the same events as she was a foregone conclusion.

She looked absurdly sophisticated, Jack observed as Carolyn drifted across the music room, exchanging pleasantries with half the *ton* in her path. He could remember when she was just a charming girl with a delightful smile to single her out from the legions of young lovelies. It was hard to acquaint that young girl with this elegant young woman with her head held high and a polished smile affixed to her face, but he had seen glimpses of the girl the other day in the park. He pondered that anomaly as he realized he was actually Carolyn's goal in crossing the room.

"It's good to see you again, Miss Thorogood," he intoned as he bowed over her hand.

Concentrating on her purpose, Carolyn tried not to notice that Jack looked at home in any environment. Gold and jewels glittered at throats and wrists all around them. Diamond stickpins, gold watch fobs, and pearl shirt studs adorned the formal attire of all the gentlemen. In simple black with nothing more glittering than his pristine cravat and intelligent eyes, Jack still appeared the part of arrogant nobility.

"I'd like a word with you about your daughter, my lord," she said boldly. When his dark brow rose a fraction, she refused to retreat. "I know it is not my place to interfere, but you must admit that I have some experience with young girls, and you do not."

He nodded in acknowledgment of that. In truth, he could do little more. The faint scent of lavender and wildflowers enveloped him, forcing him to concentrate on keeping his hands at his sides and his eyes on her face, when it seemed much more natural to sweep her into his arms. Even focusing on her face wasn't helpful. He had reason to remember the passion and promise of those rose-pink lips. Unlike calculating young maidens, once Carolyn had given her heart, she was lavish with her affection despite the fact that there was no formal engagement. She had trusted him.

When Jack made no further effort to encourage or reject her observations, Carolyn cautiously phrased her complaint. "This Mrs. Higginbotham seems somewhat overbearing for a child as timid as Amy. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Higginbotham isn't the cause of her timidity."

That elevated his attention to a more respectable level. Jack straightened from his casual position against the newel post to take Carolyn's arm and lead her toward a quiet alcove. When he had settled her on a backless velvet-upholstered settee, he frowned down at her.



"I could not bring Amy's ayah out of India. Mrs. Higginbotham had only just lost her husband, and she offered to accompany me and care for Amy on the journey home. She has been indispensable. What rackety notions have you got in your head now about that proper lady?"

His harsh words brought an equally caustic reply. "She is no lady. She's an encroaching mushroom intent on crushing your daughter into a nonentity for some obscure reason unknown to me. I cannot know anything about your household, but Mrs. Higginbotham seems prepared to rule it. She as much as said that you spoil Amy and she will not allow it to continue."

To Carolyn's surprise, Jack's expression grew weary and unhappy instead of angry at this declaration. Rocking back on his heels, he stared at the garish painting over her head before replying. Aware that a room full of people could watch their every action, he kept his words curt.

"Amy is not legally my daughter. I daresay Mrs. Higginbotham has taken it upon herself to protect society from such scandal. I will have to speak with her." He held out his hand and gestured to the room behind them. "I can feel your father's eyes burning a hole in my back. Perhaps we should join the others?"

Carolyn reluctantly placed her gloved hand in his and stood beside him. He smelled faintly of sandalwood and some musky scent that was all his own, and again that feeling of comforting familiarity at his size and strength swept over her. Other men tended to make her nervous and uncomfortable when they stood this close. Not Jack. Never Jack. He fitted beside her as neatly as her glove fitted her hand. It was a most depressing thought.

"I did not mean to cause anyone trouble," she murmured as they stood there, unwilling to return to the milling crowd. "But Amy seemed to be such a sweet, eager child. When we are in town, I miss young Penny. I

thought it would be fun for Amy as well as Blanche and me if she came to visit. Mrs. Higginbotham informed me in no uncertain terms that that wouldn't be permitted. If those were your orders, I shall understand, but Amy seemed disappointed and intimidated."

Jack sighed and squeezed her hand before he realized he should no longer be holding it. He released her but made no effort to lead her back to her father. "Perhaps Mrs. Higginbotham is right. I cannot believe your family would approve of your associating with a half-Indian child from the wrong side of the blanket. It isn't done. I'll have to move her to Dorset, but she has been so frightened by all these changes in her world, I couldn't bear to send her away just yet."

Heat flared in Carolyn's cheeks as she realized the intimate admission Jack had just made. No gentleman ought to admit to illegitimate children or mistresses before a lady. Carolyn would have been shocked if any other man had said it. The shock she felt now had little to do with his scandalous admission and more to do with imagining Jack going from her arms to some stranger's. She couldn't find her tongue to reply, and he glanced down at her with curiosity.

"Have I offended you? I thought you were already so furious with me that nothing further I did could offend you more. I apologize if I spoke out of turn."

Carolyn forced her tumultuous emotions into control and offered a brittle smile. "I'm not offended. Perhaps my pride is. You did not lose much time finding a mistress, if I'm any judge of a child's age. I shouldn't be so surprised, but even after all these years of knowing what you are, I find I am. But I do not blame the child for the father's faults, and neither will my family. She is welcome in our home at any time."

The smallest inkling of hope gnawed at his insides as Jack gazed into Carolyn's flushed and averted face. She spoke with more sophistication than the young girl he

had once known, but the raw emotions couldn't be entirely concealed by her poise. The frozen tundra he had met with earlier wasn't quite so thick as he had believed. Amy had warmed a hole through it in a single meeting. What would it take to melt the whole and discover the truth beneath?

If he wanted truth, he had to offer honesty. This wasn't the place or time, but he might have no other. Touching her elbow, Jack guided her toward the refreshment table. He kept his voice low, bending his head closer to her ear. For all anyone knew, he could be speaking sweet flattery.

"Carolyn, I have never been more than a man, never claimed to be. Perhaps I cannot fit the perfect ideal you have made of your father, but he has only somehow been more discreet than I am. Until you give me permission to speak as a lover, I cannot defend myself further. Should that time ever come, I will tell you all you wish to know of Amy. In the meantime, I can only thank you for your concern for her welfare. I am glaringly aware of my faults, and I doubt that forgiveness is possible, but I would cry friends, if only for Amy's sake."

She had forgotten how Jack could erase all transgressions with his smooth words. In the same few sentences he could raise her ire and soothe her ruffled feathers. He was quite right, actually. He should not be talking to her of Amy's origins, but to suggest there might be a future time when he had that right was above and beyond all else. She ought to slap him right here in view of everyone, but his mention of Amy's need for friends diverted her anger. Obviously, if he loved no one else, he loved his child.

Carolyn looked up at Jack with suspicion, but there was no triumph in those gray eyes. They glowed with a

strange intensity as he awaited her reply, but there was no indication that he knew it in advance. His anxiety was only for Amy.

She nodded. "If you can tame the dragon lady, I would have Amy come for tea. I know she is much too young, but little girls like to play at being grown-up. She will learn to get on in society that way."

Jack caught her elbow to swing her around to face him. "I thank you, Carolyn, but she is not likely to be part of society. Surely you must see that."

She met his eyes coolly. "If you legally adopted her, she would be accepted, but that is your decision. All I can do is entertain her for a few hours a day."

Jack stared into Carolyn's porcelain face, willing himself to see there what he wanted to see. Amy needed a mother. How many women would accept him knowing they would have to accept his bastard daughter, too? He had thought briefly of finding Amy a loving family willing to raise her as their own, but he had not been able to bring himself to look for one. Now here was Carolyn telling him to adopt her. Surely she knew that would be condemning him to a life without a wife, Amy to living without a mother?

He made a slight bow of acceptance to the truth of her words. "Send around a note as to a convenient time for you. I will make certain that she is there."

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Amy arrived promptly at the time designated, the feather perched archly over her tiny nose from a bonnet otherwise decorated in roses. Her guardian dragon sniffed as Carolyn greeted the child.

"His lordship said I might leave her here while I do some shopping." The disapproval on her face was more

than apparent.

Carolyn dismissed her without a glance. "She will do quite nicely with us. Thank you, Mrs. Higginbotham."

Without a backward look, she led Amy to the library, where Blanche waited.

At the sight of Jack's small daughter, Blanche exclaimed in surprise, threw Carolyn a swift look, then knelt to remove Amy's bonnet and cloak. The little girl gazed at Blanche's blond curls with awe and obediently stood still under her ministrations.

"It is a pity our Penny is not here to play with you. I'm certain you would get on tremendously." As protective as Carolyn of her younger sisters, Blanche easily accepted this new arrival. Carolyn had only mentioned that the child seemed timid and perhaps a little frightened by her new surroundings.

Once freed of her outer garments, Amy wandered to the table where Blanche had been working. Scattered bits of paper and pens and scissors covered the leather working surface, and her gaze fastened on the elaborate valentine. "What's that?"

Carolyn laughed. Jack had mentioned that the girl had a penchant for lovely and exotic objects. To a child's eyes, that lacy red-and-white confection would seem quite exotic. She helped Amy into a chair at the table. "That's a valentine. It's a gift to someone you love on St. Valentine's Day. Would you like to make one?"

To Blanche's amusement, her prim-and-proper older sister sat down at the library table and proceeded to instruct a four-year-old in the intricacies of valentine making. She had not seen Carolyn so animated in years. Whatever was going on here, it was good for her.

Blanche rang for tea to be brought in the library. If

she remembered correctly, four-year-olds preferred sweets with their instructions.

Over the next week, Amy came to visit several times. Sometimes they persuaded her to listen to a story or go for a carriage ride in the park, but mostly her fascination led to the glorious array of ribbons and pretty papers scattered across the library table.

Dissatisfied with her first attempts, Blanche continued to make more and more elaborate creations, and Amy's awe at their extravagance did not cease. Under Carolyn's tutelage, she painstakingly constructed one of her own. In showing the child what to do, Carolyn created a card for the first time since she was a child of Blanche's age.

Jack sometimes accompanied his daughter to the door, but in recognition of Carolyn's earlier threats, he declined to enter. Carolyn stubbornly refused any invitation, although when they met at social affairs, she spoke with him of his daughter's progress. Since often this was in the company of Lord Hampton, Jack could not put a favorable construction on their new relationship.

She kept him firmly in his place, but Jack could not resign himself to believing he had arrived to find her still unattached, only to watch her marry another. He consoled himself into thinking it was only a matter of biding his time.

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Time ran out one frosty February day. The unsettling news that George's mother was on her way home from the Continent was superseded by a more immediate calamity. Jack came home to a household in an uproar and two physicians in the nursery. In near-hysterics, Mrs. Higginbotham cowered in a corner,

exhorting the physicians alternately to take care and to do something.

In a trice, Jack pushed between the maids and doctors to find his daughter lying limp and pale against the sheets. Hiding his terror, he knelt beside her bed and touched his hand to her smooth forehead. It burned with fever.

With a stricken look, he turned to the elder of the two physicians hovering in the background. Jack could not speak, but the medical man replied to his expression without need of questions.

"The child was overexposed to the cold, and I suspect she has eaten something while outside that does not agree with her system. She has been vomiting steadily until now."

A murderous anger began to build as Jack turned his gaze to Mrs. Higginbotham and the two nursemaids he employed to look after one small child. The nursemaids chattered in tandem, making it impossible to decipher a word. He focused his ire on the massive woman cowering in the corner.

Realizing it was a matter of self-preservation, Mrs. Higginbotham drew herself up to her full height and presented the woeful tale in the best light she could.

"She took my sewing scissors and cut up the frontispiece of one of your books in the library, mangled it dreadfully, she did. I caught her when she was cutting the lace off one of her gowns. She's badly spoiled, m'lord, if you'll forgive my saying so. I thought to teach her a lesson, so I sent her to an empty garret to reflect on her bad behavior. She weren't there no more than an hour or so."

Her composure was slipping badly, and with it, the

artificial elegance of her speech. Jack continued to stare at her grimly, determined to have the whole tale before he ripped the nursery and everyone in it to tiny pieces.

At his silence, the woman took a deep breath and continued, "When Maisie went up to fetch her for her tea, she wasn't there. We looked everywhere, we did. There's not a bit of furniture in that room. She couldn't of hid. She just up and disappeared."

Since the garret she referred to was icy cold and accessible only by the back stairs, Jack found nothing mysterious in this. He was not blind to Amy's less than-obedient nature. She wouldn't have stayed in that dull, cold room for long, and he doubted that there was a key to be found to fit the lock. Given the opportunity, she would have slipped back down the stairs. Where she had gone from there was anybody's guess.

"Where did you find her?" he demanded curtly when it became apparent the woman would not willingly volunteer any more information.

"Begging your pardon, m'lord," one of the maids interrupted when Mrs. Higginbotham seemed unable to reply. "Timmy followed her footsteps in the snow. They got kind of confused in the park, he said, and he came back to get some others to help him. They said they found her by the far gate. She didn't have no coat nor nothin' on just her wet dress," she amended at the furious blaze in Jack's eyes.

The fury was as much for himself as for the servants. He had brought the child to a strange climate to which her small body wasn't adapted and that she had not learned to fear. He had left his only daughter in the care of thoughtless servants and a woman he had been warned did not approve of or even like her. He had



selfishly not made any attempt to find Amy a better situation, not wanting to admit that he couldn't take care of her, not wanting to be parted from the one creature on God's earth who loved him for himself. And this was what he had brought to her.

With a strangled cry, Jack gathered Amy into his arms and ordered everyone else out. She would be well again, if he had to pour his own life's blood into her.

When Amy didn't appear at her appointed time the next day, Carolyn was curious and disappointed. She had grown fond of the child and enjoyed watching her blossoming with care and attention. Oddly enough, the news that George's mother would arrive in London next week did not excite her so much as watching Amy master the scissors and paper to cut an almost perfect heart. Reporting this progress to Jack seemed more consequential than speculating as to whether the dowager marchioness would consider an insignificant but wealthy chit as wife material for her son.

Unable to curb her curiosity and concern, Carolyn sent a maid around to inquire as to the reason for Amy's absence. When the maid returned with the news, Carolyn picked up her skirts and headed for the stairs.

"Send word to Nanny that I have need of her fever medicine, the recipe for the cold posset, some of those dried herbs we picked last summer for steaming, and perhaps the purgatives. Just tell her what you have told me. She will know what to do." The instructions streamed behind her as she hurried down the stairs.

At the last sentence, Florrie nodded in relief. Even if she forgot part of these hurried orders, Nanny would know what was needed. She watched in concern as Miss Carolyn called for her cloak and a carriage. Surely she

could not be thinking of going to a gentleman's house unescorted.

Carolyn wasn't looking at her flight in precisely that light. She had nursed her four sisters through all manner of childhood illnesses. She knew what Amy needed. Since Blanche was from home at the moment and her maid had to get word to Nanny at their country estate, it seemed expedient to go alone. The only consequence she had in mind was seeing Amy back to health.

Finding herself suddenly confronted with the door to the town house Jack had taken for the Season, Carolyn experienced a momentary qualm, but when the door opened to reveal a frightened Mrs. Higginbotham standing in the hallway beyond the doorman, her resolution firmed. She announced herself and stepped across the portal without giving the servant time to refuse her entrance.

"Where is Amy?" she demanded of the startled matron. The woman in all rights belonged in the nursery with her charge. Such scandalous breach of duty ought to be reprimanded. Jack certainly ran a loose household.

"She is ill in bed." Mrs. Higginbotham drew herself up defensively.

"I wish to see her." Ignoring the challenge in the woman's eyes, Carolyn started for the stairs. The nursery would have to be upstairs. She would find it for herself if necessary.

"You can't go up there!" Scandalized, Mrs. Higginbotham lurched after her.

Carolyn blithely sailed upward. "Just tell me which room. I'll find my way. You needn't concern yourself further."

"You can't go in there!" the woman repeated with

slight variation. "His lordship's in there!"

It had truly never occurred to her that Jack would be in the nursery with his ill child. Her own father had probably never seen inside the nursery doors, but he'd had a wife and daughters to see to the care of his younger children. There hadn't been any necessity for involving himself personally in childhood illnesses. Still, the thought of Jack sitting at his daughter's bedside sent Carolyn's heart pounding, and she hesitated.

A door at the end of the hall opened and a nursemaid emerged carrying soiled linen. Without another thought, Carolyn hurried in that direction. Mrs. Higginbotham beat a hasty retreat.

Carolyn halted in the doorway to get her bearings. The room was lavishly decorated in flowered wallpaper and sprigged-muslin curtains and a narrow canopy bed in blue velvet. Toys stood on shelves everywhere, and an alcove to the side was obviously intended for the maid's cot. It looked undisturbed at the moment. The only signs of life were near the bed.

Her gaze fell on Jack's haggard face. He had drawn a rocking chair from the fireplace to the bedside and rested with eyes closed and his head against the high back. Lines of weariness etched his handsome face, and his rumpled clothes bore the certain signs of having been slept in. He retained none of the self-assured, polished demeanor with which he met the world. His dark curls stood on end as if he had been raking his fingers through them. His immaculate cravat had been pulled loose and flung aside, and a day's growth of beard bristled along his darkened cheeks. Carolyn bit her lip against a sudden surge of longing and turned her gaze to the bed.

She caught her breath at sight of the pale,

motionless figure beneath the covers. Amy looked so tiny and defenseless, and only the spots of fevered color on her round cheeks gave any indication of life.

Her gasp brought Jack's eyes open, and he stared in disbelief at Carolyn's elegant figure posed in the doorway. She had not disposed of her pelisse or muff, and her cheeks still bore the fresh color of the cold outside. He fixed his gaze on her terrified eyes, and denying the relief flooding through him, said, "Carolyn, you have no business here. You must leave, at once."

She ignored his words. Unfastening the frog at her throat, she laid her pelisse and muff on a nearby chair. It was easier if she kept her gaze on the child and not the haunted man at her side. "You need some rest. Go get something to eat and lie down for a while. I'll sit with her."

Jack rose and clasped her arms before she could go closer. "For God's sake, Carolyn, go home before someone finds you here."

Carolyn's gaze finally swerved to meet his, and heat swept through her from the love and anguish she found there. She had never experienced anything quite like this before, and she resisted the desire to fall into Jack's arms and hang on for dear life. She was disappearing into his eyes, and the feeling terrified and thrilled her. Nervously she looked away again, and recovered her strength as she remembered her purpose.

"I've sent to Nanny for her basket of nostrums. They seem to be more effective than most of the medicines the physicians use. We've certainly tested their efficacy often enough. Go rest, Jack. I'll come to no harm sitting here. And I do have considerable experience at nursing children."

Jack clung to her arms, staring down at her bare head with despair and hope. She had no right to be here, but he needed her desperately. Just her presence had brought a return of hope. He felt the strength of her resolve, knew the magnitude of the character behind it, and knew beyond any doubt that if anyone could nurse Amy to life, it would be this woman. But in allowing her to do so, he would almost certainly be destroying her life. Unless ...

He let the possibility of that one exception wash through him like a soothing balm. If she still cared, if she could possibly choose... He dared not let his thoughts wander to the borders of the impossible. He hadn't had any sleep in thirty-six hours. He was merely dreaming with his eyes open.

"I'll have Mrs. Higginbotham come up. Then I'll send for your carriage. You can't stay."

Carolyn gave him a brisk look, pulled from his grasp, and removed her gloves, all traces of wavering gone. "You would do better to send that woman packing. If it eases your conscience, send one of the nursemaids up. We'll need a constant supply of fresh water. Has the cold settled in her lungs?"

Jack was too weary to fight both Carolyn and himself. He felt singularly helpless staring at the lifeless features of his daughter night and day. He had no notion of how to go on. Carolyn did. He grasped desperately at the offer.

Within minutes he had explained what happened, what the physicians recommended, and the results, or lack of them. Carolyn sat beside the bed as he spoke, touching gentle fingers to heated cheeks, avoiding looking too closely at the man behind her. He had been

right when he had said he was just a man. Seeing him like this brought all her foolish fancies home. He was suffering in a way she had never experienced. The lordly rake she had condemned, the gentle lover she had worshiped — both were only small facets of his character. Men weren't so simply defined with a word or two. She had a lot yet to learn. Perhaps her father had protected her too well.

She felt him hovering behind her, fearful of what would happen should he leave his daughter unguarded for even a moment. She touched a hand to his sleeve, daring to meet his eyes just this once. "Go, Jack. You have done everything humanly possible. The matter is in God's hands now."

He needed to be reminded of that. Nodding, he pressed her fingers. Not daring to say more, he left hastily in search of a maid.

Telling himself he would nap only a few hours, Jack collapsed, still dressed, on a guest bed near the nursery. When he had fully recovered his faculties, he would decide what to do with the obstinate Miss Thorogood. She would certainly be missed by dinner. He had no illusions that she had told anyone where she was going, or she would have been prevented. Somehow, he would have to find a way to spirit her back into the safety of her own home. When he woke.

It was nearly midnight before he opened his eyes again. It took a minute to recollect why he slept in a strange bed with all his clothes on. He hadn't been that drunk in years. When the memory came, it was with a rush of pain and fear, and he hastily swung his legs to the floor.

Amy's room was lit by a branch of candles. In their flickering light he watched Carolyn wring out a cloth in a

washbowl and gently place it over his daughter's forehead. A worried frown lined Carolyn's brow as she worked, and he could see that she was biting her lip. In fear, he turned to observe Amy more closely.

She was tossing restlessly. As he came closer, he could see the fine sheen of perspiration on her small face. Even as he watched, he heard her low moan, and the bottom seemed to fall out of his stomach.

"What is wrong? What can I do?" he whispered hoarsely, coming to stand beside the bed.

Carolyn glanced up at him in relief. "Her fever is rising rapidly. We must keep it down. Call some of the servants and have them bring up snow to add to the washbasin."

Jack looked at the empty cot where the maid should be and shook his head in disbelief. Where in hell were his servants? Furiously he went in search of a maid. His daughter could be dying, and they all lay cozy in their beds. He would fire the lot of them on the morrow.

He forgot his temper a little while later as he cuddled his unconscious daughter on his lap while Carolyn applied the cold compresses to her brow. Amy seemed to lie quieter in his arms, and he felt better holding her close. She was so damned small and helpless. She needed him to protect her, and he hadn't done a very good job of it. Perhaps this was God's way of telling him he didn't deserve love. He'd certainly failed the child's mother. And Carolyn. He looked up to watch the grim lines of worry on her lovely face.

"I meant to send you home hours ago," he murmured more to himself than to her.

"I wouldn't have gone." Carolyn carefully packed the latest bowl of snow into a cloth. "You needed sleep,

and Mrs. Higginbotham is useless. I'm afraid I yelled at her."

The idea of yelling at that redoubtable matron had never occurred to Jack. He lifted a surprised brow at this delicate lady beside the bed, gently applying compresses, and wondered what other secrets she hid. How much did he really know of her, after all?

"Did you yell at the maids too? I thought I specifically assigned them to helping you while I slept."

"They're sweet, but they haven't a brain between them. Mrs. Higginbotham dismissed the one who spoke up earlier, and she told the other to go on to bed. Then she went off to bed herself." Carolyn offered a small grin. "I gave her her marching orders, but she didn't seem to think they were final."

"Did you, now?" Jack leaned back against the wooden headboard and made Amy more comfortable in his arms. Carolyn's proximity and the faint scent of wildflowers soothed him. Under other circumstances, they would have aroused him, but not when his daughter lay ill in his arms. He just needed Carolyn's reassuring presence close at hand to let him know all would be well in a little while. "You're developing quite a nasty temper, my love."

Carolyn didn't even give him a second glance at this endearment. She'd heard his honeyed words before. She had yet to see proof of them. "I've always had a nasty temper. You just never came across it before."

"I think I've encountered it once or twice of late, and I remember a particularly brilliant tantrum that haunted my worst nightmares for years. Had you shown Mrs. Higginbotham that fury, she would be out of the house by now."



That caused Carolyn to meet his gaze. In this light, she could discern little of Jack's expression, but what she saw made her vaguely uneasy. His light words had a peculiar intensity. Ignoring his reference to another time, she kept to a safer subject. "I'm sorry I did not let my tongue fly, then. She is your servant, so I held back."

Amy stirred in his arms, and Jack returned his gaze there, brushing a strand of ebony hair from her dark complexion. "She will have to go. I just didn't know how to go about interviewing governesses or nannies. I don't know very much about children, I suppose."

Carolyn sat in the rocker and replied softly, "You know how to love them. That is what counts most."

At the gentleness of her voice, Jack relaxed slightly, and closing his eyes, leaned back against the bed. "I don't know what I would have done these last years without her. She is the only softness, gentleness, that I know. I hold her, and she smiles at me with all the love and trust in the world. I needed her faith to keep from losing mine."

Tears came to her eyes, and Carolyn had to look away from the man on the bed. He was so large sprawled across the child's narrow mattress, but he looked perfectly natural. She wondered how many nights he had sat just like that, rocking his infant daughter to sleep.

"Her mother?" she heard herself asking.

Jack didn't look up. His mouth tightened into an ironic curve. "If you wish more evidence to cast me aside, that tale ought to do it." When she made no reply, he shrugged and continued. "The poverty in India is excruciating. Many times worse than you see on a London street. Servants can be had for the offer of a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. I was saving every brass farthing I could put a hand to, so I led a very simple life, two rooms and one old ayah to look after me."

He felt Carolyn rise to change the soaking compress, but he didn't open his eyes. He would have this story told and done with. There would be no more illusions between them. "With nothing better to do in the evenings, I was drinking heavily. I won't go into details of what life is like down there, but drink kills a lot of us. I suppose my ayah feared losing her lucrative position, or perhaps she sought a second income or a measure of comfort for another. Whatever her inscrutable reasoning, she brought a young girl to me one night when I was half out of my mind."

Jack opened his eyes then to watch Carolyn's expression at this revelation. He was going far beyond the bounds of propriety to speak these things, but he wanted Carolyn to know all that he was. He had fooled her when she was younger, filling her head with romantic fantasies while concealing the harsher side of his life. It had been an act of desperation at the time, just as the truth was now. Perhaps he was older but no wiser. Carolyn's expression told him nothing, and he took that as permission to go on, though he felt as if he were cutting his own throat once again.

"She became my mistress. There is no polite way to state it. I had no intention of marrying her. She filled a place in my life that was empty, but we scarcely spoke the same language. She was young and ignorant and became pregnant immediately. It made her happy, so I suppose that was what she wanted. She knew it would give her a position of comfort for the rest of her life in my household. That's the way things are done down there."

Carolyn made a small noise that sounded almost like a sob, but he couldn't stop now. It all had to be said. "She died shortly after giving birth to Amy. It was only

then that I learned my mistress was also my ayah's daughter."

A soft exclamation indicated Carolyn heard and understood, but she made no other reply to this tale of Amy's origins. It was a tawdry tale, at best. He could have done as so many others had and left the child behind, but just as he had been unable to send the old woman and babe away at birth, he could not do it four years later. With a sigh, Jack snuggled his daughter closer, clinging to her warmth.

"You took the child from her grandmother?" she asked, still looking for a reason to condemn him.

He shook his head. "She was stabbed in the marketplace one day. Amy has no one but me."

Carolyn shuddered at the horror of such a life. "I'm glad you told me," she offered once she recovered her composure. She hoped he couldn't see the tracks of her tears. The thought of his loneliness in that horrible place of exile and the mother willing to sacrifice her child to a life of infamy rather than allow her to starve tore at her heart. She was glad he had saved Amy from such a life. "Will you adopt her?"

Jack looked up and caught her eye. "I think that depends on several things," he answered slowly. The telltale blush did not rise to her cheeks and he saw only curiosity in her eyes. His hopes plummeted, but he clung fiercely to their remains. "Yes, I will probably adopt her."

Carolyn did not understand the sharpness of his words, but she was not given time to consider it. Amy began to shake and moan, and perspiration poured freely from every pore, drenching her night shift. There wasn't time to do anything but act.

Afraid to expose her to the chilly night air, they wrapped her in blankets until she lay still once more.

Then, hastily removing wet garments and finding dry ones, they returned to the previous routine of applying compresses. Within the half-hour she was shaking again. Steadily they worked throughout the night.

Shortly after dawn the kitchen sent up tea and toast, and Jack sent for the nursery maid and Mrs. Higginbotham. The maid hurriedly arrived and applied herself to changing the linen, giving the master and the lady surreptitious looks in the process. Both looked haggard but vaguely triumphant. The little girl seemed to be breathing easier.

Mrs. Higginbotham didn't arrive until an hour later. She gave Carolyn a smirk and turned her full attention on Jack. His rumpled clothes of two days before set her aback, but the snarl on his face made her quail. She turned to the offensive. "I beg your pardon, my lord, but I was told in no uncertain terms that my services weren't required. I will be more than happy to sit with the child while you get your rest. You shouldn't have the burden of nursing an ill child. I'm certain you have much more important things to do. Shall I ring for your bath to be sent up?"

Jack's lips tightened, but he held his temper with remarkable aplomb. Carolyn admired his performance. She would have scratched the woman's eyes out. More important things to do, indeed!

"We'll no longer be requiring your services, Mrs. Higginbotham. I will speak with my secretary when he arrives, and he will advance you six months' salary. I would like you to remove from the household before day's end."

The woman stared at him in astonishment. "On what grounds, my lord? Have I not cared for the wee one

like one of my own, dressing her in all that is fine and seeing that she is properly instructed in conduct? I cannot be blamed that her kind cannot learn simple obedience. I have done my utmost to teach her."

Jack rose to his full threatening height and the woman stepped backward. "Out, Mrs. Higginbotham, before I lose my patience. I recommend that you do not seek any other position requiring understanding or compassion, for you have none. Leave us, at once!"

He practically roared this last, and the woman gave a squeak of alarm and rushed to the door, throwing Carolyn a malevolent look in parting.

Jack collapsed into himself, but a sound from the bed returned his attention there. Amy sneezed, then opened her eyes. "Papa?" she inquired weakly as he scooped her into his arms.

Jack's shining eyes and radiant smile returned tears to Carolyn's eyes. Touching her hand to the child's cheek and ascertaining that it was considerably cooler than before, she felt relief flood through her and felt the same in him. They needed no words of understanding.

"Nanny's basket will have arrived by now," she murmured. "I will go home and fetch it."

Jack's smile faded. "Not yet, Carolyn. Wait until I can come with you. I would not have you face the consequences alone."

She had not given much thought to consequences. She had possessed the freedom to come and go at will for some years now. Her father trusted her to do the proper thing. In all probability, he did not even know she wasn't at home. She offered Jack an uneasy smile. "That isn't necessary. My maid is the only one who knows, and she won't talk. You needn't worry."

Amy's fit of sneezing, followed by her hungry complaints, distracted them both for some while. Jack became frantic when she cried and spit up her toast. Carolyn soothed him and the child, offering apple juice and tea

laced with honey and slicing the toast up into soft, buttery strips dotted with cinnamon. Between Jack shouting orders at an army of servants racing up and down the stairs and Carolyn patiently doctoring the food to suit an invalid, they succeeded in getting the first decent meal into Amy that she'd had in days.

Their triumph did not last long. Just as they got Amy into another clean gown and asleep, a roar in the lower hall warned that still another hurdle awaited. They exchanged glances at the familiar fury. Carolyn's father had discovered her whereabouts.

She paled at the unexpectedness of this visitation, but held her head high as angry strides approached. Not daring to compromise her further, Jack kept a respectful distance as the door burst open.

Henry Thorogood quickly took in his daughter's wrinkled walking gown and weary expression, Jack's rumpled clothes and defiantly protective air, and the tiny child lying curled beneath the covers. The vulgar message that had brought him flying here had no basis in fact; he knew his daughter too well to see anything else in this scene but what it was. He concealed his relief and turned his furious gaze on the young man who had so successfully turned his comfortable world inside-out.

"I will see you in my study in one hour, Chatham. Come, Carolyn, we will go home."

Carolyn looked from one man to the other. Had they been tomcats, they would have their backs arched, their hair on end, and they would be spitting. That was an odd way to picture Jack, and she threw him a second look. His fingers were curled around the chair back while he engaged her father in a duel of glares. The tension mounting between them was too electric to bear. Silently she picked up the pelisse and muff she had thrown over the chair the day before and walked out of the room.

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Angry shouts echoed up and down the hallways,

vibrating through the normally sedate Thorogood household. Blanche sent her sister a speculative look as Carolyn sat reading in the far corner of the library. Carolyn's air of indifference didn't fool her this time. She looked like one who hadn't slept in weeks, and the book she held was upside-down. Something was going on, but no one had given thought to informing Blanche.

Carolyn didn't seem surprised when the footman came to fetch her. She shook out the warm yellow skirts of the wool gown she had hastily donned, wasted no time tidying her loose arrangement of curls, and proceeded out, as if walking to her execution.

Her father at least had the decency to leave them alone for this interview, Carolyn observed as she entered the study to find only Jack waiting. He had that haunted look on his face again, but his eyes were warm as they took in her appearance. He made no attempt at an improper embrace, as he might have in earlier years, but Carolyn felt his desire to do so. She was grateful for his restraint.

"How is Amy?" Although she had left the child little more than an hour ago, it seemed much longer. She would hear this news first, before the argument to come.

"Sleeping when I left her. Your maid brought the basket of remedies. I thank you for your concern."

His formality indicated uneasiness. Carolyn could understand that. Her father could have that effect on heads of state. Nervously she took a seat and clasped her hands in her lap. "You needn't look like that, Jack. He doesn't bite."

Jack made a wry smile. "I wouldn't swear to that. He's in the right of it, though. I have compromised you beyond repair. I'm obliged to offer for you."

She had hoped he would phrase it a little less bluntly. It would be soothing to her injured feelings to hear him mouth a few of the pretty phrases he was so good at saying. Just for a little while she would like to

cling to the illusion of those long-ago years.

Her smile matched his as she replied, "I am obliged to refuse."

Jack's shoulders slumped and he turned to play with the candlesticks on the mantel rather than reveal his expression. "You cannot, Carolyn. That Higginbotham woman is spreading word far and wide. I could slit her throat, but the damage will already be done."

She had not expected that. Wildly, Carolyn contemplated her alternatives, but her ability to think straight had flown out the door when Jack entered it. She shook her head in hopes of freeing it from cobwebs. "We can deny everything. I'll not be forced into marriage."

"I knew you would say that." Bleakly he turned back to face her. "Can you not even consider it, Carolyn? Would it be so horrible a fate? I'm quite wealthy now, you know. I can support you in any manner that you choose."

Carolyn rose and gave him a cold glare at this insult. "What does wealth have to do with it? I would have married you when you were penniless, but you preferred gold to me. Go wed your gold, Jack. I'll not have any part of your lies."

She swung to leave the room, but he stepped forward and caught her wrist, his face a mixture of despair and desperation. "Is it George? Do you love him? I will go speak to him today and explain all that has happened. If you love each other, this misunderstanding can't come between you."

Carolyn gave him an icy look and refused to reply until he dropped her wrist. "Explain what you wish to whomever you wish if it eases your conscience. Good day, Jack."

She swept out in a trail of lavender and wildflowers, leaving him bereft. The fury in Thorogood's expression when he returned did not ease Jack's pain. He had lost her. The terrible emptiness that followed this



realization could only be filled with silent screams of anguish.

Despite her lack of sleep, Carolyn did not find rest easy that night. She couldn't erase the look in Jack's eyes when she refused him. Surely he had not expected her to agree after what he had done to her? What did he stand to gain by offering now?

Amy. That thought came instantly to mind. He needed a mother for Amy. That much was obvious. She must have filled him with confidence when she had so foolishly taken the child under her wing. Instead of pretty words, he meant to woo her with his daughter.

Why did that notion not ring true? She was quite experienced enough by now to know when she was being manipulated. She had no more romantic illusions. George, at least, had the sense to treat her as an intelligent human being capable of making decisions without having to be wooed and won with silly words and gestures. Would Jack ever consider her in such a light?

That thought made her even more restless, and she got up to put on her robe and pace the room. George's polite note had only said that Jack had been to see him and that he understood all. What did he understand? Did he understand that she needed the reassurance of his presence, of hearing his voice say the words? Obviously not. Jack had, or he wouldn't have been so quick to go to George to explain it. Had it been Jack she had been considering instead of George, he would have been at her door within the time it took to receive the message. Jack had never stinted her in his attentions.

Nor did he now. There was another bouquet on her dressing table with a note telling her how Amy fared. She had nearly cried when she had seen it. All day she had felt isolated. Her father wasn't speaking to her. George's stilted message hadn't helped. And no one had come to call. Only Jack's thoughtful note bringing news of his concern for her had come to break her loneliness.

She was mad to be thinking like this. In a few days George would be escorting her to the usual social functions, the gossip would subside, and everything would be back to normal. Why should she place any consequence on a few flowers and kind words? Jack had always been lavish in his attentions. That was just his way. It didn't mean anything.

But, may the heavens preserve her, she wanted it to mean something. She wanted to know that bouquet meant he cared for her. She wanted to know he offered for her because he loved her and didn't wish to be parted from her again. She wanted to believe that he had come to her that day after the ball to explain his undying love and the misery he had suffered in those years apart, the same misery she had suffered and was suffering still.

Flinging herself weeping on the bed, Carolyn sought comfort in repose. Only in her dreams could she believe that the warmth in gray eyes and the eager caress of browned hands meant something more than selfishness.

The days that followed slipped away like the steady drip of the icicles outside the windows.

Carolyn retreated inside herself just as Blanche remembered her doing those years ago during her first Season. Back then, she had at least continued to attend social functions, although with an icy brittleness that displayed little pleasure. This time, Carolyn refused to go out at all, putting a severe damper on Blanche's own social life. Something drastic had to be done.

The litter of paper and scissors and a crudely cut heart on the library table made Blanche smile in anticipation. Checking surreptitiously to be certain Carolyn was nowhere to be seen, she carefully completed the larger card with a few pen strokes, added the one Amy

had made, wrapped both in a length of vellum with a scribbled note, and summoned a footman. St. Valentine's Day was for lovers. The gentlemen who had appeared at their door earlier this day weren't lovers, just men playing at games. Her romantic heart hoped she had made the correct surmise in sending this particular valentine.

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Jack opened the slender package in his study, where he was working over long-neglected correspondence. The sight of the two lavishly decorated cards brought back such a painful memory that he nearly threw them aside as someone's idea of a malicious joke. But the crudity of the one card caught his interest, and he picked up the message accompanying it.

After reading the brief note, he carefully studied the two hearts. Both were made with loving hands, one pair childish and uncoordinated, the other talented and gentle. He remembered well the poem inscribed inside the larger heart. He remembered the occasion when he had last quoted it. His hands shook and tears sprang to his eyes as he read it again. Surely, after all these years, she would have forgotten so silly a verse had it not meant something to her? Why, then, would she not say the words to his face?

Pondering this peculiarity, Jack took the smaller heart in his hand and went up the stairs to where a recovering child was wreaking havoc with her impatience to be out of bed. At the sight of him, Amy leapt from beneath the covers to hold her arms out and bounce upon the bed.

Her joyful cry of "Papa" brought a smile to his weary face, and Jack caught her up in a hug, careful not

to crumple the paper in his hand. When he set her down, he presented the childish beautiful card with a flourish.

"Do you remember this?"

Dark eyes lit with excitement. "Lynley helped me! It's for you."

"Lynley?" Jack sat on the edge of the bed and smiled at the childish name for so gracious and lovely a woman as Carolyn Thorogood. As Amy pointed out the card's many and varied features, he could hear Carolyn speaking in the voice of his daughter. Loneliness and a desperate need for her company welled up inside of him. He could not keep on living this half-life. Something had to be done, but he had run out of ideas. How did one go about wooing someone he had courted once, only to slam a door in her face? What he had done was unforgivable. How could they ever go back to that time again?

Something Amy was chirping caught his ear, and he turned his attention back to her. "What was that, love? Lynley said what?"

"Don't break it, she said," Amy gave him a look of disdain at his lack of attention. "You got to keep it forever and ever and ever," she admonished in a tone that reflected the adult she mimicked.

Don't break it. Jack thought of the torn pieces stored all these years in an ivory music box of his mother's. He had carried that broken heart halfway around the world with him as a reminder of how low he had fallen. If only he could put those torn pieces back together again and start all over.

The vague stirrings of an impossible idea came to mind, but nothing was too impossible to try in this desperate gamble for a love he had lost and wished to win back again. Giving Amy a kiss and thanking her with a hug for his beautiful valentine, he rose and went in search of the music box.

Many tedious hours later he had pasted and pieced

dozens of torn bits of lacy paper on a large sheet of vellum. Giving the ragged result a wry look, Jack admitted to himself that his chance of winning this gamble with such feeble backing was slim, but it was all he had.

Forgetting cloak and hat, he set out into the fast-growing darkness of the winter streets, gripping the forlorn fragments of an old valentine. He carried no roses or candy or trinkets as a proper valentine lover should. Instead, he carried his heart in his hand.

When notified she had a visitor, Carolyn refused to see him, as she had refused all visitors this day. She didn't have the heart to exchange witty sallies with friends or suitors on the state of her love life on this day for lovers. Tomorrow, maybe she would venture out again. George had been remarkably silent this past week, but the combination of the scandal and his mother's arrival would explain that. He had sent another reassuring note, but it hadn't reassured. She hadn't even finished reading it.

The footman returned some minutes later with a large bit of paper on his salver. Carolyn gave him a look of irritation for thus interrupting her morose thoughts, but she took the awkward message he offered. Her eyes widened in surprise and she rose to carry it to a brighter lamp to better peruse what she wouldn't believe she was seeing.

Carefully pieced and pasted back together was the valentine she had created five years ago for the man she had meant to marry. The faded ink still bore the words of the poem Jack had written for her when he had asked if she would marry him, the same poem she had written on the valentine she had left downstairs in the library, remembering the words as if it had been only yesterday when last she heard them.

Tears poured down Carolyn's cheeks as the feelings of that long-ago time flooded through her, unlocked by

this tattered heart that Jack had so painstakingly recreated. He had kept it all those years. Why?

Without a word to the waiting servant, Carolyn swept out of the room and half-ran to the front salon, where visitors waited, the tattered valentine clutched in her hand. She had to see him face-to-face, to hear his reply. She had to know why he had kept this shattered heart for all these years. And why he had put it back together now.

Jack glanced up as she ran into the room. His weathered face had a lined and harried look to it, and there was a wariness in his eyes at her abrupt entrance, but he moved toward her as steel draws toward a magnet.

"Why?" She waved the forlorn heart beneath his nose.

He didn't need to understand the question. The answer was in his heart. "Because I love you. Because I've always loved you. Throw it back in my face if you will. I deserved it then. I've worked hard not to deserve it now, but that's for you to decide. I can't bear this loneliness any longer, Carolyn. I've worked and waited these five years in hopes of winning at least your respect, but what I want is your love. Can you ever forgive me and start anew?" He was not too proud to beg, but he desperately wished he dared take her in his arms while doing so. The cold air between them chilled his heart.

Carolyn stared at him in disbelief, not daring to believe the words. He had destroyed her with just such words before. She couldn't let him do it again. Her gaze faltered at the smoky gray intensity of his eyes, and she dropped it to the valentine in her hand. Her fingers instinctively smoothed the crumpled paper.

"I can't. How can I?" she murmured, almost to herself. "You sold my love for money. It's gone. There can be no love where there is no trust."

His heart ached, and he finally gave in and reached for her. Whether he hoped to prevent her escape or pour his love into her, he couldn't say, but the contact was electric. They both jerked with the jolt, and Jack couldn't have moved away if his life depended on it.

Holding her arms, he poured out his feverish response. "I paid him back, Carolyn. I paid your father back every cent I ever took from him. He was right. I had no right to ask you to share a life of penury with a careless spendthrift. I do not condone his methods, but he did what he had to to protect you. I didn't take his money in exchange for your love. I never wanted his money. He gave me no choice. Please understand that, Carolyn. Turn me away if you will, but not without understanding that I have never stopped loving you, that everything I have done has been for love of you."

Carolyn wanted desperately to be enfolded in Jack's embrace, to accept his words unquestioningly, to feel his strong arms around her and hear his heart beat beneath her ear, but she had learned her lesson at his hands too well. She shook her head blindly, refusing to meet his eyes.

"I heard you that night. Father paid you to turn me away. Don't lie to me anymore, Jack. I can't bear it."

Jack felt anger for the father who had allowed her to continue to think these things all these years, even after the debt was repaid. But the plea in Carolyn's voice called to him, and he gently pulled her into his arms. He rejoiced when she made no effort to fight him. The scent of lavender wafted around him, and he inhaled deeply.

He could easily spend the rest of his life drowning in that fragrance.

"I've never lied to you, my love. Please believe me. Every word I've said is true, although I once said them cruelly to drive you away. I didn't want you wedded to a man lounging in debtor's prison. I didn't deserve you then, and I knew it. Your father's ultimatum only made it clear to me. I hated him for making me face the facts, but he gave me the opportunity to redeem myself, and I took it in hopes of one day being able to look you in the eye again. The money he offered was a loan, my love. I repaid it with interest. You may ask him if you have doubts."

Carolyn tried to make order of her swirling thoughts, but enveloped in Jack's arms, she could only drink in the radiant heat of his body and the ecstasy of his hard strength beneath her hands. She didn't wish to think of anything else.

She didn't need to think of anything else. A door slammed, and a harsh voice exclaimed, "What is the meaning of this? Damn you, Chatham, haven't you caused enough scandal — must you create more?"

Carolyn jerked and would have fled Jack's arms, but he held her firmly, entrapping her in his protective hold as they both faced her father together.

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I am asking your daughter to marry me. I do not believe I need your permission anymore.

"You do not need my money anymore, is what you mean! She refused you, Chatham. I'll not see her made unhappy. Get out of here before I call the constabulary."

Carolyn straightened at this threat, and without a second thought to her words, she answered her father's fury. "Jack will leave when I want him to. If you throw



him out, I go with him. You tore us apart once before, but I'm older now and know you are not infallible. Had you but trusted my judgment then, we neither of us would have had to suffer all these years. This time, the choice is mine. You cannot force it." She felt Jack's arm tighten around her, and this time she allowed herself to lean into his embrace.

"Shhh, Lynley," Jack whispered placatingly in her ear as her father's face grew suddenly ashen. "Save your temper for another time. I'm a father now too, and I know what it is like to protect a daughter. It is easy to think the safe thing is the right thing. No one wants to take chances with the ones they love."

Carolyn turned eyes brimming with love up to Jack's face, and her smile was one of joy and acceptance. Her words, however, had the ring of a woman who had set aside childish fancies. "You are not my father, John Chatham. If it's marriage you want, you had better learn I am no longer a gullible child to be swept away by your facile tongue. I can fight my own battles, thank you."

The warm chuckle in her ear made her heart quake. "Anyone who can simultaneously rout Mrs. Higginbotham and capture my daughter has my full respect, my love. I do not doubt your abilities. It is your temper I fear."

Henry Thorogood watched this display with bemusement but had the sense to hold his tongue. The young lord had a quick way with words, but perhaps that was what Carolyn needed. He certainly couldn't fault the loving attention the young man showered upon her, although he certainly could fault his methods. With a loud throat-clearing to remind them he was in the room, he interrupted what could easily have become a rather intimate exchange. "I cannot leave the room unless I

know a formal betrothal has been formed."

Carolyn turned her smile from Jack's loving gaze to her father. "Leave the room, Papa. Jack may talk with you later."

She felt the joy rocketing through the man holding her as her father glared and stomped out. She wasn't certain what she had done, but in her heart, it felt right. She turned her gaze expectantly back to Jack.

"I love you, even if you are as spoiled and obstinate as Amy." Jack's mouth curved as she moved more fully into his embrace.

"Don't forget bad-tempered and willful," she reminded him, standing on tiptoes to reach his lips with hers.

"And mine." Firmly, Jack covered her mouth with his, drawing her into his hold so she could have no uncertainty as to what he meant.

"I never said yes," Carolyn gasped some minutes later when he gave her time to gulp for air.

"Yes you did, five years ago. It's been a long betrothal, my love. Shall we make it a hasty wedding?" Jack held her eyes with desperate intensity.

"Will you explain to George?" Carolyn asked, postponing her acceptance of this joy Jack offered her with open hand. She still could not quite believe it. She needed time.

Jack smiled. "I've already explained to George. He's a very understanding man. He's willing to let you choose."

"He'd give me up without a fight?" she asked in mock incredulity.

"He knows I'll put him six feet under if he stands in my way. Give me a date, my love."

"Christmas," she said firmly.

Jack bent his head closer and spoke inches from her lips "Try again."

"Easter," she murmured, rising to the temptation.

And as that holiday was little more than a month away, Jack said, "Done," and closed the compact with a kiss.

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Although the sun shone and the guests wore their spring pastels for the occasion, the ebony-haired flower girl wore red velvet. The four blond bridesmaids, one only slightly older than the flower girl, wore white lace and carried valentine roses as the bride walked down the aisle that balmy Easter Day.

When the ceremony ended and the groom's sun-darkened face bent to take the kiss he had earned from his shining bride, he gave no hint of surprise as their audience broke into gales of laughter rather than happy tears.

There at the foot of the altar two dancing cherubs in white and red cavorted to the sweeping swells of organ music, heedless of the solemnity of the occasion. The bride smiled into the groom's eyes, and the look they exchanged bespoke the distinct possibility that another cherub would be on the way before year's end.

## Keeping the Fire Hot

*Colorado, 1882*

Dawson Smith smiled down at the flirtatious piece of fluff and lace on his arm. Gloria Jean had the smile of an angel. Her perfumed scent reminded him of the magnolias back home. She was as slim and curvaceous as the women of his midnight dreams. He didn't know if she could cook or keep house, and he really didn't care. He just wanted a sweet-smelling woman in silks and satins in his bed, and he wanted her now.

But he couldn't have her. Gloria Jean was an innocent meant for some man to marry, and Dawson Smith had no intention of being that man. He chuckled at some comment made in her lilting voice. Amusement crinkled the corners of his dark eyes and curved the lines of his narrow lips. Gloria fluttered her lashes and hid behind her fan, certain he was smitten. Dawson knew what she was thinking and didn't discourage her.

"You will be at the cakewalk Saturday, won't you, Mr. Smith?" she asked coyly, casting a shy glance at his cleft jaw.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. Miss Gloria. Will you have an entry?" Lost in the teasing flutter of her baby blue eyes, Dawson wasn't paying much attention to where he was going. He was busy imagining the lovely white skin beneath all that feminine frippery and

deciding which of the girls at the saloon he would use to work off his lather.

Lost in his imagination, he nearly tripped and fell over a small urchin sitting cross-legged on the boardwalk, whittling at a piece of wood.

The urchin's bedraggled and filthy felt hat fell into the dusty street. The small figure leaned over and fished the hat from the dirt, slapping it back atop a tumbled nest of cinnamon-brown curls. Without rancor, the child drawled, "Watch it, Dawson. The drool is goin' to stain your fancy coat," then went back to whittling.

Dawson grabbed the hat, beat it against a porch post to knock off the dust, then pulled it down over the youth's head. "Jamie, you need a bath. Why don't you go jump in the river?"

Jamie snorted and glanced from beneath the hat brim at the vision in lavender silk clinging to the arm of the elegantly dressed saloon keeper. Dawson was nearly as grand as his lady in a gold silk waistcoat that contrasted nicely with a tailored buff coat and tight trousers. He was the best-dressed man in all of Altona, Colorado. Although, since most of the rest were miners, that wasn't saying much.

"We'll go skinny-dipping together sometime," Jamie promised with a sneer.

Dawson laughed. "We'll do that. Why don't you get yourself over to Davidson's? He's got a load of inventory in and could probably use a hand."

The youth didn't even lift his hat in farewell as he climbed from the boardwalk and ambled down the dirt street toward the mercantile. Gloria Jean just shook her head and fluttered her fan.

"Ah swear, Mr. Smith, I don't know what this

town's coming to. A child like that ought to be in school, learning to mind his manners. What kind of parents let their children lie about the streets all day? And in such clothes! Perhaps we ought to take up a collection."

Dawson was already heading in the opposite direction from the urchin. "Jamie is past teaching. And if you took up a collection, Mulligan would only drink it up. Why don't you tell me more about that cakewalk I mean to win on Saturday?"

After Dawson left the glorious Gloria at her home some time later, he wended his way back toward his gambling saloon, whistling to himself. Maybe he ought to buy Lulu a lavender confection like the one Gloria had worn, and then he could have the pleasure of removing it, one frothy layer at a time.

At the image of the flame-haired saloon girl discarding the ladylike costume, he grinned. She'd rebel at the laces and lift her skirt, and the only layer he'd find beneath would be the dark bush between her legs. That was why Gloria was a lady and Lulu was a whore.

Dawson refused to reminisce on what he'd once had and thrown away. Home was a million miles away, and the lovely Southern belles that inhabited it were as forbidden as Gloria Jean. When life had handed him lemons, he'd made spiked lemonade out of it. He wasn't going to complain.

Seeing Jamie lifting a bag of grain bigger than he was, Dawson set out across the street to give the kid a hand. Now *there* was one who had a right to complain. His mother dead, cursed with a drunken lout for a father and bullies for brothers, Jamie stoically worked his way through every odd job in town in return for meals and whatever anyone wanted to give him. Dawson couldn't

conceive of complaining about his own lot when faced with Jamie's. At least Dawson had grown up in the loving comfort of family and home. It had been his own damned fault that he'd lost it.

He lifted the grain bag from Jamie's shoulders and proceeded, whistling, into the mercantile. The kid grabbed a couple of bolts of cloth and raced after him.

The shopkeeper said nothing as the wealthiest man in town dumped a sack of grain at his feet like any common laborer. After all, Dawson Smith wasn't any more than a saloon keeper, despite his fancy ways. Jamie added the cloth to the table with the others, then ambled back out for the next load. Dawson tipped his hat and grinned at the frowning mercantile owner, then followed the youth out.

"Watch out for Larkin," Jamie whispered as Dawson bent to pick up the last sack of grain.

As if looking for a better grip, Dawson put the sack down while Jamie hoisted more cloth in his arms.

"Larkin? Big dude in green shirt?"

"Yeah. Heard him bragging about his dice. He'll take you for a roll if you let him." Lifting the bolts, Jamie ambled back up the stairs as if not a word had been exchanged.

Dawson followed, carrying the grain. Jamie would never admit he couldn't carry the grain himself, nor would he thank Dawson outright for helping, but he always repaid a favor in kind. Thinking of the money the big man named Larkin had been winning at the tables on the previous night, Dawson thought the favor had been more than repaid. He flipped Jamie a coin as he sauntered from the mercantile and headed back toward the saloon.

Jamie hastily stashed the coin in her vest pocket,

grimacing as her fingers brushed her sensitive breasts. They were bound so tightly she could barely breathe, and the binding itched, but she was accustomed to the discomfort. It was better than the alternative.

The coin in her pocket was more than Old Man Davidson would probably pay, she thought as she finished her assigned task. He usually gave her the tail ends of cheap muslin from old bolts as payment, but she knew she could take the scraps over to the dressmaker's and get a few coins in return. That would be enough to buy some potatoes and beans to put on the table tonight. Dawson's coin would buy a little extra.

As long as she kept food on the table, her father wouldn't complain about the space Jamie took up in the hovel she called home. He hadn't been in a state to do much complaining for a long time, but she still lived in dread of being thrown from the only home she had ever known. She could scarcely remember her mother, or those times when her father had threatened to throw both females out for being useless, but the threats lingered somewhere in her subconscious, and were the driving force of her existence.

She wasn't a man. She couldn't work the mines. Instead of growing to be big and strapping like her father and brothers, she was even scrawnier than her mother. She wished wistfully that she knew things—feminine things like embroidery and sewing that might bring in an extra coin, but her mother had died before she could teach her daughter. Not that there had ever been much in the way of needles and thread in the Mulligan household. Any way you looked at it, Jamie Mulligan was pretty much a waste.

But as long as she could bring home food and cook



a meal, no one complained about her. After selling the muslin — and surprisingly, a nice piece of gingham — to the dressmaker, Jamie bought the potatoes and dried beans, and a scoop of coffee. Maybe she could sober her father up enough in the morning so he could go into the mines without staggering.

She didn't think of her life as a particularly harsh one. It was the only one she knew. She had a roof over her head and had made a nice pallet for herself in the kitchen. Her father and brothers slept in the front room, when they were home. The only clothes she'd ever known were the hand-me-downs from her brothers, but they suited her purpose. By now, everyone in Altona who might ever have known she was a girl had forgotten or had moved away. She was just another one of the Mulligan boys to all who saw her.

Except Dawson. Dawson was a puzzle, and that's a fact. Finding herself whistling the tune the saloon keeper had been whistling earlier, Jamie slipped into the kitchen and put on a pot of water to boil. The old pot-bellied stove had overheated one too many times and would probably burst apart at the seams one of these days, but Jamie was careful with the wood. The door hinge was loose anyway, so she couldn't build up too much of a fire without sparks leaping out.

Her thoughts drifted back to Dawson. She had a distinct memory of the day Dawson Smith had come to town. She'd been only thirteen. Her mother had been dead for over three years. She'd been wearing Frank's dungarees and an old flannel shirt ten sizes too big for her when she'd walked into the new doctor's office looking for work and met Dawson for the first time. He couldn't have been more than twenty-three or -four, and

he'd been wearing a slick mustache to make himself look older.

She'd introduced herself, and he'd said "Jamaica Mulligan," and slapped a thin file folder onto the desk. It had been the first time since her mother died that she had been called Jamaica. She'd never been called it since.

Peeling the potatoes, Jamie dropped them into the boiling water. Dr. Dawson Smith had learned the hard way that a mining town like Altona had no patience with educated folk, and certainly no money for doctors. He'd also learned to call her Jamie and treat her like a boy as everyone else did. He'd had enough sense to figure that out all by himself. A town filled with drunken miners and cowboys on a Saturday night wasn't the kind of place for a thirteen-year-old girl with no protection.

Now, after seven years, Dawson had apparently forgotten her sex as well as everyone else had, just as he'd forgotten his chosen profession. A place like this did that to a person. Strangers came to town and either learned to shed their Eastern ways and become part of the hard-working, hard-drinking crowd, or died trying. Dawson, at least, had found a way to maintain his civilized demeanor even while running one of the biggest, rowdiest, most expensive gambling establishments this side of the Rockies.

Now that money was starting to flow out of the mines with some degree of regularity, the town was becoming a little more civilized. In the years since Dawson had arrived, it had grown from a boom town of wooden shacks to a small city with substantial buildings and plate-glass windows. The merchants arriving now had wives and daughters who wore silks and satins instead of the rough cottons and wools of the first arrivals. None of

them remembered the wife of an engineer who arrived just in time to bury her husband after a mine explosion. Nor did they remember Red Mulligan when he had been the burly foreman of that same mine. They only saw the drunk staggering down the street, gossiped about the son who had robbed the train a while back, clucked their tongues, and forgot about him. And his family.

The engineer's widow had been Jamie's mother. There wasn't much a delicate woman could do out here but marry, and she'd chosen Mulligan—for what reason, Jamie could not guess. He'd already had three strong boys by his first wife and needed a mother for them. But why he had picked a woman who was half his size and not strong enough for his kind of life was also beyond Jamie's comprehension. She supposed she ought to be grateful that they'd found each other or she would never have existed, but it made her wonder about the oddities of human nature.

She tested the hunk of bacon in the beans simmering on the back burner, threw in a handful of salt, and called it a meal. Dad and Frank would be home from the mine soon. She filled her plate, ate the contents hastily, and slipped out the door just as the whistle blew. Her father and brother could eat what she left on the stove. She didn't need to hang around to see if they consumed more food than liquor tonight.

The only time Jamie ever found herself wishing for new clothes was when she passed the open door to Dawson's saloon and saw all the fancy men and ladies at the tables with heaps of greenbacks laying in front of them. It wasn't the ladies' clothes she coveted. She hadn't grown up on the streets of Altona and learned nothing. The women at those tables weren't "ladies." They didn't

earn their way at the gambling tables, but in the rooms upstairs. Jamie wasn't entirely certain what went on in those rooms, but she had a fairly reasonable imagination and had grown up in a household of men. She didn't want to know any more than that.

No, it was the men's clothing that drew her eye. If she could just disguise herself as a gentleman instead of an urchin, she could sit at those tables and make more money in one night than she did now in a month.

She slipped down the alley beside the saloon. She had found a top hat out here once, but Frank had found her hiding place and amused himself one night throwing cards into it. The cards hadn't hurt it much, but once he'd emptied his stomach into it after drinking an entire bottle of rotgut, the hat had never been the same. That had been the extent of the gentlemanly attire she had acquired. But she kept a sharp eye out every time she came through here.

Whistling softly, Jamie slipped through the back door into the storage room. If Dad and Frank knew she had easy access to the saloon's liquor supplies, she'd never hear the end of it, but they never questioned her whereabouts. She was fairly certain they had forgotten her gender, too, and her age. She was little better than five feet tall and people kept expecting her to grow taller, so they still thought her a young boy. In fact, she was twenty now, going on twenty-one, and she wasn't likely to grow any more. She didn't intend to keep anyone informed of that, however.

Cookie the bartender came back and saw her sitting on one of the crates. He threw her a towel and jerked his head toward the back room. "Get the glasses washed up. There ain't many dishes. Lulu quit again."

Lulu was the whore who'd been here longest. She did all the cooking for the others and they were supposed to pay her at the end of the week. She regularly quit when the money wasn't forthcoming or when someone insulted her cooking. Since it wasn't the end of the week, Jamie wondered who had insulted her now.

It didn't matter. Dawson would come down and whisper sweet words in Lulu's ear and she would be all smiles again before evening's end. Jamie climbed up on a crate to retrieve the dishpan, then filled it with hot water from the kettle steaming on the stove. She added some cold water and filled the pan with dirty glasses. She wondered idly what it was that Dawson said to the ladies that made them smile and flutter their lashes around him.

She wondered a lot of things. She had a naturally curious mind, a teacher had once told her back when she was still attending school. She wondered why Dawson didn't marry someone like Gloria Jean and live in a fancy house like the banker. He was rich enough and good looking to boot. He even smelled good, which was a blessing around here. He sure enough liked women, so that couldn't be the reason.

She was drying the stack of glasses and pondering these curiosities of human nature when the object of her speculations walked in. Dawson often came back here to check on supplies or just to see what she was up to, so his presence didn't surprise her any. She threw him an earring she had found on the floor. He caught it in one hand and absently slipped it into his pocket.

"I don't suppose you can cook, Jamie, my friend?" he inquired, wandering about in the chaos that was Lulu's version of a pantry. He found a sack of peanuts and carried it back into the kitchen, offering Jamie a

helping.

"Nothing fancy," she agreed. "But if you have a cookbook, I could figure it out. What happened, Rosa bounce one of Lulu's biscuits again?"

He cracked a peanut shell and popped the contents in his mouth before answering. Jamie had long ago decided that Dawson Smith was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. He'd gotten rid of the silly mustache, but now he had long sideburns that framed his already angular face and emphasized the squareness of his jaw. His hair was thick and dark and curly, and he forgot to get it cut as often as he should. It was brushing the back of his stiff collar now, and Jamie wondered if she ought to ask if he wanted her to trim it like she did her father's.

He was her best friend, her only friend. She'd gladly do it for free, but his concentration was elsewhere tonight, and she didn't intrude.

"A cookbook. That's an idea. Reckon Davidson would have anything like that over at the mercantile?"

Jamie smiled and propped herself cross-legged on top of an upended crate. Dawson wasn't really thinking about cookbooks, she could tell. She knew things about people they didn't think she knew. There were advantages and disadvantages to being ignored by everyone. She thought she could pretty well have her father and Frank hung if she wanted to divulge some of her secrets, and she had once told Dawson as much. Most secrets weren't as dramatic as that, however. One of the other secrets she knew was that Dawson was a physician with a fine mind, who couldn't be satisfied with pouring liquor and playing the gaming tables. He could do both those things while his thoughts were on a peculiar medical symptom he'd heard someone discuss. She'd seen

him do it more than once.

"You aren't worried about Rosa's appetite, are you? Nobody can eat Lulu's biscuits. Does it have anything to do with Rosa carrying a baby?"

Dawson's gaze finally focused and fell on the urchin perched insolently on the crate. If it weren't for the lively crop of curls beneath her hat, he could easily mistake her for one of Dickens' chimney sweeps. He licked his finger and ran it down her grimy cheek, leaving a pale white streak.

"You need a bath. Go upstairs and tell Lulu to fix one for you. She's not good for anything else tonight."

Jamie shrugged. As much as she liked the baths she occasionally sneaked, they weren't a good idea. People looked at her oddly when she was clean, she had noticed. They started counting backward and wondering how long she could be a fourteen-year-old boy. It was better not to attract too much attention.

"You and Lulu have a fight?" she asked helpfully, distracting him.

"Lulu and I fight all the time, and it's none of your business. How did you know about Rosa's baby?" He might have ignored her earlier questions, but he'd heard them. Given an inch, Jamie Mulligan would take a mile of questions. She had a mind like a steel trap and Dawson preferred to step around it when he could. She knew entirely too much about everybody, and she was too good at putting pieces of a puzzle together. There were one or two secrets that he would like to continue to keep.

Jamie gave him a scornful look that made Dawson want to laugh. She had slanted green eyes that she kept half-closed most of the time, but they crinkled up and flashed now. He'd already insulted Lulu and Rosa this

evening. He might as well round out the numbers with this junior version here.

"I've got eyes and ears and a brain between them," she answered scornfully. "Is Lulu going to talk Rosa into not having the baby?"

This time, it was Dawson's turn to scowl. "She'd damned well better not. Is that what you heard? I'm going to strangle that woman, just see if I don't. You stay right here and I'll bring you her corpse. We'll bury it together."

Jamie grinned as Dawson shoved a box out of his way and headed for the door. "Give me a game after?" "Name your poison," he called over his shoulder. "Twenty-one. Penny a point," she called to his departing back.

"Damn, but you'll own the whole building," he muttered before disappearing into the nether regions where she couldn't follow.

Cookie came back to collect the tray of clean glasses and bring her a tray of dirty ones. He gave her casual sprawl a look of irritation. "You ain't bein' paid to lol-lygag, boy. Don't know what the boss keeps you on for."

"My good looks and sweet tongue." Jamie hopped down from the crate and stuck out the aforementioned appendage.

Cookie grunted and slammed back out to the front. Instead of dumping the glasses in the water and washing, Jamie wandered to the pantry and assessed the contents. She liked working here. No one asked her to lift fifty-pound sacks of grain. No one cared if she were male, female, or somewhere in between. As long as she did her work, she went unquestioned. And it gave her someplace to go when Dad and Frank were drinking.

Finding the flour, lard, and soda, she threw the ap-



propriate combination into a bowl and began to knead it.

By the time Dawson made it back downstairs to the kitchen, the room smelled of freshly baked biscuits and coffee. He remembered he hadn't eaten any supper, and his mouth watered. Jamie was casually ignoring him, bent over the dishpan in an affected position of industriousness. He knew she hated washing dishes and avoided it every chance she got. His gaze roamed the chaotic room that was Lulu's kitchen.

He grinned as he found the fresh baked biscuits, still steaming hot, on a pan near the stove. Ignoring Jamie as she was ignoring him, he sauntered over to the pan, picked up a biscuit, and threw it back and forth to cool it off. The little brat had even sliced some salted ham and left it on a platter. He pulled the biscuit apart, drinking in the scent. They were fluffier and fatter than the ones his mother used to bake. Slapping on some ham, he bit into the sandwich with gusto. His eyes swept the room in search of the coffee.

The pot sat in the middle of a table she had cleared – right beside the deck of cards. She was going to hold him to his promise.

He had two women down, and a man with loaded dice at the tables. He really needed to tend to business. But he couldn't resist the offer. He was perfectly aware that the little brat counted cards. She could ace just about any man out there when luck was running her way, and she damned well knew it. But he'd let her have her fun. The biscuits were worth every cent he'd lose.

Making up a stack of miniature sandwiches and pouring himself some coffee, Dawson straddled a chair and cut the deck. He didn't even have to call. She was drying off her hands and settling on a stool before he

could say a word.

"I'm not going to let you rob me blind tonight," he warned.

"You don't ever *let* me do anything," she said contemptuously. "I walk all over you because I'm good."

Dawson laughed. He genuinely liked this arrogant little brat. Ever since the day she'd walked into the old doc's office and informed him her name was Jamie and not Jamaica and he'd better remember it, he'd followed her career. It hadn't taken him long to realize why she wore the boy's disguise. Any unprotected woman in this town was free game to the miners and cowboys who rolled into town on a Saturday night.

After running into her menfolk a few times, Dawson was even more aware of her reasons for hiding. One brother had disappeared into the night after a man who had won his paycheck turned up dead. There wasn't any proof that a Mulligan had done it, but the suspicion was heavy. Another brother had been caught robbing a train with a gang of outlaws and now languished in the federal pen. The father and the remaining brother were no-account drunks who occasionally managed to make it down into the mines and earn enough to keep them liquored up the rest of the time. With family like that, she was better off pretending to be a boy. He worried about her, though. By now she was surely old enough for the drunks in that family to see her as a woman. And unfortunately, he didn't think a blood relationship would stop them from wanting to sample her charms.

Dawson threw down his cards and watched her clean off the table again. Damn, it was a good thing they were only betting pennies. She'd started out with two and now had twenty-five. "How old are you now, Jamie?" he

inquired casually.

She gave him a suspicious glare and shuffled the cards. "Old enough to know better. Where's Lulu's body?"

Since Lulu was busy sharing her luscious self with a man she didn't mean to charge, it took Dawson a moment to remember their earlier conversation. He chuckled as he remembered the sight of that very live body and the corpse he'd threatened to haul down. "Lulu's body is otherwise occupied right now. I'll kill her some other time. I talked to Rosa instead. She's got enough saved to get to San Francisco. I gave her the name of a place she can go. She can arrive as a wealthy widow and make herself respectable if she wants."

Jamie didn't offer any comment. Had she been a respectable lady like Gloria Jean, Dawson would never have talked about such things as pregnant prostitutes to her. But because he often forgot what she was, she had learned a great deal more about life than most ladies would ever know. She had a very real understanding of why the women upstairs did what they did, even if she wasn't entirely certain what it was that they did. More than once when Jamie had been worried about losing the roof over her head, she'd wondered if one day she wouldn't find herself doing the same thing.

Dawson polished off the last of the biscuits after noting that Jamie had had her fair share. "You applying for the position of cook?"

"Lulu would skin me alive," Jamie answered evasively.

"You're probably right, but I can insist that she needs a little help. I could eat these biscuits all day."

"That's about all you'd eat. I don't know much else. I don't suppose Lulu would be willing to teach me." The

words were more statement than question; Lulu didn't exactly have the patience for teaching.

"I'll find a cookbook," Dawson promised, rising from the table as he folded another losing hand. "I'm going to catch you cheating one of these days, and I'm going to make you cook for free."

Jamie didn't have any objections to that. As Dawson left to relieve Larkin of his loaded dice, she glanced around at the well-stocked kitchen and larder. She could make a bed up over there in that corner beside the stove. She'd straighten this mess out and practically have a room to herself when she was done. And all the food she could eat. Of course, in a place like this, she'd still have to disguise herself as a boy, but one couldn't have everything.

She'd have to let Dawson catch her cheating next time. She didn't cheat often—just when she was particularly desperate—but she knew how to do it, all right. Dawson would know why she did it. That ought to bother her; she had some pride. But with Dawson, it didn't seem to matter so much. He'd find some way to talk around Lulu if he knew that cooking here was what she really wanted. Cheating would be the signal that she was ready to move into his kitchen.

They'd always understood each other that way. Gathering up her pennies, Jamie slipped out back the way she had come.

It was odd how two such disparate people could become friends, but somehow, she thought of Dawson as just that. Maybe it was because they were both oddities in this town. Dawson walked a fine line between respectability and dissipation. He dressed like the bankers and merchants, talked like them—heck he had more

money than most of them. At the same time, he ran a notorious establishment in a town that valued upright and honorable living. He was a gambler and a saloon keeper and he rented rooms to women of loose morals. That tipped him toward her side of town. Except that she really wasn't a part of the immorality of her father's friends any more than Dawson was. It was only poverty and family that kept her where she was, and there wasn't much she could do about her family.

She occasionally wondered how she would compare if she got cleaned up and decked out like Gloria Jean, but she didn't concern herself much with impossibilities.

She wouldn't be female if she hadn't considered marriage as an escape from her present plight, but she might just as well imagine traveling to San Francisco and seeing the ocean. She didn't have occasion to meet any respectable men. And she had more sense than to think she would be better off if she married a miner or cowboy who would smack her around whenever he felt like it, go whoring whenever he had the urge, and return to her bed smelling of cheap liquor. She'd seen the wrong side of marriage too often to want to be a part of that.

She knew she was smart and that one day she would figure a way out of this predicament. The opportunity just hadn't appeared yet. Becoming Dawson's cook just might be the chance she'd been waiting for.

She slipped into the dark kitchen of her home and grimaced at the sight of the dirty pan left sitting on the warm stove. The heat had cooked the remains of the beans into adobe plaster. An empty whisky bottle lay in pieces on the rough wooden floor, and the dregs had

seeped into the planks where they would stink forevermore. She'd end up begging Dawson for that job if she wasn't careful.

The room reeked of tobacco smoke and body odors. Come Saturday, maybe she could raid her hidden cash for enough coins to persuade her father and Frank to go down to the bathhouse. They were rank beyond belief right now. She threw open the room's one window and attempted to air out the cabin.

She was too weary to do more than that. She had to sleep while they slept and be up and out of here before they awoke. From the looks of it, the whisky was gone; she knew from experience that they'd be like enraged grizzly bears until they found more booze. The last time the liquor had run out, she'd been belted across the room just for looking at them crooked. If she had to get by on six hours' sleep in order to save her teeth from being knocked down her throat, she'd do it. She liked her teeth too much to lose them.

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Jamie contemplated accepting Dawson's offer of a bath as she carted the last crate into the mercantile. She could feel the perspiration streaking down her forehead, and the noon sun was about to fry her brains. Mentally, she lowered herself into perfumed suds and lathered her hair in cool water. Physically, she accepted the grudging scraps Davidson offered as payment and headed for the street.

Occasionally, she wondered what it would be like to be a whore. They had all the perfumed baths they liked. She'd heard they had satin sheets. They would eat well when Lulu bothered cooking. They had money to spend on anything they liked. And they could save

enough money for train trips to San Francisco; a place Jamie really wanted to see.

But then she'd watch the filthy miners and weaselly shopkeepers climb the stairs after Lulu and Rosa and the others, and her stomach would turn over. Instinct told her that any occupation involving men was one to be avoided.

So she decided to treat herself another way. Instead of stopping at the dressmaker's to turn her material into cash and get stuck running errands, she wandered out of town to the creek cascading down the mountain into a hidden pool. A few of the cowboys knew about the place, but they wouldn't be near town today. The townspeople never roamed much farther than the last building on the street unless they were in a stagecoach or carriage, so they didn't know the stream existed. She'd lose an opportunity to make a little cash, but it was worth it.

The water was heavenly. She had a sliver of soap from the last bar she'd bought, and she used it lavishly on her hair. She hated it when her head itched. She didn't care if her face was dirty, but she liked clean hair. And she didn't like to smell.

The water was just deep enough to come to her shoulders, so she couldn't drown. She didn't know how to float or swim, but she bobbed up and down in the water and scrubbed until the soap was gone, then soaked in the coolness. How nice it would be if she could stay here forever. The water washed against her skin like the finest satin, and she closed her eyes and let it lap around her, trying to imagine what it would be like to wear silk. She thought it must be a lot like wearing water.

But the sun was already moving down behind the mountain. She had to get back and convert Davidson's

scraps to cash and buy food for supper. She shivered when she climbed out and a light breeze flicked over her wet skin. She was pale and beginning to prune. She grabbed a piece of the muslin and rubbed herself down. She'd wash the scrap and sell it another time. The others would be sufficient to buy potatoes.

She hated donning the filthy clothes, but she hadn't been organized enough to bring clean ones with her. Her only thought had been to escape to the stream and lose her troubles for a little while. Now she was going to have to put her thinking cap on and figure out how she was going to get through town with shining cheeks and wet hair. Even fourteen-year-old boys tended to show traces of a beard.

A muffled explosion rocked the mountain as she was pulling on her trousers. Jamie looked up in surprise, searching the sky for thunderclouds. And then came the dreaded sound of a tolling bell and siren. The mine.

There were accidents in the mine all the time, but it had been years since there had been an explosion or a collapse. Fear clutched at her insides as Jamie grabbed up the rest of her clothes and ran down the mountainside, dodging rocks and spindly aspen like a leaping jackrabbit. Her father and Frank had gone in to work today, still half-drunk from their payday binge. They might be drunks, but they were all the family she had left.

Just then, another horrible thought occurred to her. Without them, she would be homeless in every sense of the word. The house they lived in belonged to the mine. If anything happened to her father and Frank, she would be without family and without a home.

People were already running up the road toward the mine. Horses and carriages mixed with women and



children on foot. In some way or another, everyone had an interest in that mine. Jamie flew down the hillside to join them.

She smacked right into Dawson's arms as she slid off the bank into the road. He grunted, grabbed her arms to steady her, and looked down to see what he had caught.

His eyes widened, and he hastily jerked off his coat and shoved her arms into it. Taken by surprise, Jamie looked down at herself. She was carrying her oversized shirt and hat and wearing only her combinations and trousers. Like everything else, the thin cotton was larger than she was. Men went around like that all the time. But she hadn't taken the time to bind her breasts. She jerked his coat around her and pulled on her hat over her wet hair.

"Get back to the saloon. Have the girls begin making bandages out of those old sheets I've been saving. Clear the tables and chairs out of the way and see if you can gather some blankets for pallets. And get that damned shirt on." Dawson shoved her in the direction of town, against the steady stream heading up the hill.

Still shaken, Jamie ran to do as instructed. People tended to forget Dawson was a physician as much as they forgot she was a girl. They never looked further than what they could see. But she knew what he was telling her: For the first time since Dawson had arrived in Altona, they were going to need a hospital, and the saloon was going to be it.

Jamie jerked off Dawson's coat as she dashed into the empty saloon and was still fastening her oversized shirt when she yelled up the stairs at Lulu. At this time of day, most of the women were still in bed, sleeping off the

previous night's exertions. But at her frantic call they straggled down the stairs or leaned over the railing in various stages of undress. Jamie had never seen so much fancy undergear in all her life, but she didn't stop to consider it.

"Don't goggle, little boy," one of them called as Jamie waited anxiously for Lulu to make an appearance. There wasn't much point in talking to the others until then. She'd just have to repeat the message a dozen times.

Lulu finally appeared, fully dressed in scarlet silk with a slit from her ankles to her thigh. The feathery boa around her neck looked like it would tickle, but Jamie didn't have time to admire the fashion show. "Dawson said we've got to make bandages out of those old sheets. He said to get as many blankets together as you can. I'll start shoving these tables out of the way. There's like to be a lot of injured coming in soon."

Lulu frowned, sauntered down the steps, and removed Jamie's hat. She dropped it on the floor, then crossed to the front door. "Mine blew, did it? There's like to be a lot of dead, if you ask me." She gazed out at the empty street, then turned back to Jamie and narrowed her eyes. "You're not a boy, are you? And that damned wily Dawson knows it. Get out of here, kid. We'll handle this."

Furious at being dismissed as a child, Jamie grabbed up her hat and stalked out the back way. Once out of sight, she headed for the kitchen. She could hear Lulu giving orders and chairs being shifted across the floor. Maybe she wasn't needed in there, but she could be of some use in here. She had to do something or go crazy waiting for news from the mine.

As she got the fire stoked and set pots of water and coffee on to boil, she remembered her unbound breasts.

Combined with her clean face and wet hair straggling to her shoulders, she didn't have much of a disguise. She prayed the women would keep their mouths shut, but any hopes she might have harbored about coming to cook here had come to an end. Lulu would never allow another female on her turf.

Hiding in the storage room, Jamie bound herself and rubbed some soot on her face. Her hair would bounce back into tight curls once it dried. There wasn't much she could do about it until that happened. She'd just have to look like a long-haired boy and keep to the kitchen.

She heard the voices yelling first, then the stamping of feet as the first of the injured were carried into town. Dawson's voice was loudest, directing the men into the saloon, then shouting orders at the women. The idea of using prostitutes as nurses didn't seem to strike anyone as amusing. When the first one appeared in the doorway looking for hot water, Jamie had a bucket ready for her.

As the afternoon wore into evening, the frantic rescue efforts continued. Jamie didn't have a glimpse of Dawson. Lulu came back and carried out the coffee as if it were her own. Jamie made biscuits enough for an army, and sliced up every piece of meat and cheese in the place. Somehow, it all disappeared. Her arms were beginning to ache from pumping water, but the demand never slowed.

When Cookie wandered back and discovered an urchin sweating over the stove, he raised his eyebrows and pumped the next bucket.

"Have they got a list of the dead yet?" Jamie asked fearfully, removing another pot of coffee.

"No list. Ain't seen any Mulligans either." Cookie poured the water into the kettle and started out with the

coffee. He gave Jamie's ear a sympathetic tweak. "I'll let you know iffen I do."

That was the best she could hope for.

Things slowed down a bit after full dark. The saloon was filled with the sound of women weeping and men moaning. Occasionally she could detect Dawson's low voice giving instructions. She didn't know why she could pick his out among so many, other than because it was somehow reassuring. Lulu had just carried out another pot of coffee, but she wasn't being very communicative. She just sent Jamie an enigmatic look and helped herself to the pot.

When the demand for hot water finally died away, Jamie curled up in a corner, so thoroughly exhausted she didn't think she could move a muscle. She couldn't bear the thought of returning home. If the place was empty, she would know the worst. This way, she could hold on to hope a little while longer.

She must have dozed off. The clatter of an empty coffee pot against the iron stove jarred her awake. She jumped up, wearily wiping her eyes.

Dawson was there, leaning with exhaustion against the stove, attempting to pour coffee from dregs. He was stripped of all his finery and down to shirtsleeves—bloody shirt-sleeves, Jamie noted. Without a word, she filled a clean pot, added wood to the fire, and set the water to boiling.

Dawson leaned against the sink and watched her move with the grace of a shadow from stove to sink to pantry. There wasn't any lamp back here but the one over the sink. When she stood beside it, he could try to trace the outline of the breasts he had seen so clearly earlier today, but she'd apparently bound herself again. He

didn't need to ask how old she was. He'd found the old files and looked it up.

"Jamie." His voice came out as little more than a weary whisper, surprising him.

She drifted back to the stove and added grounds to the coffee pot. She didn't look at him, but he could tell she was listening. Her whole body was tense beneath the loose shirt and trousers.

"They've brought in a list of the missing."

He didn't have to say more. She knew what that meant. The roof of the mine had caved in. Those trapped behind or beneath it were either dead already or would be soon. She knew with a sudden and sharp clarity whose names would be on the list. He wouldn't have mentioned it otherwise. He wouldn't have come back here at all.

"They were drunk. They probably didn't feel a thing." She said quietly, trying to relieve him of the burden of finding a way to break the news gently.

There wasn't much Dawson could say to that. They both knew that her father and brother might still be alive and suffocating in the methane gas from the explosion. Or they could be lying under timbers, dying slowly from blood loss or internal injuries. They also knew the likelihood of anyone digging through the debris in time to save them or any of the others was next to nil. It was better to think of them as already dead.

"I'll help in any way I can," he offered.

Jamie nodded. "If you don't mind, I'll sleep here tonight. There's space over by the pantry. Somebody might need something during the night."

Dawson preferred to send her home. Horrible as her life might be, she was still a young girl, and he wagered she knew little of the life the women in this place

lived. He'd rather she didn't learn more. But he also knew Jamie well enough to know she would never have made the offer if the alternative hadn't been worse.

Dawson nodded his head. "I appreciate that. There aren't any blankets left. Can you make yourself comfortable?"

She gave him a fleeting grin. "Flour sacks make great pillows."

If he were the kind of man who cried, he'd cry now at the sight of the bravery behind that quivering smile. There were full-grown women out there right now who weren't accepting the news of their losses with half the fortitude of this one, and most of them had comfortable homes and families to fall back on. Dawson chuckled her under the chin and walked out. He was too exhausted to consider any other alternative for her right now. Another woman he might have hugged and kissed and comforted. Jamie Mulligan would rightly have socked him in the gut for trying.

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Jamie crawled out of her hiding place at the first crack of dawn. She could hear people stirring in the other room, but she wagered there was time to run home before anyone came looking for her.

Her hair had dried into a tangled frazzle. She jerked her hat over it, tightened the binding under her shirt, and slipped out the back door.

The dawn promised a day as bright and warm as the previous one. She guessed nature didn't take mining explosions into account. The clouds didn't weep for the dead and injured. Thunder didn't roar and rage at the injustice of it all. Life went on as it always did.

As if to emphasize the point, a bird began to sing

from the rooftop, and a rooster crowed.

Scowling, Jamie slipped down back alleys and roads to her home. It looked more miserable than ever in the morning light. It was the place where her mother had made cookies and told Christmas stories. She had learned to walk on those floors; she had polished that window more times than she could count; she had even persuaded a morning glory vine to sprout and bloom along the step. It was her home — but it didn't belong to her anymore.

Inside, the empty rooms echoed hollow as if they knew the life had gone out of them. The dirty pot of burnt beans still sat soaking where she'd left it yesterday morning. The kitchen floor still reeked of the liquor she hadn't had time to scrub out. In the front room, her father and brother's dirty clothes still lay scrambled in the disorderly pile where they had left them two nights before. They would lie and rot now. Jamie didn't mean to wash them again.

She might be sentimental about her home, but she couldn't afford to be sentimental about her family. With organized efficiency, she searched every inch of space in the front room for anything that might be of value to her. Old clothes were worthless, but she fished through pockets for pennies and knives that might bring a coin. She found the last of Frank's paycheck under a board by his bed. She wrapped up her mother's Bible in a stack of quilts. Her mother's clothes had been sold or used for rags long ago.

She would have to find a place to store the few pots and dishes that represented her kitchen. In the meantime, she would carry these few things back to Dawson's. Maybe Lulu wouldn't throw her out as long as the saloon remained a hospital.

Back at the saloon, Jamie stashed her quilts in the corner she had claimed for her own and went about making breakfast. Everyone was probably tired of biscuits, but she knew nothing about making bread. She could fry an egg if anyone wanted one, but she didn't see much point in frying one up ahead of time. Men drank coffee any time, so she got that started. She wished she knew how to do more.

Lulu came storming down a few hours later, slamming the door and yelling at Jamie to get out. By then, Jamie had already made more pots of coffee than she could count and she was running low on lard for the biscuits. She looked up at Lulu with surprise, inspected the last tray of biscuits in the oven, and shut the oven door.

"You getting tired of biscuits too?" she asked with a hint of irony.

"I'm damned tired of biscuits and I'm damned tired of His Royal Asshole telling me what to do! Now get the hell out and let me cook a real meal." She slammed an iron skillet on the stove and headed for the pantry.

"I'd be more than glad to help if you'd just tell me what to do," Jamie offered.

Lulu carried out the last of the lard and glared at her. "Unless you're willin' to work under the covers like the rest of us, you'd better get your skinny ass out of here. If I hear one more word about your glorious biscuits, I'm going to slit someone's throat." Ominously, she moved toward the tray of knives.

Jamie left. She hoped her possessions would be safe. She couldn't imagine even Lulu in a rage bothering with a few old quilts.

When she returned to the house to see if she could



figure out how to salvage her kitchen supplies, she found the place already occupied by a couple of men who had "Company" written all over their faces.

Jamie tried to slip in and grab a skillet and pot before they could see her, but her hand slipped and the noise of metal against metal brought one of the men to the kitchen. He grabbed her wrist and wrenched the pot away.

"A man dies and thieves are already scavenging the remains. Get out of here, brat, before I call the sheriff." He shoved her toward the door.

Jamie fell from the force of the blow and was scrambling to her knees when the second man entered. He bent to help her up, but she shook him off with fury, backing away from both of them.

"It's Mulligan's youngest," the second man offered. "He probably ain't got nowhere else to go."

The first man frowned and stared at her as if she were emitting a bad odor. "They're talking about starting an orphanage for those that don't have any family. We could take him down to the church."

Jamie panicked and began to back toward the door. The idea of an orphanage was ludicrous. It would have been ludicrous back when she was ten and her mother died; it was even more so now. But she had no intention of explaining that to these men.

"I just want my things," she demanded. "They're my things. I need them. I've got a job."

That was a blatant lie on all counts, but these men seemed relieved not to have to do anything else. They hunted around for a sack or a box and began helping her gather her kitchen tools. They made no apology whatsoever for taking away her home.

Her back stiff, she carried out the big box full of pitifully worn-out household goods. She had no idea where she was going; she just knew she wasn't going to stay around and become an object of pity. Lord, she thought with a sigh, her father wouldn't even have a funeral, buried as he was down in the mine. They were just going to open up his house, heave everything out—including his daughter—and rent it to some other unlucky fool. Life wasn't fair.

She'd screamed and raged at the injustices of life when she had been younger, but tears and anger hadn't changed a blamed thing. She was a quick learner. When she had realized tears didn't work, she'd found something else that would. Playing the part of urchin had protected her. Working for pennies had kept her from starving. She would simply have to find something new to put a roof over her head, and crying wasn't going to do that.

She knew what she wanted to do, but she'd need Dawson's cooperation. She disliked asking anybody for help, but if she had to it would be easier to ask him than anyone else.

Carting the box to the back of the saloon, Jamie hid it among the old crates and boxes of liquor stored there. Then, dusting herself off slightly, tucking her shirt in neatly, and straightening her hat, she went around to the front door and entered just like a regular customer.

Dawson didn't even look up. He was bent over a man lying on a pallet on the floor, removing a bandage. Jamie waited awhile for him to look up, but when one of the other patients asked for water, she went to fetch it. Soon, she found herself going from pallet to pallet, supplying the needs of the injured or the women who

waited beside them.

It would be a more depressing sight if she didn't keep telling herself that these were the lucky ones, the ones who had gotten out alive. These women still had their fathers and husbands and brothers. These men would live to see another dawn. She had no need to cry over their pain and suffering. She merely eased it where she could with sips of water, a cool cloth, or a few words of comfort.

Dawson finally noticed her and dragged her back to the empty kitchen. He held her collar and shook his head as he looked her up and down. Then he pushed her toward the stove.

"Fix yourself something to eat. You look like something the cat dragged in."

That hurt. She had just bathed yesterday, and she had taken the time to dust herself off as best as she could. She was hideously conscious that her overalls had only one strap and hung on her like a gunny sack tied around the middle with rope, but he'd seen her in these a thousand times. She scrubbed self-consciously at her face with the back of her hand and tried not to glare at him. After all, she couldn't get him riled when she'd come to ask him a favor.

"I need your help," she blurted out, with none of the finesse she'd planned on using.

He stiffened briefly, then crossed the room to fill a plate with the mess simmering on the stove. He shoved it at her and pointed at a chair. "Eat. You can talk to me while you're eating."

She sighed and took the place indicated. Even to her empty stomach, the congealed mess looked unappealing, but she nibbled at it anyway. She had been taught not to

talk when chewing, and she glared at Dawson as she tried to chew the piece of rubber in her mouth. So much for being polite.

Finally, she swallowed and reached for the water he'd poured for her. The coins in her pocket made her braver as she sipped.

"I need a loan."

Dawson raised his eyebrows and sat down across from her. "What for?"

She had been afraid he would ask that. He had every right to know what the money would be used for, but if she told him, he wasn't likely to loan it. "I need some clothes," she finally said. "I'll pay you back, I swear."

"How do you mean to do that?" His look contained oceans of suspicion and an equal amount of weariness. He'd more than likely been up most of the night.

Jamie squirmed. She even considered eating some more. But he was going to know sooner or later. He was too smart not to. She set her chin bravely and met his eyes. "I want to be a gambler. I want some decent gentleman's clothes so I can sit at the tables."

Dawson gave a long whistle and eyed her with a certain amount of respect. "You're a rare one, you know that? I can't think of another woman in this world who would come up with a solution like that."

Jamie knew better than to feel eagerness, but she sensed it creeping up on her anyway. Holding in her excitement, she kept a wary eye on him. "Will you give me the loan then? I can pay you back a little bit every night out of my winnings."

He lifted the hat off her head and dropped it to the floor. He got out his handkerchief and wiped at the soot

she had rubbed into her cheek. Unable to peer any further beneath her disguise, Dawson tilted his head and examined her carefully. Then he shook it slowly, sending Jamie's hopes plummeting to the ground.

"You make a pretty boy, but you'd make a damned awful man. How many five-foot men with smooth cheeks have you seen running around?"

Not many. Jamie slumped in her seat and stared at her plate with distaste. She supposed she could live in alleys for the summer. If she stole food from backyard gardens, she could save everything she earned and maybe rent a place cheap come winter. The idea of living without a roof over her head made her whimper inside. She'd always known she was poor, but she'd never been homeless.

Dawson came around the table and pulled her up by her shirt sleeves. He gathered the loose material in his hands until he had it taut enough to see something of her actual shape beneath the cloth. He eyed her critically. "It's a wonder you haven't maimed yourself wrapping yourself that tight. How in hell do you breathe?"

Mortified, she jerked away and slapped at his hands. "I manage. I'm sorry I took up your time. I've got work to do."

He caught her loose overall strap and kept her from escaping. "Even if you could cook more than biscuits, Lulu would feed you to the snakes if I put you back here where I can't keep an eye on you."

Jamie gave his restraining hand a glare of disdain but didn't say anything. She just looked at him, waiting for him to make up his mind and let her go.

He gave her another once-over and shook his head. "You're no bigger than a termite, but maybe that will

work to your advantage. I'm going to loan you the money."

She stared at him, hope widening her eyes, displaying the full glory of sooty lashes and emerald glitter.

Dawson shook his head again. "I'm going to kick myself for this—I most assuredly am. There's one condition to the loan." She waited without speaking. "You're going to buy ladies' clothes."

Her newborn hope died. She gave him a pained look but kept her dignity. "I'll not be one of your whores, Mr. Smith."

He winced. He hadn't been *Mr. Smith* to anyone in years. Not even *Dr. Smith*. "Do you really think I'm as bad as that? I thought I had at least one friend who saw past my reputation."

Puzzled, Jamie searched his face. He seemed genuinely hurt by what had been a perfectly natural assumption. But Dawson never let his feelings show for long. Abruptly, he was whistling and looking her up and down. Carefully, she inquired, "Then what, precisely, did you have in mind?"

He grinned. "A lady gambler. I want you to be my new dealer at the blackjack table." Seeing her disbelief, he hurried to add, "You'll work for me. I'll not have you counting cards against the house. I'd have to throw you out. I'll pay you a regular wage, and you'll be where I can keep an eye on you. Cookie might have to chuck a few men out at first until they get used to the idea, but we'll make them understand you're not one of the girls."

A lady gambler. She could dress like a real lady. She could be a woman. It was an impossible dream. She looked down at herself, trying to imagine what she would look like in silk and lace, and found it impossible. She looked back up and saw Dawson's smug expression. It

was more than impossible to imagine. It was impossible any way she looked at it.

He couldn't watch her twenty-four hours a day. She wouldn't want him to. It was going to take everything she possessed to pretend she was a lady for eight hours at the table. For that long she might endure his looking at her as just another one of his employees. More than that would rip at her insides. She knew it instinctively. She didn't want to know what it would feel like to have him ignore her as a woman. Worse, she didn't want to know what it would feel like to have him look at her as he looked at Gloria Jean and his other women. She shook her head in dismay at the thought and gathered her courage.

"I won't want anyone to know who I am. Give me some fancy name to use like Rosa or Lulu."

Dawson looked at her with curiosity but nodded agreement. Jamie could tell his mind was already working at the problem, finding new angles, solving them faster than she could think of them. She wasn't in the least surprised when he answered.

"That's an excellent idea. I'll let them think you came from out of town. I've got a driver going into Denver for supplies. I'll have him stop at the first stage station on the road and you can hop off there. I'll be out with your new clothes first chance I get. You can arrive on the stage as if you're brand new to town, tell everybody I sent for you. What name do you want us to use? You've got time to think about it."

She heard what he was saying, but only one part stuck in her mind. Pursing her lips, she looked at him suspiciously. "You're going to buy my new clothes? How're you going to do that?"

Dawson grinned and looked her over carefully.

"You think I never bought ladies' clothes before? You just wait and see. Besides, you can't be doing it. That will ruin your disguise if people see you."

Grudgingly, she had to agree but she had been looking forward to choosing her own clothes for a change. She'd never been able to go to a store and pick out so much as a piece of underwear. He might as well own the blamed things if he was going to pick them out.

With a decided lack of grace, she consented. "I want some of those fancy things like Gloria Jean wears," she informed him. "I want to look like a real lady."

Amusement danced in his eyes as he took her measure. "Gloria Jean is twice as big as you. I'll get you something suitable."

"I don't want any kid clothes!" she answered, alarmed. "I might be small, but I'm twenty years old, Dawson Smith. I want to dress like a lady." She stifled her anger, afraid she would lose her one chance if she annoyed him. But she couldn't resist adding, "Could I have a gown with green and pink stripes? I saw one like that over at the store once."

He shrugged and nodded. "I can only get you one like that if I can find one like it," he warned. "But I'll do my best."

She sighed and nodded. "When's your driver leaving?"

"First thing tomorrow." Dawson started to leave, then noticing that she stood there aimlessly, he turned. "You got a place to stay?"

She stiffened her backbone, pulled on her hat, and nodded energetically. " 'Course. I'll be here first thing tomorrow then."

In two steps, he had her by the back of the collar



again. Jamie kicked backward, but he didn't release her. "Mrs. Leavenworth owns a boardinghouse. I've got a room there I keep for my personal guests. Go over there and tell her I'm expecting company in a day or two and that I want you to stay there until they arrive. She won't believe you, but she'll send someone around to ask me before she throws you out."

Jamie jerked away. "I don't take charity. I'll find my own place."

"If you're going to be a lady, you've got to stay where ladies stay. That's what Mrs. Leavenworth is for."

She gave him a furious look from under lifted eyebrows. "Ladies? Is that why you keep a room there? To keep *ladies* there?"

"If I had time, I'd wash your mouth out with soap. Now get over there, give Mrs. Leavenworth my message, clean up, and get yourself back over here to help me. I've got to get these people out of the saloon soon so I can open back up."

If she'd had a gun, she would have shot him when he walked off. No, she wouldn't. She wouldn't shoot a man in the back. Maybe she'd strangle him in his sleep. That wasn't any better. She couldn't think of any way of killing him where he couldn't kill her first. She'd think of one sometime. If she was going to work for the bastard, she would have to wind up killing him. She was beginning to feel some sympathy for Lulu.

Jamie grouched all the way to the boardinghouse and back, but she couldn't suppress her excitement entirely. She didn't know what she would look like in new clothes, but she was hoping she'd look better than Gloria Jean. Finally, she had a chance to be *somebody*, instead of a filthy little urchin everybody ignored. She was practically

dancing with the excitement of it.

Somehow, she managed to get through that day. She was used to not seeing her father and brother from one day to the next, so she didn't exactly miss them. She didn't like staying at Mrs. Leavenworth's, but it was a place to sleep. She hauled her quilts and Bible over, deciding it might be a shade better than sleeping near Lulu's kitchen. The old lady scowled and clucked and insisted on checking the covers for fleas, but she'd already had word from Dawson. Jamie suspected Dawson's arrangement with the landlady might be cut short if she stayed here for long, but that was his problem.

She asked for a tub and hauled buckets of water up to the room. The old lady seemed to approve of that notion and even sent up some warm water. After locking the door, Jamie peeled off all her filthy clothes, scrubbed herself good with a bar of soap she found in the basin, then started on her clothes. She wasn't about to start her new life wearing filthy clothes over clean skin.

She hung her wet garments on hooks near the empty fireplace and went to bed naked. She couldn't remember ever sleeping on clean sheets. She stretched luxuriously on the feather mattress and decided staying at Mrs. Leavenworth's boardinghouse might even be worth listening to the old hen cluck. She could almost die happy right here and now, except she wanted to know how it would feel to wear ladies' clothes before she went.

She was too excited to sleep soundly. This side of town was quieter than where she was used to sleeping. The quiet kept her awake. Jamie heard the birds chirping before dawn, and even though it was still dark, she leapt out of bed.

Her clothes were still wet and clammy, but she

wasn't overly concerned. They would dry eventually. And soon, she could don new ones.

That thought brought her to a standstill. She'd only commissioned Dawson to buy her one outfit. She would have to keep that outfit clean all week until she could have it laundered on Monday when there wasn't any gaming. She would have to wear her boy's clothes when she wasn't working.

It was a depressing thought, but Jamie saw the sense in it. She actually began to find advantages as she made her way over to the saloon and the wagon waiting out front. She hadn't dared ask Mrs. Leavenworth for something to eat before she set out at this hour, and her stomach was growling, but she was used to that. She slipped beneath the canvas in the pre-dawn darkness. No one would even know she was gone.

Except maybe Dawson. He came out and leaned into the interior calling, "Jamie? Are you there yet?"

"Told you I would be." She popped from her hiding place and sat on an empty crate.

"I brought you some food. I don't know how soon I'll get out there, and the stage station isn't known for its repasts." He handed over a sack that weighed enough to be a week's rations.

"Add it to what I owe you," she said gruffly. "I'll earn it. Now get down and out of the way. I'll see you in a day or two."

She felt odd when Dawson brushed his knuckle under her chin, but Jamie attributed it to her empty stomach. He walked away without looking back, and she felt odd about that too. There seemed to be this big gaping hole where her middle used to be.

She climbed behind the boxes and pulled out a loaf of bread. She'd eat something first, and then she'd feel

better.

The wagon lurched off as she hungrily broke her fast. She couldn't keep Dawson Smith out of her mind, though. He must have been working too hard at taking care of those miners. There'd been a sadness to his eyes this morning that she hadn't seen before. But Dawson Smith had it all — she couldn't think of a thing that he could be sad about. Maybe one of his patients had died.

Once her hunger was satisfied, she settled down for the ride. The day was hot enough that she didn't mind the dampness of her clothes. She didn't look much like a boy today, but there was no one to see her. She didn't know what she was going to do when she reached the stage station, but that wouldn't be until nightfall. Maybe it would be dark enough to disguise her more feminine attributes.

She wasn't fond of the idea of having to continue to wear boy's clothes even after she got her new ones, but it looked to be unavoidable. Aside from the fact that she had to keep the gown clean, she really couldn't afford to wander around town parading herself as a lady. Everyone would know she worked at the saloon, and without a father or brother for protection, she would be even more vulnerable than she had been before. Unless she wanted to hide at the boardinghouse for the rest of her life, she'd have to hang on to her disguise — at least until she made enough money to go to San Francisco.

She reckoned that wouldn't take too long. She knew how to save every penny she made, and if she could operate as Dawson's blackjack dealer at night and as her usual self during the day, she could save money quickly. By this time next year she aimed to have a dozen fancy

gowns and be living where she could see the ocean.

Those dreams took her past noon, but the boredom of the ride gave way to serious doubts as the day wore on. She slept through a few of those hours, but by the time they stopped at the stage station Jamie was wondering if she wouldn't do better to go on into Denver and disappear.

She found she couldn't bring herself to do it. It wasn't that she'd miss Altona—the Colorado town meant nothing to her. She could turn her back on it in a minute. Dawson Smith was another matter entirely.

As she leapt from the back of the wagon with her food sack, Jamie decided she must be out of her everlovin' mind. Dawson Smith didn't care about her. She'd be just one more employee to bring him riches.

But she couldn't forget that look in his eyes this morning when he'd seen her off. She couldn't erase his casual touches. No one had ever bothered touching her before. No one had ever bothered trying to help her. Hell, no one had even taken the time to be kind. Except Dawson.

So she would go through with this farce and see what happened. What would it hurt? If it didn't work out, she'd come up with some other idea.

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Dawson arrived by noon the next day. Jamie suspected he had ridden all night after working all evening in the saloon. She took one look at him and sent him off to sleep in the bed she'd been renting at the station. He handed her his satchel and willingly collapsed into the cubicle behind the drawn curtain.

By the time he woke, Jamie had figured out most of

the various ribbons, buttons, and hooks on the froth of clothing and underwear he had brought. It had taken her quite a while to guess at the proper use for the "dress improver" that looked like half a petticoat with steel ribbing, but its purpose had dawned on her once she had the skirt in place and realized that the rear sagged. She hadn't been able to adjust the corset laces to make the bodice fit properly, though. As a result, she was having some difficulty fastening the gown. It still gaped open at the top.

But the gown had broad pink stripes up and down the skirt, interspersed with fine lines of green and medium stripes of ivory. Jamie had no idea what the material was, but it was so smooth and soft and shiny, she didn't much care whether it was satin or silk. The bodice was a soft green trimmed in tiny pink rosebuds, and the ivory lace at the throat would cover her modestly, if she could only get the hooks fastened. She would have given a year's wages for a mirror, but she could only fidget and admire the thin slippers and silk stockings on her toes while waiting for Dawson to wake.

The impatient rustle of stiff fabric eventually brought Dawson completely to his senses. Through the cubicle curtains he caught a glimpse of the fancy dress he'd had the seamstress hastily make up. There hadn't been time to create something at the height of fashion, but a kid Jamie's size didn't need all those extra lengths of fabric and ruffles draped over her. He pushed aside the curtains to sneak a peek.

He almost fell out of the bunk. He closed his eyes and opened them again to make certain he was awake. The vision didn't change any, and he didn't have enough imagination to conjure up the sight he was seeing — not

even in his dreams.

Dawson tried to concentrate on the absurdities. Her tangled mop of cinnamon curls wasn't exactly the elegant upswept coiffure he'd seen in Lulu's fashion plates. But, Lord, those eyes. Those long-lashed eyes had always been ridiculous for a boy, but she had kept them concealed most of the time behind that old hat brim. Now they were wide and excited and sparkling like rare emeralds, and they were very definitely feminine — so feminine that he was forced to ignore the tumble of curls.

He looked away from the scrubbed pink and ivory of her smooth cheeks and down to the bodice clasped inexpertly in delicate fingers. He didn't know why she hadn't fastened the bodice, but he could almost find the careless urchin in her half-dressed stance — if he squinted his eyes and ignored the obvious.

He gave up pretending when he saw it was futile. The urchin had breasts that would make Lulu green with envy, breasts that she could scarcely conceal given the state of her bodice, breasts that would give a man something to dream about for a lifetime. Not large, loose breasts, but round, full, young breasts that had probably never been touched.

Dawson groaned, rolled on his back, and covered his eyes. He was going to regret this. He could feel it in every aching part of his body. He liked women altogether too well. He liked the way they smelled, the way they rustled when they walked, their gentle voices and soft skin, the way they looked in silks and satins. He liked the way they looked in nothing at all. And he was suddenly thinking of how very lovely Jamie Mulligan would look in his bed.

That wasn't the worst of it. He faced that fact with

his eyes wide open. He'd had to face it every day of his life for these last seven years. Virgins and ladies and all self-respecting women with marriage on their minds were out of his reach. He could flirt with them, escort them about, be in their company and enjoy what he could see and smell, but he couldn't touch. He could only touch the women whose favors he had to pay for. Jamie fell in neither category, but it would be very easy to seduce her into the latter one.

He didn't think he was that kind of cad, but he knew every ounce of his self-control was about to be tested. Steeling himself, he threw his legs over the side of the bunk and stood up.

Jamie drew back in surprise, nearly losing her hold on the gown. Dawson thanked his foresight in providing her with a chemise to go under the corset or he would be looking straight down her front. Obviously, he'd overestimated his ability to judge a woman's size. No wonder she couldn't get the gown fastened.

He forced himself to inspect her coolly, nodding his head in approval and gesturing for her to turn around. "Let me help you with that," he said, without mentioning the intimate garment by name.

Jamie obediently swung around and Dawson grasped the corset laces and tugged. He had considerable experience in women's undergarments, both taking them off and putting them on ladies of pleasure, but he found himself singularly fumble-fingered right now. Jamie was more nervous than a frog in a frying pan, and she wriggled and jumped at every tug of the lace. He couldn't help but look to see how he was doing, and the more he looked, the more he wanted to look.

Muttering curses under his breath, he tied the laces



off as best he could, then jerked the bodice up where it belonged. He could tell as she fastened the front hooks that the seamstress had made it too small. No amount of corseting was going to help. He had meant to provide his new dealer with something modest and respectable, but there would be no disguising her considerable assets behind the tightness of the silk.

Jamie choked and protested as Dawson fastened the hook at the waist. "I'm going to suffocate in this!" she complained, whirling around and inspecting her finery. "Are you certain ladies go around like this all day? How in hell do they eat?"

That was the Jamie he knew. Stepping back to admire his handiwork, Dawson smiled. "Mind the language, Miss Mulligan. Dresses don't make the lady. If you want to keep those miners in line, you've got to impress them with your respectability." He shrugged wryly. "And it's my fault if the gown is too tight. I underestimated your size. You kept yourself very well-hidden."

Since he was looking at her breasts, Jamie had a good notion what he was talking about, and she blushed crimson. "Looks like I'd do better to keep myself hidden," she answered curtly. "Go on out and I'll change. The stage doesn't come through until morning."

She was right, but temptation wasn't easy to resist. They were out here in the middle of nowhere with only the stationmaster as chaperone, and he was no doubt in the stable mucking out stalls. Jamie was glaring at him through suspicious eyes, but Dawson knew her well enough to know what would happen if he touched her. She was a kindred soul if he'd ever met one. They'd been drawn to each other from the start, although at the time there hadn't been this sexual discovery between them.

His discovery, not hers — not yet.

Sighing, he took her advice and walked out. He was much too aware of how vulnerable she was right now. He could wait a while, give her time to recover her usual aplomb. When she was ready to fight back, then he would think about her as a woman.

Such noble denial was going to be a damned sight more difficult than he had anticipated, Dawson discovered a short time later when Jamie reappeared wearing her urchin's clothes. The overalls and overlarge shirt might as well be invisible for all he could tell. He knew every curve hidden beneath them, and he found it difficult not to touch her to confirm what was there and what wasn't. The way she wouldn't look at him, he suspected she felt something similar.

"Are you going to be all right here another night?" he asked, staring off at the setting sun. "Or do you want me to stay and keep you company?"

She sat on the front stoop and wrapped her arms around her bent knees. "I'll be fine. You're the one who hasn't had enough sleep."

She didn't go into detail. She didn't need to. She was worried about him making that long ride in the dark, and about what would happen if he stayed here with her. Dawson found her concern rather touching.

"I want to be there to greet you when you arrive in all your finery. Do you think you'll be able to fasten those hooks now that the undergarments are properly adjusted?" He didn't look to see if she blushed at his casual reference.

"I can do it," she replied stiffly.

Dawson couldn't resist. He turned and lifted her chin up so he could see her eyes. "I wager you can do

anything you put your mind to, Miss Mulligan. I'll be on my way, then. Ol' Paint can get me home in the dark even if I fall asleep."

"*Ol' Paint*," she snorted. "There's nothing old about that animal of yours, and it certainly isn't a paint. Why do you call it that?"

"Why do you call yourself Jamie when your name is Jamaica? I understand Jamaica is a beautiful tropical isle. It suits you." He held her chin, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and walked off whistling.

Jamie contemplated murder again, but strangulation was her weapon of choice this time. She wanted to wrap her hands firmly around his neck. She just didn't think she'd get around to choking him if she did.

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Jamie returned to Altona just before sundown the next evening. She stepped off the stage in all her finery, wearing lace gloves and a feather in her hat and smiling demurely when men stopped to whip off their own hats and stare. Dawson was there to meet her, as promised, and she took his arm just as she had seen Gloria Jean and his other ladies do.

She was surprised at how much she had learned just from watching him with the other ladies in town. When he bent toward her with that knowing smile of his and a small quip, she spread her fan and hid her answering smile behind it. When he introduced her to men she had known all her life, she fluttered the fan, and said her "how-do-you-do's" in a soft voice that made them lean closer. They never knew what hit them.

It was a powerful feeling, and she could get really carried away on it. She swept triumphantly into the sa-

loon on Dawson's arm and watched chins drop all over the room. She hadn't had an opportunity to see herself yet, but she must make an acceptable female or they wouldn't be looking at her that way. Of course, the way Dawson had looked at her the day before had given her all the confidence she needed in that direction. He was a connoisseur of women, and even he'd had a time looking at her.

She figured it must be her figure that made the difference. The rest of her hadn't changed, except that now she was cleaner, and her hair was swept into a soft twist. The gown was too tight and probably too revealing, so that attracted as much attention as anything. She wasn't going to become vain or anything over all this ruckus; new women around here were always made much of. She just liked knowing she could be accepted as a woman like the others.

Jamie worked the tables that night under Dawson's careful scrutiny. The men were so eager for a chance to meet the lovely young woman Dawson introduced as Jamaica that there was soon a waiting line. They behaved themselves for the most part. Jamie minded what Dawson had told her and played the part of very proper lady, and the men responded accordingly. It wasn't until later, when some of them got a little drunk, that they began to make unwarranted overtures.

At the first questionable remark, Jamie raised her hand in the air and snapped her fingers. Cookie immediately appeared at her side, and she pointed out the culprit. He was unceremoniously removed from the saloon. That quieted the remainder of her admirers for awhile.

When Cookie was otherwise occupied, a drunken

cowboy tried to get a little more personal, reaching for her chest. Dawson silently appeared behind him and grabbed the man by the collar. When the cowboy protested, Dawson jerked the man around and slammed his fist into his captive's stomach. The crowd grew quiet, but before the man could get to his feet, Cookie appeared. Dawson and his bartender carried the cowboy into the street and heaved him.

It was late and Jamie was getting tired of the tension, but she continued smiling and playing until Dawson came back and put a hand on her shoulder. She gave him a questioning look, and he gestured with his head.

"You've done enough for tonight. Let's get you out of here."

She rose quietly, her heart pounding. She didn't know why it was suddenly galloping like a runaway horse. She just let Dawson slip his hand around her waist and lead her away. With a small gasp, she realized having his arm around her waist wasn't at all the same as resting her hand in the crook of his elbow. She felt like a nervous fool as he took her out the front door.

"Where are we going?" she whispered once they were outside.

"I'm going to escort you to the boardinghouse. I don't want to give any of those jackasses ideas by letting you go alone."

She didn't want to be giving Dawson ideas, either, but it seemed rather vain to assume that he might have any. She held her tongue on that subject. Dawson praised her performance, and Jamie let the first real compliments she had ever received wrap warmly around her. The night's tension slowly evaporated as they traversed the dark streets together, the only sounds their own quiet

conversation as they walked.

He stopped at the front door of the boarding house. Smiling faintly, he kissed her hand, and left her to go to her room alone — except for the butterflies accompanying her in her stomach.

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"We're going to have to get you a new dress," Dawson said grimly as Cookie hauled off his blackjack dealer's latest would-be lover.

Jamie was in the kitchen, sipping coffee, when he made this announcement, and she looked at him with surprise. Then she glanced down at her gown. It was the same one she'd worn for six weeks. It hadn't changed any, and she'd been very careful with it, sponging it clean each night. She looked back at him questioningly.

"Don't stand there looking so damned innocent. I'm going to commission a dress that covers you to your ears. I can't take much more of this." Dawson paced restlessly around the kitchen, shoving chairs and crates out of the way. The outward appearance of the room hadn't changed much in the last six weeks, but mysterious changes had been occurring behind the scenes. He'd looked in the pantry several times this past week and had found edible food in it instead of a hodgepodge of empty tins and unlabeled bottles. He didn't have to look far to find the culprit.

At his words, Jamie grew teary-eyed, but she hugged her precious gown and threw back his words with her own growls. "I'm not paying for any more dresses, Dawson Lee Smith! I like this one." She ruined the performance by finishing in a whisper, "I'm doing a good job, aren't I?"

She might as well have stabbed him through the heart. If he had learned anything at all these past weeks,

it was that Jamie Mulligan could be tough as nails when she had to be, but soft as a creampuff if he so much as offered a harsh word. He'd yelled at her once, and she'd yelled back, left the saloon like an outraged alley cat, and started weeping the minute she'd hit the street. He'd been careful not to repeat that performance.

But he was damned tired of seeing filthy miners pawing her, smarmy gamblers eyeing her, and the rest of the riffraff around here treating her as if she were their own. It seemed every man in town assumed the right to handle her but himself. Knowing full well the source of his frustration, Dawson groaned inwardly, tipped her chin, and wiped her tears with his handkerchief.

"I'll let you choose the gown," he murmured. "You shouldn't have to pay for one that doesn't fit right. Just please, for my sake, pick one with a high neck."

He was so close, Jamie couldn't even manage a nod. All she could do was stare up into his eyes until he released her. It wasn't butterflies in her stomach anymore, it was a herd of elephants stampeding around, threatening to crush her to death every time she got this close to Dawson Smith. She stepped away hastily when he let her go.

"I'll walk you home now. I think we've both had enough for one night." He offered his arm and Jamie took it, fully aware the elephants would return as soon as she touched him. She didn't know what was wrong with her, but she knew Dawson was the cause.

They slipped out the back entrance, away from the noise and garish lights of the front. Jamie liked these moments when they could walk in peace, discussing the evening's events. She could always make Dawson laugh, even when he was looking his saddest. But when he

scolded her and offered to pay her more money if she wouldn't roam the streets running errands in her boy's clothes, she managed to refuse him. It was a matter of pride. She wasn't going to live off him, and when he finally found the woman he wanted, she was going to have a fortune to carry away with her. The amount she had saved already seemed like a fortune.

They were too tired to have much to say this night. Dawson kept his hand protectively at her back, but they both knew she was as sure-footed on these rough boards during the night as she was during the day. The rowdy noise from the saloon must have disguised the footsteps coming up behind them.

"Here he is, Jack! I've got him." The gun butt came swinging down toward Dawson's head before he could completely dodge it.

It glanced off his temple and slammed into his shoulder, and he staggered sideways, groaning. Jamie let out a full-blooded shriek that should have woken the dead, but the second man already had his arm wrapped around her waist, jerking her from her feet.

Jamie continued shrieking as he wrestled with her, trying to cover her mouth while holding her flailing arms and legs. Dawson almost laughed, but he was too furious. He came up out of his wounded crouch with both fists swinging. One connected soundly with the jawbone of the man who had struck him, but the other missed its target as his victim stepped sideways and returned the punch. As he bent double with the pain, Dawson cursed himself for not having seen it coming.

"Bill, help me with this she-wolf! You're the one who wants her. Come and get her." The man holding Jamie wrapped his arm around her throat and jerked her chin upward. She responded by bringing her head back



so fast that it smashed his nose. He yelped, and she kicked backward, hitting his shins with her high heels.

The man called Bill seemed intent on finishing off Dawson first, but at his partner's howl of pain, he stood up and moved toward Jamie. He couldn't see her smile of triumph as he approached, but he heard her war cry when he reached for her and she released a swift kick. Held off her feet as she was, she was just the right height to strike him where it hurt most. Bill crumpled with a howl of agony.

On the ground behind him, Dawson jerked his derringer from his boot. Slamming his shoulders against the back of Bill's legs as he bent in pain, he toppled his attacker and aimed the derringer at his accomplice.

"I'd drop Miss Jamaica now, if I were you. She's not big enough to shield all of you, and I learned to shoot at my mama's knee."

Dawson heard Jamie's gown tear as the fool at his feet lunged and caught her skirt at the same time that the other man let her down. She gave a cry of half-distress, half-fury and turned to kick the man who had torn her precious gown. As her shoe connected with Bill's face, Dawson decided he was going to have to see to it that the sheriff licensed her feet as lethal weapons. The jerk should have got off his knees before he grabbed for her.

Jamie's screams must have finally penetrated the noise in the saloon. A herd of men stumbled out the front door, hands on their revolvers, and even the sheriff wandered over from his office to see what was going on. Dawson shoved his knee in the back of the man on the ground and let his customers chase after the one fleeing down the street.

"I'm going to put a bullet through your head if you

ever try this stunt again," he warned his captive. The man struggled, but the derringer shoved to his temple held him still long enough for the sheriff to grab his arms.

Dawson jumped to his feet as soon as the sheriff had a handle on Bill. His gaze instantly swung in search of Jamie, but Cookie and Lulu were leading her back into the saloon. Heart pounding in his ears, he watched her until she was safely out of sight, then set about cleaning up the evening's fiasco. He had to get his thinking straight before he went after her.

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Dawson stared at the door to the room he kept above the saloon. Lulu had told him where to find Jamie, but he was half afraid he'd open the door and find her gone. The other half was afraid that he would find her waiting. Squeezing his eyes shut, he knocked, then quickly threw open the door.

When he opened them again, she was there, perched on the edge of the bed, staring at something she held in her hands. She scarcely looked up when he entered. The lace on her bodice was ripped, revealing more of the shadows between her breasts than was good for his well-being. He could see her white petticoat through the tear between the silk skirt and the bodice. The gown could possibly be repaired, but he doubted if Jamie knew how to do it. She wasn't even attempting to piece it back together.

Her curls had grown longer and drooped in ringlets around her neck now. He had to will his hand to his side to keep from touching one. "Are you all right?"

She shrugged and slid whatever was in her hands beneath her skirt as she glanced up at him. "I'm fine. I'd better go."

Dawson straightened his shoulders beneath his coat and winced. She looked at him curiously but didn't offer to help him off with his coat or see to his injury.

"Physician, heal thyself," seemed to be her attitude. He acknowledged the appropriateness of the platitude. His physical injuries weren't precisely what he had in mind for healing, though.

He eased the coat off. "I don't think it would be a good idea for you to go back out there tonight. The sheriff has Bill locked up, but he's got three brothers still roaming the street, and they're probably all as drunk and surly as Bill. You're better off staying here."

"I don't think so." She stood up, palming the object she kept hidden.

When she crossed the room to his dresser, Dawson followed her. He didn't bother to see what she was returning to the Bible he kept there. He'd had about all he could stand for one night. He'd had about all he could stand for six weeks. He caught her shoulders and swung her around.

Jamie gasped a little when Dawson's mouth finally came down on hers. She'd dreamed about what it would be like, but dreams couldn't match the reality. It wasn't just the kiss. His lips were warm and hard and demanding and joy rose in her soul at their touch, but it was all the other little things that made her want to weep with happiness and need and terror. His fingers on her shoulders were long, fine-boned, and so very gentle that they were more caress than possessive hold. In waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, he was more blatantly male than she'd ever known him, and her hands tentatively came up to rest against his chest. She could smell the faint scents of sweat and cigar smoke and whisky; being this close to

him made her head swoon. His fingers were pressing more intimately into her now, pulling her closer as his mouth demanded things she was all too willing to give. She gave a small, lost cry and pulled her mouth away.

Dawson didn't let her go but pressed her head into his shoulder. She stood there shivering in all her ruined finery, letting him hold her. She couldn't imagine being anywhere else in this world right now, but then, she wasn't thinking any further than the arms holding her tight.

"I'm sorry, Jamie. I didn't mean for things to happen this way. I meant to take care of you. I meant to do the honorable thing for once in my life, but I can't remember why right now."

His hand stroked her hair, and she leaned into him, not wanting to see his face. She knew she'd see pain there, and she didn't want to cause him pain.

"It's all right, Dawson. You don't have to be honorable around me. I'm not much of a lady," she admitted.

Above her head, he chuckled. "You're better than a lady. I don't think there's another like you in the whole wide world. When I came out here, I thought all ladies smelled sweet and wore silks and never argued. It took me a little while to realize all women who smell sweet aren't ladies. I went through a spell when I decided ladies didn't exist except in my imagination, but now I know better." He lifted her chin up and kissed her nose. "If virtue makes a lady, you're a lady, little one. But I've decided I like ladies who can kick like a mule and scream like a rooster better than those weak kinds who sit on verandas and sip lemonade."

Her smile wavered slightly as she tried to push away. "You're a nice man, Dawson, even if you are a little strange. I'd better go now."

He released her but made no move to escort her out. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his dark hair falling across his brow, and watched her through shadowed eyes. "I don't want you to go, Jamie," he replied, almost angrily, as if she had forced the words from him. "If I were a free man, I'd do whatever it took to make you stay."

Realizing what he'd said, he turned on his heel and walked toward the door, his head bowed. "I'll call Cookie to walk you home."

Jamie stayed where she was, staring at him. "I think you'd better explain, Dawson. I'm not a kid anymore. You can't say things like that and expect me to just leave."

Yes, he could. He rested his forehead against the door, battling with his better self. He ought to tell her to get out and stay out, but he knew he'd hurt her if he did that. He couldn't bear to hurt her. But he'd hurt her worse if she stayed.

Cursing, he swung around and glared at her. "You're not a kid, but you're an innocent. You deserve a chance at a good home, a husband and family. I can't give you that. It was a mistake for me to think you could stay here. I'll have Cookie post guards at the boardinghouse."

Jamie crossed her arms and sat down on the bed. "I never pegged you for the marrying kind anyway, Dawson. If you had been, you could have married one of those rich ladies you're always out with."

Dawson looked at her with bewilderment and amusement. Jamie was good at provoking that kind of confusion. "I wouldn't marry any of them if they were gift-wrapped and handed to me. They're no different from the wife I already have."

She looked as if she'd been socked in the stomach,

as she had every right to do. Dawson ran his hands through his hair and tried to ease the awkwardness. "You're the kind of woman I'd have now, if I had a choice. I want someone who would stand beside me even when I'm making a damned fool of myself. I want someone strong enough to keep on going even when the odds are against them. You're the only woman I've ever met like that, Jamie. I just met you ten years too late."

She gave him a considering look, then crossed her legs under her and made herself comfortable. "Are you really saying you'd marry me if you weren't already married? That's quite a line, Dawson."

He shrugged and leaned his shoulders against the door. "I've never used it before, if it is. For the first time in my life, I'm even considering what it would take to get a divorce." He paused, then continued in a quiet voice. "Would you marry a divorced man, Jamie?"

She wrapped a curl around her finger. "The way I look at it, a piece of paper isn't going to keep a man if he wants to roam. You've proved that already. Is that your wife in the picture?" She nodded in the direction of the Bible on his dresser.

He scowled. "You shouldn't be going through my things."

"That's the only reading material you've got in here, Dawson. What did you expect me to do while I waited?"

He crossed the room and shook the Bible until the picture tumbled out from its hiding place. He glanced at it and handed it to her. "That's my wife. I had it taken a month after we'd been married."

Jamie ran her finger over the lovely curves of the woman's face. "She's pretty." She held the picture closer to the light and frowned. Then she glanced back to Dawson.

"Is your name really Smith?"

He blinked, then grabbed the picture away. He turned it over. There wasn't any indication of a name anywhere on it. Irritated, he threw it back on the dresser.

"What does it matter?"

Jamie shrugged in an unladylike manner and nibbled on the curl wrapped around her finger. "Just thought it would be nice to know the name I might have had."

"You're nuts." He crossed the room to keep from sitting beside her. "The name is Mallory, Dawson Mallory."

Jamie shut her eyes and swayed slightly where she sat. He looked at her with concern but didn't dare reach out to grab her. He knew where that would lead. He wished she would get off the damned bed.

"I don't suppose your wife's name is Laura, is it?"

He shook his head in disbelief. "You know my wife?"

"Nope." Her eyes flew open and she stared at him. The green of her eyes wasn't glittering. "You know I told you once that I could probably have my father hanged if I wanted?"

"That was just talk. You were mad. I didn't take notice."

She snorted inelegantly. "You should have. I've got one brother in jail for armed robbery and another with a warrant over his head. You didn't really think they turned bad all on their own, did you?"

"It never made any difference to me. I was just concerned about how you kept those big louts under control, but you wouldn't let me close enough to do anything about it."

"You'd better take a seat, Mallory." She pointed at his desk chair. "You're not going to like what I have to tell you." He narrowed his eyes but obligingly straddled the chair, pulling it directly in front of her.

As if suddenly struck by a new thought, she tilted her head. "Why did you leave your wife?"

"I had a run-in with a lynch crowd, cut the man down. They took objection to my interfering and I had to shoot a couple of them. I'd been wanting out for some time. Mississippi isn't what it used to be. I couldn't stand to see what was happening there. I asked Laura to come with me. She refused." He jerked off his tie and threw it on his coat. "I didn't exactly leave her. She just refused to accompany me. I've been sending her money every month, so she can't say I've deserted her. That's one of the reasons I started this saloon. I couldn't send her the chickens and jam I got as payment for my physician's services. I thought maybe if she thought I was well off, she'd come join me."

"Laura." Jamie looked sadly at her fingers. "Did you love her very much?"

"Come on, Jamie, let's get on with this. If you've got something to say, then say it. I married Laura while I was still in school, when I still thought ladies smelled sweet and didn't differentiate much among them. I would have been content if things had gone as planned. I can't say that I loved her. I didn't even know what the word meant."

She stiffened her shoulders and met his eye. "She's dead."

He didn't flinch. "She can't be. The money I send her has to go somewhere. My sister would have told . . ." He looked momentarily sick and watched Jamie closer. "She



lives with my sister in the house we inherited from our parents. My sister writes. Laura seldom did."

"You'd better send someone to get the Bible from my room," she said softly.

Dawson shoved the chair back so abruptly that it fell over. He called to one of his men downstairs, gave him curt orders, then slammed the door shut and righted the chair, sitting back down again. "Give it to me now, Jamie."

"You're not going to like it," she repeated, watching him carefully.

"I'm not liking what I'm suffering right now. If you don't tell me, I'm going to truss you up and throw you on the stage with me and we're going back to Mississippi to get the whole story."

"You'll not find her there. She's buried under a rock by that old cave down the mountain." When his eyes looked a little wild, she hurried to add, "She died of snakebite."

"I'm going to strangle you, Jamie," he said slowly, enunciating each word clearly. "Now give it to me straight."

She gave him an angry look. "I'm trying. It's not as if I'm used to telling these kind of things. My father tried stage-robbing a few years back. He thought it would be easier to get his pay direct from the cash box, I guess, but he never caught the stage with the mine payroll. I didn't know what he was doing until he came back one time all liquored up and blabbed the whole story to my brother. When he passed out, I snuck in and searched his clothes, but all I found was a letter and a locket. I hid them in my mother's Bible."

Dawson waited without speaking. Jamie sighed and

tried again. "When he stopped the stage and found there wasn't any payroll, he made the passengers cough up their cash. There were only two, a man and a woman. The man protested and my father said he knocked him over the head. Neither of the passengers had much money, but . . ." She tried not to look at Dawson. "He thought he could make some use of the woman. He sent the stage on and carried her up to the cave, but she got bit when he lowered her from his horse."

Dawson buried his head in his folded arms. "My God, she actually came to me. How long ago?" Then realizing how he'd allowed his hopes and despair to overcome common sense, he looked up and scowled. "How do you know it was Laura?"

"Three, four years ago," she said, answering his questions in order, "and her name was on the letter. So was yours. And the locket is the same as the one in that picture of yours. I didn't see her, but the letter tells it all. I used to keep wondering who poor Lee Mallory might be. I never put it all together until I saw that picture tonight. She didn't call you Dawson."

He shook his head, disbelief still apparent in his expression. "She never liked the name. She always called me Lee. What did the letter say?"

Jamie sighed and knit her fingers together. "Maybe you ought to wait and read it yourself. I always wondered what happened to the man who was with her. You'd think he'd have yelled his head off and sent out a search party once he got back to town."

Dawson's face changed to stone. "The man who was with her?"

She gave him a disgruntled look. "I told you, there was a man with her. My father knocked him out. My

father was worried he'd be recognized and laid low for some while after."

Dawson frowned but a knock at the door signaled the return of his messenger. He got up, opened the door enough to take the book from the man's hand, then shut it firmly again. He stared at the worn black Bible as if it were a snake, then riffled through it until he found the letter. He looked up, waiting for Jamie to explain the missing locket.

"There's a pocket in the front. It's in that."

When he pulled the chain out of the small pocket on the inside front cover, an expression of resignation crossed his face. "It was my mother's. I gave it to Laura the day we married." He snapped it open. "She used to keep my picture and a lock of my hair in here." He rubbed his thumb over the empty place where the picture should be. "I guess she didn't want to remember what I looked like."

He slipped the locket in his vest pocket and opened up the letter.

From across the room, Jamie said, "She carried that in her purse. My father was rather upset that it wasn't folding money."

The sad expression returned briefly as Dawson glanced down at the familiar handwriting on the yellowing page. His look turned wry as he began to read. When he looked up again, there was a trace of bitterness twisting his mouth.

"The only thing that brought her out here was a divorce. The man with her was an old friend from back in Mississippi. No wonder he didn't hang around to see what happened to Laura. He figured I'd shoot him if I found out what happened."

"Her taste in men sure didn't improve over the years." Jamie unfolded her legs and started toward the door. "I'll have Cookie see me back to the boardinghouse."

Dawson swung around and slammed his shoulder to the door before she could reach for the knob. Jamie couldn't read his expression so easily this time, and she lowered her eyes. His black waistcoat fell open to reveal the wrinkled creases of his shirt, creases she had made when he'd held her. Staring at the broad expanse of his chest didn't help any. She didn't know where else to look.

"I don't have a wife," he said flatly, speaking to the top of her head.

"I'll go with you, show you where the cave is, if you want. I know where to get some flowers to put on the grave." She'd never felt so nervous in all her life; she wasn't the nervous type. She'd have died of it if she had been. But she didn't know what was going through Dawson's head right now, and she didn't want to admit to what was going through her own.

"I know where the cave is. I suppose I better write my sister and tell the scheming witch what happened to Laura. She probably thinks Laura just decided to take off without bothering over the divorce."

He didn't move one way or the other, and Jamie didn't either. "It probably takes a lot of money to keep up the house back there," she whispered. "There's not a lot of ways women can make money."

Dawson grunted and finally reached out to touch her curls. "You're probably right. But she should have told me instead of keeping me thinking I was still married."

Jamie shrugged. "She didn't know any different."

"You're not going to let me throw a tantrum, are

you? I can't kill a dead man for killing my wife. I can't strangle my sister for taking my money. I could go after my ex-friend and beat him into a pulp for not going back to look for Laura, but he's not worth the effort. What am I supposed to do now, Jamie?"

She finally lifted her eyes to meet his. She saw sadness there, and loneliness, and a tenderness that made her heart ache. "Go ask Gloria Jean to marry you, I guess. Her daddy's got a big, fine house. You won't even have to build your own."

His lips tilted slightly at one corner. "Gloria Jean would drive me to drink after more than two hours straight in her company. I told you, I've learned better than that."

The look he gave her burned a path straight through her center, and Jamie had to look away. "You can tell your sister to move out here if she wants a house, then sell the one in Mississippi. That way you can keep your money and she can look after you."

Dawson leaned both shoulders against the door and crossed his arms complacently over his chest. "I can look after myself, thank you. If I go back to being a physician, I'll have all the chickens and jam I can eat. My sister can sell the damned house and do the same. I want a woman in my bed as well as my kitchen. I don't think my sister will suit."

Jamie backed away slightly but kept her gaze fixed on his face. "You told me I was too innocent. You'd have to get Lulu if you wanted a woman in bed as well as your kitchen."

He gave her a horrified look. "Lulu? Do you hate me that much?"

"I don't hate you. Don't look at me like that,

Dawson. You know damned well I'd do anything for you. Don't go rubbing it in."

His look now was of self-satisfaction. "Then you'll marry me."

"Marry you?" It was Jamie's turn to look horrified. "I just told you my father was a stage-robber and my brothers worse, and you want me to marry you? That's a lot of bull-malarkey, Dawson Lee Mallory. What a fine family tree that would make. How many murderers, thieves, and cheats do you have on your side?"

Dawson's eyebrows flew to his hairline, and he moved so quickly from the door that Jamie wasn't prepared. He swept her off the floor, threw her down on the bed, and sprawled next to her, pinning her with one strong arm before she could jump up again. He kissed her mouth before she could open it to protest, then traced a path of kisses along her jaw after she went too limp to fight. She stirred restlessly beneath him, needing something she couldn't put a name to, but he didn't enlighten her immediately.

"Didn't your mama keep a family record in her Bible?" he whispered against her ear when he reached it.

By this time, she was trying to squirm away. His hand drifted to her barely covered breast and teased lightly along the curve. Jamie stiffened but couldn't move. It felt too good. She'd never known his touch could feel so good. A flame ignited in her lower abdomen. As if he knew, Dawson laid a torch to the kindling by moving his thumb gently across the silk over her nipple.

She struggled to remember his question and managed a whimpering, "Yes."

"And didn't it name your daddy?" he asked softly, watching her face now as his fingers played their dan-

gerous game.

She couldn't frown like she wanted. Her eyes were too wide with the wonder of the sensations he was creating inside her. But when she didn't answer, he stopped expectantly, waiting for her reply.

"It just gave the day I was born, right after the date she married her first husband and the day he died." She couldn't follow the line of his thoughts, couldn't follow any thoughts at all. She wanted him to touch her like that again.

Dawson shook his head and nibbled on her lips again. "Damn fool women. They haven't got a lick of sense. She didn't even put the date in when she married Mulligan?" When Jamie shook her head, he turned his attention to where his hand was pushing aside the torn lace of her gown. He parted it to reveal the firm, full curve of her breast, then unhooked the top fastening of her corset so he could slide his hand inside and untie her chemise.

Jamie gasped, then sighed and closed her eyes as he rubbed his finger over her nakedness. She wasn't even going to fight him. Dawson shook his head in mock dismay and pressed a kiss to the lovely valley the torn gown revealed. Then he covered her again and looked down at her face.

"Remember the day you first saw me, when I pulled out your file from the old doc's office?"

Jamie nodded, keeping her eyes closed.

"I read that file. Your mother went to see the old doc when she first came to town. When she arrived here she was already pregnant. She got here to find her husband was dead, and she was carrying his child. She had no money, no place to stay, and she did what any sensible

woman would do to protect her unborn child. She married the first decent man who asked. She just didn't know Mulligan well enough to know he wasn't what he seemed. Your name may be Mulligan because you were born after they were married, but your father was named Gregory Latimer. You're not any blood relation to those scoundrels you grew up calling father and brothers."

Jamie's eyes popped open. "I'm not a Mulligan?"

"Honey, do you think you ever looked like a Mulligan?"

She shook her head slowly, her eyes still wide with wonder. "I never got big," she murmured.

He gave a laugh. "And they never got pretty. Did anyone ever tell you that you've got the biggest, prettiest green eyes this world has ever seen?"

Jamie shook her head again. This time, her gaze was completely focused on the marvelous man leaning over her. He wasn't touching her breast anymore. He was caressing the line of her jaw, but the look in his eyes was enough to keep the fire inside her alive and growing. He looked as if he wanted to devour her. He looked as if he wanted to love her. He took her breath away.

"I'll tell you every day of our lives if you'll consent to marry me, Jamaica Latimer. Tell me yes, and I may find the strength to let you get away long enough for me to find a preacher."

Jamaica Latimer. She savored the sound. It was almost as good as her new gown. Not as good as Jamaica Mallory. She couldn't believe he meant it. "You could marry anybody," she whispered.

"I don't want to marry just anybody." Dawson's hand teasingly returned to the torn lace. "I want to marry a five-foot warrior who will fight me every inch of the



way when I'm wrong and stand behind me every mile when I'm right. I want to marry a lady who knows how to make those ignorant louts out there behave. I want a woman who squirms under me when I touch her." His hand cupped her breast, and she arched upward, offering herself. Daringly, he took a sip of the nectar offered, and almost forgot where he was. Forcing himself away, he looked down at her with a distinct glitter in his eye. "I want a woman willing to carry my baby, and if you don't say yes pretty soon, you could be doing that without benefit of my name."

Jamie blushed and tried half-heartedly to pull away. "You don't love me, Dawson Lee. You're only supposed to marry people you love."

"Damnation, woman," he growled near her ear. "What do you think I've been trying to tell you half the night? It's not as if you're giving me much encouragement. I love you, Pint-size. Now will you marry me?"

Jamie gave him a considering look, then drew an assessing gaze down the length of the powerful body half covering her before returning to his face. "I think I can manage to keep loving a man too big for his britches, if he can keep those britches on except when he's with me."

He rubbed his "britches" knowingly against her hip. "I can manage that real well, I expect. Can you manage cooking something besides biscuits?"

"Just keep the fire hot, Dr. Mallory," she murmured, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down to her.

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The wedding was held in the saloon at noon the next day, and no one was surprised at the two main participants. There was some consternation, however,

when the groom called his bride "Jamie" and the bride referred to her newly wedded husband as "Dr. Mallory," but identities were ephemeral things and the case of champagne that appeared after the ceremony was not. All concerned indulged the newlyweds and called them by their new names while helping them drink their wine.

It wasn't until nine months later when the first child was born and called Jamie Mulligan Mallory that people went around with stunned looks and wondered if the youngest Mulligan boy could really ... ?

They looked at the beautiful young mother garbed in satins and lace, remembered the urchin in dirt and rags, glanced at the ecstatically handsome father, and shook their heads. It couldn't be.

## A Golden Crocus

Illinois, 1885

*My dearest sister,*

*In only a matter of days I will be able to see your loving face again. You do not know how I long to hear your sweet voice. You are the home I no longer have, and I long for your company. Are these words too strong for the affection I feel has grown between us this past year? Your letters have given me the strength to excel and succeed as I have never done in the past, and I am about to reap the rewards of my endeavors. I hope you will share in my happiness.*

*Do you have any idea how strong an influence you have become on my behavior? Whenever I think to stray, I need to only ask myself, "What would my angel think of me should she discover my failings?" and my feet are turned to the paths of righteousness once more. You are all that is good and modest. Your letters remind me of my duties with such quiet rectitude that I cannot fail to heed them. I cannot wish to think what would have happened to me in this year past had I not your memory to keep me strong.*

"Sister?" Lorna exclaimed in disgust, throwing the letter to the bed without reading more of it. "He calls you sister? I have never seen such self-serving, fatuous idiocy in all my born days. No wonder he is a lawyer."

Elizabeth looked at her flamboyant cousin, then carefully refolded the letter, smoothed the wrinkles, and pressed it back into the box containing several

more packets of similar missives. "We cannot all be as you are, Lorna. I am not good at revealing myself to others, but I had hopes . . ." She looked troubled as she closed the box and tucked it away in her lingerie drawer. "We have exchanged such intimate thoughts with each other. That is why he calls me sister. It is as if we have known each other all our lives. No one knows more of me than Richard."

Lorna looked amused. "I don't suppose he has so much as held your hand, if all you have done is exchange letters?"

Elizabeth fidgeted with the cameo brooch pinned to the high collar of her gown. "Of course not. We had only just met when he had to return to Chicago. He promised to write and tell me how he fared in his new position. We have so very much in common, our understanding was spontaneous. Surely that must count for something?"

Lorna gathered up the sheafs of paper she had been working on earlier. "You refine too much on a meeting of the minds. I number countless men among my correspondents, but I do not think of them in terms of undying affection merely because we are agreed on many subjects."

Looking vaguely rebellious, Elizabeth straightened the various bottles adorning her dressing table. "But we are not like you. I am not in the least worldly, and Richard admires that. He believes a woman's place is in the home, that women are the moral guardians of men, and simply because of their greater strengths, men are meant to go out into the world to protect and defend us. And I feel he is right. What you do is unfeminine and dangerous. I am terribly afraid for you, Lorna."

Lorna shoved her sheafs of paper into a leather carrying case and shook her head. "You are changing the subject, Elizabeth. We have discussed my 'dangerous'

occupation on too many occasions for there to be any point in rehashing it now. The subject here is your reading something into this man's letters that is not there. He calls you 'sister,' not 'sweetheart.' Do not pin your hopes on his proposing to you when he arrives. Personally, I would fly in the other direction if any man spouting such nonsense came toward me, but that is your affair. I just do not wish you to get hurt by hoping for what does not exist."

"You did not read the letter carefully." Clearly mutinous now, Elizabeth slammed a perfume bottle into place. "One does not use words like 'loving' and 'sweet' with a sister. It is just difficult to express another level of affection when we have barely been in each other's company. By calling me 'sister,' he acknowledges that we have gone beyond being just friends."

Lorna shrugged, checked the draping of material over her bustle in the mirror, and reached for her hat. "For your sake, I hope you are right." She gave her usually serene cousin's mulish expression a look of concern. "But I wish that you had kept your heart out of this until you know your affections are returned."

The rebelliousness disappeared, replaced by a pleasant smile as Elizabeth stood and hugged her stylish cousin. "You play the part of hard-hearted lady journalist very well, but I know you love me as I do you. I do not mind that in your search to imitate men, you must hide your feelings as they do."

Lorna gave her cousin a quick hug. "We all have different ways of expressing affection, I suppose. Mine is by forgiving you your misunderstanding. Do not let your parents wait up for me this evening. I am likely to be quite late."

Elizabeth stepped back and shook her head with

concern. "I hope you will have someone trustworthy with you. You may consider Illinois a bastion of rural safety, but you are stirring up a lot of trouble with your city thinking."

Lorna adjusted her hat and picked up her carrying case. "Terence will be with me, but I don't fear your angry farmers, dear. It is their wives for whom you need feel concern. They are going to have a hard time of it when they try to rise above their years of oppression."

She sailed out of the room, leaving Elizabeth to shake her head in dismay. She did not share Lorna's views on the rights of women, but she felt more sorry for her cousin than angry with her. Women were not equipped to deal with the harsh realities of the world. They were too frail physically and emotionally to go out and do battle every day. The strain of doing so was beginning to tell on Lorna. The laughing cousin she remembered from years past was rapidly turning into a brittle woman, too caught up in her crusade to ever know the kinder pleasures of love and home. Elizabeth wouldn't exchange places with her for the world.

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Richard nervously fiddled with the knot in his tie, ran afoul of his tie pin, gave it up and reached for his top hat. His long wool overcoat fell open to reveal his double-breasted waistcoat beneath, but he gave his image in the mirror only a casual glance. He already knew he dressed with a level of sophistication unknown in this small, rural town. He hoped it would impress and not repel the woman he had come to court. The intelligence of her letters led him to believe that she would be open-minded in her opinions.

Still, he was nervous, and he wasn't fond of the

feeling. He could face a courtroom full of hostile faces and overcome their opinions without a qualm, but the idea of facing one lone woman had him pacing. He wasn't certain why this was so, and that unnerved him more.

He had said nothing to express his hopes in his letters. It had been a year since he had seen Elizabeth. He could very well have idealized her image. But her letters had kept her refreshing innocence and captivating intelligence in his mind ever since. She was all that was modest and pure, while still exciting his heart and soul. He was eager to know her better, to learn if she could possibly share his need for companionship.

As he stepped out into the windy streets outside his boardinghouse, Richard recognized he was setting himself up for disappointment. Even if Elizabeth returned some small portion of his affection, it still might lead to nothing. He had accepted a job in California, a million miles away in terms of all that was familiar to her. It would take something much greater than affection to make a doting daughter willing to leave the comforts of home and family to go away with a relative stranger.

He had only a few short weeks in which to convince her that he would be enough to replace what she had now. The task seemed insurmountable, but the alternative was worse. He hadn't known a true home in so long that he couldn't count the years. He longed for one now. He had worked his way through the university and his apprenticeship and the long, lonely years of hardship with the single goal of finding a good woman and starting his own family when he had the income to support them. He had that income now. He sincerely hoped that Elizabeth was the woman. He didn't relish the

prospect of going to California alone.

When he reached the house, a maid answered the door, giving him a brief reprieve before he would meet again the woman on whom he had pinned so many hopes. He was escorted into a comfortably appointed parlor, where he was left to admire the collection of material wealth displayed upon every shelf and spare inch of wall. Richard knew Elizabeth's family was more comfortable than wealthy, but to one who had known starvation, the extravagance of these decorations was reassuring. He wanted a wife who knew how to feather his nest appropriately.

While he waited, he admired an upright piano, the back of which was decorated in a wine-red portiere with gold tassels. The top of the piano sported a collection of ornate frames bearing photographs and daguerreotypes of various family members looking stiff and uncomfortable. He picked up one showing Elizabeth and tried to remember this unsmiling woman as the young girl he had laughed with last summer. It made him even more tense.

Putting down the frame, he examined the dragon-headed brass candlesticks, an assortment of vases, and a collection of fans that spilled from the piano onto the wall and the table beside it. Exotic peacock feathers mixed with elegant ivory, but he could only think of how long it must take to dust them.

The lounge behind him was covered with embroidered cushions and protected with lovingly crocheted doilies. He took a seat on the edge, afraid he would disturb the arrangement of cushions and covers. This position left him staring at the painted Chinese pugs on the hearth. Fortunately for the porcelain, the house had steam heat and there was no fire in the fireplace. He listened to the constant tick of the clock on the mantel and waited for the sound of



footsteps.

He breathed a sigh of relief and stood up as he heard the patter of feminine feet on the hall carpet. In a swish of silk, she was standing there, and Richard gazed his fill.

She was more lovely than he remembered. Her golden hair was parted in two loops over a wide, clear forehead and hung down in dangling curls to frame a heart-shaped face of translucent loveliness. A smile swept over pink lips before disappearing behind a mask of shyness, and he felt his heart register a pleasant thump. She was everything he remembered and more.

"Elizabeth?" He held out his hand for her to take and realized it was shaking slightly. This was the woman he meant to marry and share the rest of his life with. A decision of that magnitude justified a slight case of nerves.

Her small hand rested easily in his. "Richard. It is so good to see you again."

She spoke softly, so softly he barely heard her. He squeezed her fingers and released them, fearful he would make her as nervous as he. The long train of her skirt brushed his legs as she entered the room, and he almost sighed with pleasure at this physical contact. He caught the scent of violets as she passed, and he breathed it in eagerly. Letters could never replace the reality of touch and scent.

"Do I dare tell you how much more beautiful you are than I remember?" he murmured as she took a seat on the lounge. Daringly, he took the place beside her.

Her lashes swept upward briefly so she might meet his gaze, then she turned her eyes modestly to the floor. "You will make me blush if you say such things. Pray, let us talk of more important topics. How was your journey?"

Richard didn't consider his journey in the least important, but he couldn't leap into the conversation with his hopes and desires. He had no wish to terrify the angel of modesty beside him. The devil of it was, he couldn't see his way around to ever telling her how he felt. She was too virginal, too unworldly to understand his base nature. Their philosophical discussions had touched on many topics, including love and friendship, but they had certainly never veered anywhere near the physical demands of love and marriage.

It was up to him to lead the way. That thought alone was enough to unman him. He couldn't possibly risk even holding her hand when her family could walk in on them at any moment. He played with the brim of his hat like a nervous schoolboy while he sought some safe topic of conversation.

"The railroads are improving significantly," he managed. "Despite the rain and cold outside, I made the journey in the greatest of comfort, sitting beside a stove and reading a book. Can you imagine how it must have been for our ancestors?"

He wanted to kick himself for the immense insipidness of his remarks, but his brain seemed to disconnect as the scent of violets filled his nostrils. He could barely steer his gaze away from the bows on her gown, which rose and fell with her breathing. He imagined unfastening those tiny ivory buttons at her throat, and a shiver went down his spine. How was he going to teach carnal knowledge to a woman undoubtedly wearing three petticoats, two chemises, and a corset?

One step at a time, he admonished himself. He had to win her trust first. With that thought firmly in place, he set about listening and conversing with some semblance of intelligence.

By the time an hour had passed, Richard was a physical and nervous wreck. They had struggled from talk of his journey and railroads through the weather and on to the political situation, but the task of conversing on these topics was in no way similar to spilling out everything he thought on a piece of paper. He had to watch every word so as not to offend, and he had to do it while wondering if he might catch a glimpse of her ankles.

It came almost as a relief when the front door flew open with a gusty March wind and in swept a laughing woman, carrying what could only be a briefcase. Richard heard her laughter floating from the foyer and rose from his seat at the feminine sound. Elizabeth jumped up too, hurrying to call to this unexpected interloper.

"Lorna! You are home early. Richard is here. Come meet him. I will send Sally for some hot tea for you."

Led by an eager Elizabeth, the woman entered the parlor. Amusement still danced in her eyes as she held out her hand for Richard to take.

Feeling very much as if he were the source of her amusement, he took her extended hand and wondered if she wished him to shake it or bow over it. There was rather an element of command in her presence that made either seem quite feasible. She solved his dilemma by giving his hand a quick shake and removing her fingers from his grasp.

"So, you are the Richard I have heard so much about. You do not look a paragon, but as I have never yet met one, I suppose I wouldn't know."

She swept through the room, disposing of her gloves and hat with careless gestures as she located the radiator and warmed her hands over it. Richard tried to keep from staring. Her hat now off, he could see that her hair was red. Not auburn. Not

strawberry blond. Red. And thick. She wore it piled high, but windswept strands came loose at all angles. She didn't seem aware of it.

A redhead's freckles sprinkled her nose, making her look more a mischievous child than the full-grown woman she so obviously was. The severe cut of her tailored jacket emphasized not only the full swell of the ruffled bodice beneath, but the narrowness of her waist and the long line of her hips. Richard had difficulty diverting his gaze as she turned to warm her backside against the heat.

"I doubt that I am a paragon, Miss ..." He stumbled. They were not yet formally introduced, and he did not know her full name.

"Sanderson. Lorna Sanderson. Richard Dillon. I'm so sorry. I've made a muff of it already, haven't I?" Elizabeth hurried to his side. "Lorna is my favorite cousin. She's come to stay a few weeks. I hope you will come to know and like her as well as I do."

Richard nodded politely. "Miss Sanderson." Then the name finally registered somewhere in the dim recesses of his mind, and his eyes narrowed as he gazed at her. "Lorna Sanderson? The journalist and lecturer?"

This time, the amusement dancing in her eyes was very definitely at his expense. "Go ahead and say it, sir: the battle-ax who preaches women's rights. I'm not ashamed of what I do."

He was making a real muck of it now. He turned an anxious gaze to Elizabeth, who was watching him with equal anxiety. With an inner sigh of relief, Richard smiled reassuringly at her before turning back to the woman who so blatantly wished to defy him. "You have no need to be ashamed. You have made yourself well heard at a time when many could not. I will admit to being pleasantly surprised that you are also young and beautiful." This last he

said with a hint of amusement, in reference to her charge of being a battle-ax.

She had full pink lips that pursed slightly when she was thinking, he noticed as she turned a contemplative gaze on him. There was nothing shy or demure about Lorna Sanderson. She was as direct and straightforward as the wind that had blown her through the door. It made dealing with her considerably easier. A man would know exactly where he stood in this woman's eyes.

"From Elizabeth's praises, I had not thought you a flirt, sir. You are excused this once. Do not let it happen again." Having delivered this salvo, Lorna turned to her cousin. "Am I in time for dinner? If so, I will run upstairs and make myself presentable. Tell Sally to bring me my tea there."

Having been pointedly reminded of the lateness of the hour, Richard soon made his excuses and departed, with Elizabeth's invitation to return on the morrow. He felt almost relieved when struck with the cold wind as the door closed behind him. Dealing with the vagaries of nature was so much easier than coping with women.

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Lorna arranged her papers on the podium and looked out over the crowd spilling through the doors. She didn't bill her lectures as speeches on women's rights. She had too much finesse for that. They were advertised as "Educational Treatises on the Betterment of Living," and she made excellent suggestions throughout the series on how women could live healthier, more active, more fulfilling lives. She made no apology for the fact that many of these suggestions required a woman to step outside her usual role, and that she frequently referred to the good that could be done if women were allowed a voice in political decision making. By the time she was done

speaking, it was more than obvious that if women were the moral guardians of the world, they would be much better able to guard if they were in positions of power.

Her message riled the men, no doubt, but they had been relatively quiet in this small town where visiting lecturers were treated with respect. It was taking a little while for her message to completely sink in. By now, the little ladies ought to be asking their husbands why they could not take over the task of paying the bills as well as keeping the household accounts. And once they had a good grasp of how much money was available outside those household accounts, they would begin questioning where the excess went. When they began asking why their husbands should have boxes of Cuban cigars when little Johnny ought to have new shoes, or why the tab at the local tavern should more than equal their grocery budget, then the trouble would begin.

Lorna relished her role of troublemaker. Looking out over the rows of feminine faces bright and eager and ready to learn, she felt her spirits soar. Her own mother had bowed to her husband's every wish until the day he died, and then she had been nearly suffocated under the burden of trying to support a home and family while having absolutely no knowledge of how to do so. Lorna wouldn't wish that fate on anyone, and she was here to see that as many women as possible could escape from it. The scowls and frowns on the few male faces in the back of the room told her she was making progress.

Terence ushered in the last of the late arrivals, found them seats, and closed the auditorium doors. Terence was her indispensable ally. They had grown up together in the same neighborhood, under much the same set of circumstances, only his father had been an

abusive alcoholic. He could readily see the advantage his mother would have had if she had been able to leave the home and support herself. He was enthusiastic in his endorsement of her lectures, and he made life generally easier for Lorna by arranging everything for her. He had made it his business to develop contacts on every major newspaper in the Midwest. He was almost single-handedly responsible for her popularity.

Lorna almost wished she was capable of being like other women in desiring a husband and home. Terence would be her ideal mate, and in fact he had pointed this out to her more than once. One of these days, when she was ready to settle down, perhaps she would take him up on his offer. Right now, she just couldn't imagine herself tied to hearth and children, no matter how fine a man Terence might be.

As she spoke, Lorna was aware of heads nodding in agreement with her words, of faces brightening with sudden discovery, and of a few frowns and negative shakes. She focused on the timid, the women who hung on every word with a dazed expression of fear and hope. These were the women she wanted to reach most. These were the women who needed to hear that they did not have to suffer for the rest of their lives for a mistake made when they were young.

To her amusement, Lorna recognized Elizabeth's beau slipping into a back seat. The fatuous Richard had come to see if she was a bad influence on her cousin. A little fire and brimstone ought to singe his ears. Self-satisfied men like that raised her hackles.

Murmurs of approval and excitement rippled through the room as Lorna launched into a full-scale tirade that on some occasions had brought her audience bounding to its feet in applause. This audience was a little

more subdued, but she felt their response, and she increased her vigor. In the back of the room, more men spilled through the doors.

She didn't like seeing those men standing back there like that. The seats were full. The doors had been closed. They should have been denied entrance. Lorna scanned the crowd for a glimpse of Terence. He was unobtrusively moving to the back of the room, but she didn't feel relief. Having grown up on the streets, Terence was tough and wiry and strong, but he wasn't a six-foot farmer with shoulders like an ox. She toned down her voice a trifle to give him time to persuade the intruders to leave.

The faces of several of the women had turned from attentive to frightened as they glanced nervously over their shoulders. A woman on the far side of the audience quietly got up and slipped to a side exit. Lorna's lips tightened at this evidence of the fear those bullies had wrought within their own families. She would like to hand out whips to every woman in the audience tonight—let those men know what it felt like to be physically helpless. She wanted to see those men on their knees.

Instead, one of them came forward, yelling obscenities as he located his wife among the crowd and went after her. Terence shouldered his way in front of him so the woman had time to make good her escape, but other men followed the lead of the first. Lorna was reminded of a herd of sheep as they barreled mindlessly across the room, searching for their ewes. What she needed was a good collie.

A shrill scream split the air as one of the men found his target and slapped her. The crowd shifted anxiously,



then with panic at the onslaught of irate husbands and fathers. Chairs tipped over as their occupants hurried toward the exit to avoid husbands, trouble, or their own fears. Those few who stayed behind were trapped in the crush. Feet caught and tripped over fallen chairs, long skirts tangled in wooden rails, and soon feminine voices were as loud and obstreperous as the males'. Lorna silently cheered on the women wielding umbrellas and parasols and applying them roundly to masculine ears, but she decided it was time to depart when she noted a particularly irate contingent of men heading in her direction.

Lorna couldn't find Terence in the chaos. There was no one to notice as she scooped up her skirts and stepped down from the speaker's platform — no one except those bullies with their eyes fixed on her, that is.

Trying not to panic, Lorna skirted around two women beating ineffectively on a stoic farmer who was attempting to pull his wife from the melee. She would have stopped to cheer them on if it weren't for the fact that she caught a glimpse of one of the massive farmers coming up from that side. The nearest exit seemed a million miles away.

A bulky man a head taller than she stepped in front of her, and Lorna stepped backward, nearly bouncing into a rotund stomach behind her. Caught, she looked to either side to see several more men closing in around her. She despised feeling helpless. From now on, she would carry a whip.

"Reckon you ain't got a man to teach you a lesson, so we agreed to do it for you," the one in front drawled without inflection. "Women out here are likely to get hurt without a man. You'd best get yourself

back where you belong."

He didn't seem entirely unreasonable. He wasn't foaming at the mouth. He wasn't even drunk. He looked to be a respectable farmer in his checked shirt and galluses. But he was wide and tall and he was reaching for her, and Lorna was quite certain she didn't want to hear his lesson.

The gray arm of an alpaca suit intruded, coming down hard on the man's hand as he reached for her. While the farmer turned in surprise, a second gray arm went around Lorna's waist and dragged her out of the circle of men.

In seconds, she found herself chest to chest with Elizabeth's beau. At his urging, she dazedly slipped behind him and watched as Richard confronted the monsters of injustice who had threatened her.

"If any lessons are to be taught here tonight, they'll be lessons in manners," he admonished. "Gentlemen do not physically maul ladies. There is no honor in harming someone smaller than you. If that's understood, I suggest you gentlemen take your —"

Lorna gasped as one of the men swung wildly in Richard's direction. He couldn't sidestep the blow without exposing her. Instead, he blocked it with one neatly cuffed wrist and swung swiftly and with great effect with his other fist. His attacker crumpled into the crowd behind him.

As two more men entered the fray, Lorna gave a scream of outrage and reached for a chair. Obviously, these men also needed to be taught that it was unfair to fight five against one. While Richard sank a blow into the stomach of the one grabbing his tie, Lorna swung a wooden folding chair over the head of the one coming

up from behind.

They had nearly settled the fracas by the time Terence shoved his way through the dissipating crowd to their side. One man lay groaning on the floor, two others had been carried off, and a couple of angry wives had begun applying fists and purses to their husbands' arms to steer them away. With the simple expedient of stepping in front of Lorna and applying his fist to a jaw, Richard halted the obscenities emitted by the last offender.

"You should have let me have him," Terence muttered furiously as he caught Lorna's arm and pulled her toward him. "He needed his head parted down the middle, like his hair."

Lorna shook herself free. "Let's just get out of here. Are you all right, Mr. Dillon?"

Richard was brushing off his suit and examining a torn cuff, but he looked up at her inquiry. His gaze took in the other man's possessive stance, and he shrugged. "I've been worse."

"Come on, Lorna. Let's get out of here." Terence took her arm a second time, attempting to steer her toward the nearest door.

Irritated, Lorna brushed off his hand, reached for her handkerchief, and applied it to the slight trickle of blood on her defender's mouth. "I'll be fine, Terence. Mr. Dillon will see me home, after I see that he's all right. I've got to get back before my uncle hears about this and comes looking for me. See what you can do to settle the rest of this mob."

Angry voices still echoed through the auditorium. Some women wept, others spoke furiously, still others seemed to be in fits of the vapors, while angry or

worried men milled about, anxious to get their womenfolk home. If anything, the crowd seemed to be growing as word of the fracas spread outside the hall. Terence glared at Richard, transferred his ill humor to Lorna, then stomped off to do as directed.

"I'm quite fine, Miss Sanderson. We had better get you out of here before this melee erupts all over again." Richard took her handkerchief and blotted the trickle of blood himself.

"I thought you'd never ask." With relief, Lorna took his arm and allowed him to lead her around the fallen chairs and angry clumps of people toward the far doors. She'd dealt with mobs before, but never quite so close at hand. She hadn't expected this quiet crowd to explode. Obviously, neither had Terence. He was usually right at her side when there was any danger.

"I'm grateful for your defense, Mr. Dillon. I don't know what would have become of me if you hadn't come to my rescue." Lorna couldn't believe what she heard herself saying — she sounded like a simpering ninny. But she spoke the truth. She was more than grateful for his aid. Next time, she would be better prepared.

"You would no doubt have received a rather crude lesson in the reasons women do not make nuisances of themselves in public." Richard guided her from the hall into the still darkness of an early spring evening. Apparently the door they had chosen led to a back alley and not the front, where people still milled about.

"Women!" she exclaimed. "It wasn't women making nuisances of themselves back there. We were very quietly minding our own business when that rampaging

ox stormed through the room. Do not blame that fracas on women, sir." Oddly, Lorna still continued to cling to his arm. Her nerves were a trifle shattered, she admitted. It was good to have a strong arm to lean on while she maneuvered around wet puddles on the walk.

"Of course, how foolish of me. I should have realized a roomful of women plotting rebellion would be perfectly harmless. The problem certainly lies with the poor maligned husbands who have watched their pleasant homes turn into battlegrounds for viragoes."

She ought to be furiously angry, but the image he set amused her. "Well, I'm certain all the ladies will go straight home and brew the poor dears cups of coffee to settle their hurt prides, and from now on, they will never lift another word in protest. I'm quite sure they have all learned their lessons tonight."

He sent her a darting glance. "You know you have only whetted their appetites for more. You enjoy wreaking havoc, don't you?"

Lorna caught his arm tighter as she nearly slipped on a wet patch and tried to right herself. He held her firmly until she was steady again. She lifted her skirt more carefully as she fell into pace with him.

"I enjoy showing women that they have alternatives. They do not have to endure life being beaten and walked over. They do not have to watch their husbands drink up the money needed to feed their children. They do not need men if they can get a little education, stand up for themselves, find jobs, and grasp some of the power that men have wielded alone for far too long."

Richard snorted. "Is that what you thought you were preaching back there?"

"That's what I *know* I was preaching back there.

You don't think a man is going to get up and tell them all that, do you? Men are far too fond of having everything their way. It's time women stood up and took what was rightfully theirs."

Her voice soared with the same righteousness that had lifted it earlier. Richard grinned and glanced down at her fiery red hair.

"Well, you tell me what is rightfully yours and I'll keep my hands off of it, all right?"

They had come to her uncle's front porch and stood facing each other. Lorna had the urge to smack him, feeling somehow that his words had a more intimate meaning than was obvious. As a matter of fact, he seemed to be looking at her in a way that he should only be looking at Elizabeth. It made her insides tingle, made her more aware of him as a man and not just a casual rescuer.

With a cry of exasperation, she flung open the door, rushed through it, and slammed it in his face.

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Terence ignored a squabbling couple, helped a lady to her feet and into the hands of her anxious companions, sent somebody's father in search of his daughter along the far wall, and wished the whole place to the devil. He was still smarting from the brush-off Lorna had given him. The fancy man in the pretty suit wasn't her kind. He had disapproval written all over his mug. They were probably having a rip-roaring argument right now. That was probably why Lorna had gone with him. She wanted someone to fight with after a night like this.

Well, he'd give her something to think about when he saw her tomorrow. This traveling life had to stop sometime, and now was as good a time as any. Maybe

tonight's fracas had shaken some sense into her. She should stick to writing magazine articles and stay out of crowds. She ought to know by now that Terence wouldn't be anything like her father. He would never object to her writing. He supposed it would be all right if she did an occasional lecture or two in respectable surroundings. He just wanted her to stay home where she was safe and out of trouble and let him take care of her for a change.

That didn't seem too much to ask, but for a woman like Lorna, it sounded like a death sentence. Terence knew that. They'd talked about it often enough. He wanted marriage, but marriage of necessity entailed children. Lorna didn't want children—not yet, anyway. Or so she said. He was beginning to doubt if she knew the truth herself. She liked his kisses well enough, but she was quick to avoid anything else. He was beginning to think that despite everything they meant to each other, maybe the problem was more than just Lorna's reluctance to marry. Maybe her reluctance was to marrying *him*.

His eye caught on a bewildered female wringing her gloved hands and straining to see through the crowd. She wore her hat straight and neat over her blond tresses. Her prim gown with its tight bodice and bustled skirt only served to accentuate her exceedingly feminine curves. He had met her only once, but he remembered her. She didn't belong here.

Terence strode over fallen chairs and abandoned parasols to get at Elizabeth, and even then, he was almost too late. A drunken rowdy he had noticed earlier stumbled into her path and grabbed her frail shoulder. She gasped and tried to step away, but the drunk only grinned and held tighter. Terence watched her face turn

pale before he could get to her. He didn't even want to imagine what the wretch must smell like, much less consider his drunken hands on her. He kicked aside the last chair and grabbed the drunk's coattails.

"Be on your way, sir. A gentleman doesn't go about molesting young ladies." He jerked, and the drunk went staggering backward. Releasing Elizabeth, he fell, but Terence had already grabbed the lady's waist and pulled her from further harm.

Lorna's cousin was light and fragile in his arms, a bundle of terrified helplessness as she watched the drunk fall to his face and stay there. She was actually clinging to Terence's lapels, for heaven's sake. She was irresistible.

He leaned over and kissed her pretty pink lips. She jerked with shock, pulled back, and smacked him soundly on the cheek.

Terence grinned. "I deserved that, but I'd do it again. It was worth the pain."

Elizabeth glared at him, a vision of outraged innocence. Her cheeks were flushed as pretty a pink as her lips now, he noticed while waiting for her to recover her tongue. He had to get her out of here or Lorna would have his head on a platter, but he didn't dare make another move toward her until she had leashed her temper. He'd learned that much in these years of dealing with her cousin.

"You are a scoundrel, sir. Just tell me where I may find my cousin and I shall leave you alone to find some other woman to molest."

"Lorna is fine. Your beau is taking her home as we speak, and that's where I'm going to escort you. You have no business being in this place." Terence grabbed her elbow and steered her toward the door.



Elizabeth resisted. "I found my own way here, I can find my own way back. I do not need your assistance."

He kept moving, half dragging her forward with his momentum. "In case you haven't noticed, we had a near riot here tonight, Miss Sanderson. The streets aren't safe. Whatever made you come here tonight, of all nights?"

Given little other choice, Elizabeth hurried to keep up with him. Outside in the crisp air, she managed to free her elbow and stride briskly down the street so that he was forced to follow. "I heard there was trouble and I came to help. I am perfectly safe out here, sir. This is my hometown, after all. You would do better to go back and help clean up."

"You are beginning to sound like your cousin. I will see you home, and there's the end of it."

She responded with stony silence, refusing to utter a single word despite his attempts at cheerful banter. The challenge was too good to resist. Terence racked his brain for a topic that would rouse some comment.

According to Lorna, her cousin was a thoroughly domesticated little lady who believed a woman's goal in life was to marry and have children. In his experience, ladies like that had only one subject for conversation. Eyes gleaming, he pounced upon it.

"I'm trying to persuade Lorna to marry me. How should I go about it?"

Startled, Elizabeth turned wide eyes in his direction to see if he jested. Apparently deciding he did not, she forgot her intention to freeze him out. "Get a job," she responded seriously.

This time, it was Terence's turn to look startled. He had expected romantic suggestions like candy and flowers. Her practical advice shattered his complacent notion of this woman's character. She was

much more like her cousin than he had imagined.

"A job?" He knew he sounded like an ass, but he couldn't immediately summon any other response.

Elizabeth nodded firmly. "A job. Lorna adored her father. She should have been his son instead of his daughter. Even after he died and she realized how he had left her mother helpless, she couldn't help trying to take his place. What she needs is a man who can support her so she doesn't have to worry about supporting herself any longer, a man who is just like her father but doesn't expect her to behave like her mother. Does that make sense?"

"No," he stated flatly as they reached their destination. "And yes, in some odd way. But she knows I can find employment anywhere. I have contacts all across the country. I'm not only a good journalist, but I also know the newspaper business inside and out. I've been asking her to settle down for months."

"Then you will have to settle down on your own and hope Lorna realizes she can't live without you." Elizabeth lifted her skirt and started up the porch steps.

"She'll hate me for deserting her." Terence stayed where he was, not following her up the stairs. His mind was too busy whirling around this new notion.

"Give her plenty of warning." With that, Elizabeth swept inside the house, leaving him no further opportunity to question her.

Terence was left to walk back to town through the icy night, wondering if it was just the cold air seeping around his heart or if it was something else. The idea of walking away from Lorna and making his way through life alone sounded depressing.

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"Your beau has considerably more sense than

I thought," Lorna admitted reluctantly, checking her hair in the mirror and making a face at the reflection. "We had a long talk after last night's lecture. Did you know he will be taking a partnership in an established practice out in California?"

Elizabeth worried at the fingers of her gloves. "I know. California is such a long way away. I don't know why he chose there."

Lorna lifted her eyebrows as she turned to look at her cousin. "Because there are more opportunities for young men out West. He would have to work years to gain such a position here."

Elizabeth lifted her shoulders and strolled to the window overlooking the front yard. "He is very ambitious. That worries me. Our sentiments correspond so exactly in everything else, I cannot understand why he does not agree with me in this. A man whose only interest is his business does not make a good father or husband."

Spoken from the heart. Considering the number of hours Elizabeth's father spent at his office, Lorna nodded sagely. She ought to warn poor Richard about this cloud on his horizon. His eagerness to sweep Elizabeth off to California had been quite apparent last night. "I would think a young and eager man would be as interested in his family as in his work, if he chooses the proper mate," she answered thoughtfully.

"Who in the world could that be?"

Lorna jerked her head up, surprised at this response until she realized Elizabeth was not asking about Richard's mate but someone outside. She joined her cousin at the window and frowned at the sight of the woman walking slowly toward the house.

The visitor looked vaguely familiar, but she didn't appear to be one of the well-dressed ladies of the neighborhood. The feathers and roses on her hat

were sadly bedraggled, and the velvet trim on her jacket was worn shiny in places. The outfit might have been striking some years ago, but it had long been ready for the dust bin. The haggard face beneath the roses had the same well-worn appearance of the woman's clothes.

"Uh-oh." Lorna suddenly placed the face. Sweeping up her skirts, she hastened from the room, Elizabeth close on her heels.

They arrived at the front door at the same time as the maid. Shooing Sally away, Lorna opened the door herself. The woman on the other side sagged with relief.

"I do have the right address. Thank heavens." She seemed so distracted to find Lorna that she didn't know how to go on from there.

"I remember you from the lectures, Mrs...?" Lorna raised her voice inquiringly.

"Slovoski. Mrs. Stanley Slovoski." Obviously gathering her courage, she knitted her fingers together and continued, "Could you spare a moment of your time?"

Despite her appearance, the woman had a cultured voice, and Lorna stepped aside to allow her in. "Come in, Mrs. Slovoski."

Elizabeth watched anxiously as Lorna escorted their unexpected guest into the family parlor. She wondered why her cousin hadn't taken her to the guest parlor, but their visitor's expression as she gazed around at the clutter of magazines and books and sewing baskets and other accoutrements of family life answered her question.

To Elizabeth, the well-worn furniture and carpet in this room were something to hide, but to their guest, they appeared to be every material comfort she could dream of. She touched an old velvet cloth across a lamp table with the reverence of one

who possessed little. To have shown her into the rich guest parlor would have been cruel.

"Please have a seat, Mrs. Slovoski. Would you like some tea or coffee?" Lorna indicated the horsehair sofa before the fireplace.

Elizabeth had never seen her cousin quite so solicitous. She lingered in the background, waiting for instructions.

Their guest shook her head negatively. "No, thank you. I don't wish to be any trouble. I just ... You seem to be such a sensible lady...." She fluttered her hands helplessly in her lap.

Lorna glanced over her shoulder to Elizabeth. "I would like some coffee. Would you ... ?"

Elizabeth disappeared down the hall, understanding exactly. The woman looked as if she had not eaten in a week. The tray would carry more than coffee.

Beneath the bedraggled feather dangling from the woman's hat, Lorna could discern more than a shadow on the sallow skin. She tried to keep from frowning. Mrs. Slovoski was one of those women who appeared all too frequently at her lectures: the ones with the bruised faces and looks of despair in their eyes. They seldom attended more than one or two of the sessions, but their images remained imprinted on Lorna's memory long after that. Now here was one she could reach out to personally, and she was terrified of the responsibility. She had no idea what to say.

She pulled up a chair across from her. "Now, Mrs. Slovoski, what can I do for you?"

The woman averted her eyes to the empty fireplace, then reluctantly returned her gaze to Lorna. The words spilled out of her as if they had been dammed up too long. "I am married, but we have no children. My

husband blames me because I am glad there are no children. We barely have enough money for ourselves. He is a hard worker, but no one will pay him what he is worth because he is not educated and he does not speak English well. He is very unhappy. I thought... if I could just find work... But I don't know how to do anything." This last came out as a wail of despair.

Lorna wondered what had possessed this woman, who obviously came of good family and education, to marry an immigrant who could not even support himself, but she couldn't ask. People did odd things. Perhaps she had fancied herself in love with him. Perhaps she had needed to rebel against her family. Perhaps she had found herself alone in the world and without resources and had taken the first offer to come her way. Any and all of the above could be true. What mattered now was the present, and she had no easy answers.

"Women are often told that they do not know how to do anything, but we can do many things. If you can take care of a home, you can cook, you can bake, you can clean, you can sew. These are all services that are in demand somewhere. The problem usually is that we do not know where to market those skills. And then the next obstacle, after we succeed in finding a position, is the men in our lives. They do not like to feel like failures when their women go out to work."

Mrs. Slovoski was nodding her head. "Exactly. I offered to take in laundry, but Stanley went into a rage. He is very proud. I want to make him happy, not to upset him, but we cannot go on living like this."

Elizabeth carried in the coffee tray. Lorna was given a reprieve while cups were passed around and a selection of small sandwiches and muffins was presented. She

scarcely tasted anything while she contemplated what she must say to this woman. Had she not seen the bruise on Mrs. Slovoski's face, her answer might have been different, but she had seen the effect of those bruises on Terence's mother and countless other women since then. She firmly set her resolve and waited for an opening.

When the coffee had been sipped and the sandwiches tasted, Lorna found her opportunity. "Mrs. Slovoski, you will not like what I have to say. I know you have come a long way, hoping to hear some easy way out of your situation, but as you already know, there is no easy way. I could help you find a job, but that will do you no good if your husband will not let you keep it. This is what my lectures are all about. You are going to have to decide who is more important, your husband or yourself. Is his life and what he wants more important than your life and what you want? Women have been trained for generations to believe the man's wishes come first, but what he wants is not necessarily what is right. It may not even be right for him. Men are not infallible."

Mrs. Slovoski stared down at the coffee cup in her lap. "I cannot live without him. I must do as he says."

Lorna made a rude noise. "It is more likely that he cannot live without you. Men are quite helpless on their own. They don't know how to cook and feed themselves, but we do. You only need the courage to believe that you can find a job and support yourself, if necessary. What would you do if something were to happen to your husband? How would you live then? You would find a way, wouldn't you?"

The woman looked up with a light of hope dawning in her eyes. "Yes, yes, I would. I bake very well. There is a restaurant... I baked for them several times, until

Stanley discovered what I was doing." The light dimmed. "But he will not let me go back." Her fingers went to the bruise hidden beneath her feather.

Elizabeth dared to intrude. "Could you not stay home and bake and then sell your goods?"

The woman shook her head. "It takes much flour and sugar and other things that I do not have. Stanley would never give me money for those things."

They had ignored the knocking at the door, letting Sally answer it, but they could not ignore the sudden intrusion of Sally and the new arrival. Elizabeth looked up and squealed, then leapt to her feet to run to Richard.

"We forgot! I am so sorry. Please, come in. We are all ready, but . . ."

Mrs. Slovoski was already on her feet. "I did not mean to keep you. Thank you so much for your kind words. I must be going now."

Lorna hurriedly rose and caught her arm. "Not yet. There is still one other solution. If you will not leave Stanley, then you must find someone to invest in your bakery. The investment would be very small. Flour and sugar are not that expensive. You could price your goods so that you may repay the investment quickly, with a little interest. After that, the profits would be yours. Do you think you know how to price your goods?"

The woman nodded uncertainly. "I was very good at mathematics. I think so. But who would invest in me?"

Lorna whirled to confront Richard. "Mr. Dillon, I think a small investment of ten dollars would be sufficient. You can afford that, can you not?"

He looked startled and wary, but he reached in his



pocket. "Do I get a bill of sale or a note or anything in return?"

Lorna snorted. "Lawyers. You are all alike." But she took a piece of stationery from the small desk in the corner.

Too overwhelmed to understand anything that was happening, Mrs. Slovoski found herself signing a note and going out the door with ten dollars more than she had arrived with. Elizabeth and Lorna waved her away, then turned back to their other guest, who looked as if he had been run over by a very fast wagon.

"Do I get some explanation?" he asked skeptically as Elizabeth smiled at him with delight and took his arm.

Since both women launched into explanations at once, his look of bewilderment did not ease for quite some time; but when he finally grasped the import of what they were saying, he frowned.

"You may kiss my money good-bye, but that is of little account. You have no idea what you may have brought down upon that poor woman's head, or your own. When her husband finds out that she has been sneaking around behind his back selling pies, he will want vengeance. I hope she will be wise enough to keep your names out of it."

"You are being stuffy, Mr. Dillon. Personally, I would have preferred it if I could have persuaded her to leave the monster, but women have been taught all their lives that they are frail and helpless and need men to protect them. It is difficult to persuade them otherwise. It is rather frightening to think of taking care of one's own self without the support of any other. Oh — that must be Terence now. Let us go." Lorna swept out of the room

to fetch her coat and muff, not giving even a second glance to her cousin's beau.

Richard turned his gaze to Elizabeth, who was picking nervously at her gloves. "She is very set in her opinions, is she not?"

Elizabeth nodded hesitantly. "But she is so often very right."

There was nothing he could say to that. The prospect of going off to California on his own was one of the reasons he was here now. He didn't want to do it alone. Women weren't the only ones who longed for companionship, but men weren't allowed to say such things. As the sound of Lorna greeting Terence in the hall drifted in to them, Richard offered his arm to escort Elizabeth out to join the others.

This business of communicating feelings was very tricky, he decided. A man couldn't admit any weakness, so how did he go about telling Elizabeth how he felt? And if he didn't tell her how he felt, would she think that he was cold? Her letters indicated that she wanted warmth from a man.

Richard let the matter slide as they set out in the carriage he'd hired to take them to the pond where Elizabeth wanted to have a picnic. The March weather was alternately warm and chilly and it was altogether too early for a picnic, in his opinion. But the sky *was* a brilliant blue, and he wouldn't dream of denying Elizabeth her wish.

The women laughed and chattered and responded gaily to Terence's lighthearted teasing as the carriage jolted over the rutted road. Richard had never been one to speak his thoughts lightly, and he couldn't contribute to the frivolity with any degree of success. By the time he

stopped the carriage, he was completely silent, and Terence was the one handing the women out.

Richard watched in quiet dismay as Elizabeth laughed over some inconsequential jest that Terence made. Her laughter chimed like bells, and he wanted to be the one setting the bells to ringing. When Terence was the first to take Elizabeth's arm and lead her toward a redbud showing its first shades of pink, Richard felt even more incompetent than ever.

A gloved hand tugged at his elbow, and he bent to hear Lorna whisper, "I do believe Terence is trying to make me jealous. He's been acting very odd of late. Let us show him we are above such games."

With a feeling of gratitude, Richard took Lorna's arm and started down the trail leading alongside the pond. Elizabeth was already skipping among the trees as if she were a caged bird suddenly freed to the elements. Terence was staying right with her. Richard extended his arm to Lorna, and they walked more sedately toward a curve in the trail where the edge of the pond disappeared from sight behind a wooded outcropping of land.

"She is so beautiful and lighthearted that she makes me feel an old man at times," Richard said thoughtfully as combined laughter rang out behind them.

"Elizabeth? I never thought of her as lighthearted. She is ploddingly prim at most times, until I would like to shake her. But she is such an amiable, goodhearted creature that I cannot stay angry with her for long."

Richard studied this assessment for a minute. The woman holding his arm and walking serenely beside him was taller than her cousin. Lorna's head came past his shoulder, and he could sense the strength in her. She did not need his arm for support but took it for her pleasure.

She did not expect anything of him, and it was easy to be silent in her company. He could reflect on his situation with Elizabeth without feeling nervous for his lack of conversation.

"When I met her last summer, and from the letters we have exchanged, I felt that she was a serious-minded young woman, one who had a mind of her own but believed in the traditional role of women. I thought I knew her well, but we are not the same people we seemed to be on paper, I fear."

Lorna smiled. "I think you have come very close to what Elizabeth expects everyone to think of her. She is a dutiful daughter and will someday be a dutiful wife. On the outside, she is what everyone wishes her to be. The inside, I fear, is a different matter. Women are taught certain roles and learn to play them well. That does not mean those roles portray who they really are."

Richard turned on her a look of surprise. Lorna met his gaze boldly, and he noticed her eyes were a dark green with golden flecks. She was rather attractive with her untamable red curls and brash mouth that smiled when it shouldn't and spoke what usually went unsaid. Her words now gave him fodder for thought, but he wasn't thinking very well.

"Do you play a role?" he asked daringly.

Lorna shrugged, her mouth turned upward as she looked away. "I play many roles. What about you?"

Talking with this woman could be dangerous. Richard attempted a truthful answer. "I don't think I play any roles. I have always known what I wanted and gone after it in a straightforward manner. I would not know how to act differently."

"That is because what you want and how you wish

to go about getting it correspond with what the world expects of you. You are very fortunate."

Richard heard laughter some distance behind them, and he didn't turn to see what Terence and Elizabeth were doing now. He refused to play the part of jealous lover. His eyebrows went up a notch at that thought, and he turned his attention to Lorna.

"I should think the world would expect both of us to act the parts of jealous lovers right now. I don't know about you, but that does not correspond with what I wish. Does that mean we are playing parts rather than acting as ourselves?"

Lorna laughed. "That will take some thought. I do not play the part of jealous lover because I am not. I think it may be Terence who wishes me to play that part, but I am not cooperating. Your case is a little different. I don't think Elizabeth expects you to be anything but who you are. Therefore, there is none to think you must play the part of jealous lover if that is not what you are. But if you are jealous, you are playing a part by not behaving so."

Richard shook his head. "That is too much introspection for me. Let us do something more entertaining, like see what's on the other side of that old tree over there. If it's not too muddy for you?"

Without a word of ladylike protest, Lorna was off and running toward his goal before he could set one foot in front of the other. She ran as competently as she did everything else, and Richard gave a shout of laughter as he accepted her unspoken challenge. It would take some concentration to keep up with her.

He only caught up with her just before the dead tree hanging over the pond's edge. He passed her at the

last minute, grabbing an overhanging branch and swinging around to catch Lorna. She slid solidly into his arms, and they both teetered precariously on the edge of falling, their laughter spilling over from the excitement of the race.

What he did then was completely irresponsible, but so very natural that he could not stop himself. She was happy and content in his arms as they struggled for balance, not shying away with maidenly protests, and Richard couldn't find the will to release her immediately. Instead, he bent to brush his mouth against hers.

It was meant to be a tribute, a small salute to her gallant race. Or perhaps it was a forfeit he meant to claim as winner. He didn't pause to think about it. He merely bent his head to capture her mouth and found himself captured by a bolt of electricity instead. She didn't fight her way free. She remained where she was, her hands pressed to his overcoat, her lips responding to his. Richard knew he should halt there, but he didn't seem capable of behaving rationally at the moment. The warmth of her in his arms enveloped him. The sweetness of her mouth tempted him. Electricity held them bound. He tightened his embrace and deepened the kiss.

Her fingers closed on the cloth of his coat while her head turned to fit more comfortably against him, giving him better access to her mouth. When she parted her lips at his demand, Richard felt that the patch of snow under his feet ought to melt beneath them.

He had never held a lady in a passionate embrace before. He could smell the light fragrance of her skin, feel the silky brush of her hair. For all her strength, Lorna was a slender woman, and his arms closed around her and lifted her upward effortlessly. She trusted his

support, and his body responded so strongly that Richard was forced to gasp for breath.

It was then that she looked up at him, her eyes wide and round and filled with the same surprise and wonder as must surely be in his own. And then she was gone, slipping easily from his hold and fleeing across the field, and all he could do was follow.

She was right, of course. What had happened between them was nothing more than a physical response to their exercise. He would have to apologize later, when they were alone. Oddly enough, his mind rebelled at that idea. An apology meant that he was ashamed of what they had done. He wasn't ashamed. It felt like the most honest moment of his life.

Terence watched Lorna approach the bend some distance in advance of her escort. That was typical Lorna. She'd probably outraged the dignified lawyer with some defiant remark and was now victoriously escaping the field of battle. The chip on Lorna's shoulder was a trifle big for most men to deal with.

He continued with his self-appointed task of carrying the lunch baskets from the carriage. "Do you promise that there are apple tarts in here?" He lowered his eyes to Elizabeth's laughing ones and grinned down at her. Elizabeth was a great deal easier to please than Lorna.

"I promise there are, but I don't promise you'll get one," she teased. "You must treat me with great respect and not laugh at me anymore or you'll not see a one of them."

"You were the one who spun herself in circles until you were so dizzy you fell down. I cannot help that. Must I be all grim and solemn and reprimand you for your

silliness to gain an apple tart?"

"No, you must be very solicitous and concerned and say, 'My dear Miss Sanderson, are you hurt? Shall I carry you to the cabin?' And then I shall be very grateful and give you apple tarts."

Terence laughed as she lowered her voice to imitate his and then employed a syrupy tone for her own.

"You ought to be on stage, Miss Sanderson. You are every bit as naughty as any actress I have ever known."

"And I suppose you know a great many?" she replied in the ringing tones of mock censor.

"And suppose I do?" He threw open the door to the cabin that had been their destination and offered his hand to help her inside.

They were still laughing when Lorna and Richard joined them. The party settled with great gaiety in this one-room fishing cabin where the men made a fire in the fireplace while the women spread out the hamper of food on a blanket on the wooden floor. If there were undercurrents between the couples, they went undetected while large quantities of cold chicken and apple tarts were consumed between outbursts of laughter and chatter.

At Lorna's suggestion that they tour the woods after lunch, Elizabeth declared herself quite content to sit beside the fire and sip warm cider while her cousin worked off her unladylike exuberance. Terence agreed wholeheartedly, helping himself to the last tart. Lorna glanced wistfully at the bright sunshine outside, then resigning herself to inactivity, began piling dishes into the hamper.

"I need to work off some of that chicken, Miss



Sanderson. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me for one last walk?" Richard reached for the overcoat he had discarded in the cabin's warmth.

Elizabeth smiled approvingly when Lorna's expression brightened. "You are a good person, Richard. Not everyone is so considerate."

Terence gave Lorna a look that a brother reserves for a pestilent nuisance of a sister. "Consideration is a two-way street. If Lorna wants to walk, she is quite capable of doing so on her own. You needn't freeze your feet off to oblige her, Dillon."

"I owe her a rematch on our earlier race. Besides, hiking while there are still patches of snow on the ground is an opportunity I might not have again anytime in the near future."

That remark echoed in the silence of the cabin after Lorna and Richard had left. Elizabeth gazed thoughtfully at the fire while sipping from her mug of cider.

"I take it he means because California does not have snow," Terence said, just to fill the silence.

"I wouldn't know. I know abysmally little about California," Elizabeth said.

"Finding a life's mate is a difficult process, isn't it?" he asked. "The books make it seem so very easy. One simply fixes their fancy on another, follows the form of courtship, and it leads to happy-ever-after. But how does one know that fancying one person over another results in greater happiness if other factors go against one's desires?"

Elizabeth laughed softly. "Only you could have put it so. I suppose the books would have it that love will overcome all obstacles. If you truly love Lorna, you will not mind if she continues traveling and lecturing

while you settle down to what you want to do, because you will want what makes her happiest."

"But that would mean that if she returned my affection, she should want what makes me happiest." He raised an expectant eyebrow at her.

He didn't receive the expected smile. She sadly returned her gaze to the fire. "I suppose that in every marriage there must be one person who loves the other more. I cannot see how else it is done."

Terence frowned at that thought, removed himself from his reclining position, and went to gaze out the window at the pair walking toward the woods. He wasn't at all certain that love entered into it. Lorna was the only woman he knew intimately enough to consider settling down with. They had been through a lot together, and those shared emotions had led to physical responses often enough. They were comfortable with each other. That had seemed more than enough reason to make her his wife. But he was quite certain that Lorna didn't love him. He was less certain of his own feelings. He supposed that meant he would be the one to do the compromising.

He looked down at the young lady gazing at the fire's dying embers and felt a moment's unease. She belonged to another. He had no right to use her in his war to win Lorna's heart. Picking up the basket, he held his hand out. "I've changed my mind. We need to walk off lunch. Let us join the others."

Elizabeth looked at him questioningly but hastened to fasten her coat and return her hands to her gloves. "You haven't been very attentive to Lorna. Don't you think she's noticed by now?"

He didn't answer but doused the fire so they

could leave the cabin. The thoughts he was having didn't correspond to the innocence with which he had originally offered to stay behind.

Richard and Lorna hadn't wandered far. They stood at the base of a rocky knoll that protected a patch of daffodil buds from the wind. The flowers were not yet open, but the afternoon sunshine warmed the hillside. Elizabeth swung around and admired the sheltered cove as she joined them.

"There must have been a house near here once. See, there is a forsythia almost in bloom. And I think that's a lilac." She pointed out several bushes lining a path to the pond. Then she turned and examined the face of the rocky crag above them. "And up there! Look, the crocuses are blooming! Aren't they lovely?"

The broad patch of bright gold glittered in the afternoon sun like a sparkling treasure just out of their reach. Seeing something at last that he could do to appear the gallant, Richard reached for a rock above his head and started to swing himself up to the patch. He was reaching to pick one of the tiny blossoms when Elizabeth called out to him.

"Oh, don't! You can't pick them. They fade and die when you pluck them from their roots."

Richard looked down at the sturdy blossom his fingers had already plucked. The deep gold of the crocus burned as warm as the sun despite its bed near a patch of ice and snow. Surely a flower as strong as this one ought to make a lovely bouquet, like the violets that would appear a little later. But he didn't wish to ravage the glory of the blooms if they couldn't be preserved. Heeding Elizabeth's warning, he climbed back down, carrying the one tiny flower.

"I'm sorry, I'd already picked this one."

Elizabeth took it from his hand and tucked it

carefully into the lapel of his coat. "Then we might as well make use of it while we can."

She serenely accepted Richard's hand as they returned to the carriage, and the other couple followed them in relative silence. The gay laughter of earlier had become something quieter, more thoughtful, as the party returned home.

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"I talked to Mr. Harris at church on Sunday. He said he was looking for a good young journalist. He started talking about wishing he could spend more time fishing. I think he's looking for someone he can groom to take his place."

Elizabeth spoke so excitedly that she touched her hand to Terence's arm without thinking. She didn't withdraw it in time. He covered it with his own hand as he stared down into her dancing eyes. For a demure miss, she had the most delightfully lively eyes.

"You think I ought to apply for a position here?" A large question was beginning to form in Terence's mind, a question he didn't dare to dwell on. This was Lorna's cousin. The two women must be more alike than he recognized. That was the reason he found himself so drawn to her.

"Oh, yes!" Elizabeth was practically dancing with excitement as she tugged on his arm, pulling him down the street toward the newspaper office. "Wouldn't it be lovely? Lorna could live here, where her family is. I'm sure she'll agree that's for the best once she thinks about it."

Terence tucked her hand more properly around his arm and slowed their pace. "You're forgetting," he reminded her, "your beau wishes to move to California."

The excitement faded from her eyes, and she slowed her pace to a more sedate one. "Yes, of

course. But Lorna will have Father and Mother to turn to. One ought to have family to rely on."

Terence didn't think Lorna cared a whit about having her aunt and uncle nearby. She spoke of them politely but thought them quaint and old-fashioned. He rather admired them himself. He'd never known a stable family, but he couldn't explain any of that to Elizabeth.

If he were going to get on with his life as he planned it, he had to begin somewhere. Patting Elizabeth's hand, he strode in the direction she led him. "Well, let us meet the man, then. It can't hurt to just talk."

Elizabeth wasn't smiling any longer, but she followed without protest.

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"He's doing what?" Lorna stared at her cousin with disbelief.

Elizabeth was wearing one of her new spring gowns with rows of ruffles over her bustled overskirt. She looked very feminine, very petite, and very proper, everything that Lorna was not. She tried not to glance down at her own stiff wool traveling dress. She barely had the proper number of petticoats. She certainly wasn't wearing a bustle or ruffles. What she was wearing was practical, she told herself, but a small twinge of something feminine inside wished she were more than practical. She forced her attention back to her cousin's reply.

"Terence is taking a position at the newspaper. Mr. Harris really likes him. I think he's going to groom him to take his position someday. Wouldn't that be excellent? He could be editor of the town paper. You must be very proud of him."

Lorna wanted to scream, "What about me?" but

that was scarcely an appropriate attitude for an independent feminist. Terence was free to do as he pleased. She had just always thought what pleased him was to be with her.

Shaken, she scarcely noticed the maid answering the door until Sally intruded by introducing the guest to the parlor.

"Good evening, ladies. I trust I'm not too early." Richard stood there, hat in hand, looking questioningly from one serious face to the other.

He didn't get an immediate reply. Elizabeth's father and mother appeared from the family parlor to greet him, and all parties took seats. As it became apparent that her aunt and uncle meant to interrogate this suitor for their daughter's hand, Lorna managed to excuse herself and escape. She gave Richard a fleeting smile of sympathy, but she couldn't bear to remain in the stuffy room any longer. She needed an outlet for the emotions rioting through her.

Terence was deserting her. He was going to settle into this dismal town and become a staid and proper citizen like her uncle. She couldn't believe it of him. She'd thought they'd shared the same beliefs, the same ideas. She'd been planning a grand tour of the West. He obviously had been planning something else entirely.

What was she going to do without him? She would have to hire someone. Where would she get that kind of money? Perhaps she could find someone else sympathetic to the cause. A woman this time. She wasn't going to invest any more time and energy in men. With growing fury at Terence's defection, Lorna stalked off in the direction of the boardinghouse where he stayed.

Before she had marshalled all her arguments, she saw him walking toward her. They had grown up together, but she almost didn't recognize him as he approached. He was wearing a hat! He looked rather distinguished in the tall-crowned felt. He didn't look like the rabble-rouser she knew. His hair was freshly barbered and looked polished and smooth in the light of the street lamp. The unusually warm air of the day was cooling, but he didn't wear an overcoat. She could see the glimmer of the gold chain of his pocket watch stretched across his vest. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was going courting.

He looked surprised to see her, but not as surprised as when she set into him.

"How could you?" Lorna stopped in front of him, not caring how it looked to see a plainly dressed woman accosting a gentleman. "I thought we were partners. I thought you believed in our cause as much as I do. Why are you doing this? Why here? What can you possibly hope to achieve by staying here in the middle of nowhere?"

Terence caught her arm and steered her back in the direction from which she had come. "I do believe in the cause, but I believe I can serve it better from here. I'm old enough now to realize I can't change the world, but I might be able to change some small part of it. I'll have the newspaper as a forum. Mr. Harris isn't entirely opposed to our view. We can print articles on the western states allowing women to vote, make it seem an acceptable thing. We can follow the trials of women who seek relief from their husbands' ill treatment. We can stop hiding the truth, promote women's rights, support the temperance committee. It will take time, but I

believe I can make a difference."

"One small town isn't enough! We must spread the word nationwide. There are women and children dying out there! Terence, how could you desert them like this?" Lorna swung around to confront him.

He had no choice. He couldn't make her see when she was angry. He needed to calm her down, redirect her energies, show her how he felt. He caught her arms and lowered his head to hers.

Lorna didn't allow him to do more than press his mouth against her lips. She shoved away and glared at him. "I'm not a silly little girl who will fall for your persuasive kisses, Terence. I thought we understood each other. I thought we might share something together. Obviously, I was wrong."

She stalked away, her outdated brown skirt trailing over the green spring grass that only days before had been dotted with dirty snow. Terence watched her go with an aching emptiness that he had never succeeded in filling. The tempestuous hustle and bustle of touring with Lorna had kept the hollow forgotten much of the time, but it had never gone away. He had hoped...

But the last of his hopes was walking away.

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"Well, it's late. We'll bid you a good evening, Mr. Dillon. I'm sure we can trust Elizabeth to see you out." Smiling politely, Elizabeth's parents made their excuses and departed, leaving the courting couple momentarily alone.

Standing to see them go, Richard caught Elizabeth's hands as soon as her parents were out of sight. She was quite beautiful in the lamplight. The serene glow of her face was like that of a Madonna from an old work of



art. She made no protest at his presumptuous move but merely waited for him to reveal his thoughts.

Nervously, he clasped their hands together. "Your parents are quite civil to me. I feared they would take umbrage at a stranger courting their daughter."

"They have confidence in my ability to make my own choices in friends."

She was somehow so distant from him that Richard did not know how to respond. It had been so easy to communicate with pen and paper, but now that he was here, holding her hands, he couldn't feel the same familiarity. There was nothing but this politeness between them. He knew she felt the same as he on many subjects, but intellectual discussions weren't sufficient basis for the kind of marriage he had in mind. He needed to draw her closer, to feel the kindred spirit burning in her, the spirit that would make her agree to cross the country for him.

Helpless to know how to go on, Richard bent to place a soft kiss on her lips. Elizabeth turned her head to his, allowing the liberty, and his heart soared. He pressed a little further, but she did not seem to know how to respond. With a small feeling of disappointment, he lifted his head again.

"Thank you for the lovely evening, Elizabeth. It is good to feel at home with someone as I do with you. It has been a long time since I've known a proper home."

A smile flickered briefly across her face as she walked with him toward the door. "Everyone needs a home," she murmured. "Perhaps we are like plants and need to sink roots somewhere."

His thoughts went to the golden crocus that had wilted into transparency almost immediately after

plucking. He wished she had not conjured up that image. Not daring to do more in full view of the neighborhood, Richard touched his hand to Elizabeth's cheek as he stood in the doorway.

"We just need to find the proper soil, I suppose," he admitted. He tried to satisfy himself with the smile she bestowed upon him as he turned away, but it wasn't enough. He could feel the lack grinding somewhere deep inside. He wanted this woman to be his bride. He needed her serenity to form the basis for the home he wished to have. He needed her companionship in the distant land he would soon call home. But he had the uneasy feeling that something wasn't right—something was missing, and he didn't know how to find it. He must be doing something wrong, but he didn't know what.

Pondering the matter, Richard nearly ran into Lorna on the next street. Or rather, she nearly ran into him. He caught her arms to steady her and didn't let them go as he looked down into her face. He could see tears shimmering in her eyes, and they disturbed him. He didn't think a woman as strong as Lorna wept.

"Why are men so stupid?" she cried before he had time to say anything. "Why are they so blind? Can we really be so different that we don't even speak the same language? Do we use the same words but have different meanings?"

Since his thoughts were traveling along much the same path, her words struck him forcefully. He kept his hold on her while he tried to find the proper response. "I think perhaps we do," he said. His legal training made him think an argument through step-by-step, but she wasn't giving him time to work his way clearly to a conclusion. "I think men are more of the world and think

in wider meanings. Women are of the home, and their words are centered on what they know around them. *Home* to a man could mean the city or state. To a woman, it means the house she lives in."

"Balderdash!" Lorna threw off his hands and glared at him. "I don't have a house to live in. I live in hotels and other people's houses. *Home* has many meanings for me, just as it must for you. I just think men are deliberately obtuse when they speak to women."

Richard had the oddest urge to hug her and to laugh. She was so angry that he could almost see steam pouring from her ears. Her red hair was definitely a fiery signal of her temperament. But instead of angering him, her temper made him feel more alive than he thought possible.

"And men think that women speak in riddles. How is it that we ever get along, do you think?"

"We don't!"

To Richard's dismay, her eyes puddled with tears again. Helpless, he reached out a hand to her, but she smacked it away.

"Just look around you." She swung her hand in a grandiose gesture. "Men keep their women locked up behind closed doors as if they were possessions, like their pianos and cookstoves. Do you think women like to be thought of as some kind of inanimate object to be smacked and pushed around at a man's whim? We have thoughts and feelings too, but do men ever question them? Of course not. Their only concerns are for themselves."

"You speak in generalizations. That's not always true. Much of the time we are prevented from talking with women as we would like. Like now. If you were a

man, I could ask you to come with me and have a cup of coffee and talk. But you and I know that if we walked into a cafe at this hour, the whole town would talk and your reputation would be ruined. When would I be allowed the intimacy of having a private conversation with a woman? Not until we are married and stuck with each other. What happens if a man marries, only to find he and his wife have no common interests about which they could converse?"

Lorna stared at him. "A modern woman could go with you during the day. It is only this hour that makes it unseemly. Surely you and Elizabeth have much to discuss."

His smile was wry. "You and I have just said more in these few minutes than Elizabeth and I have discussed in days. Why is it I find it so much easier to speak with you than with the woman I wish to marry?"

Lorna opened her mouth and shut it again. Richard admired the way her face glowed with intelligence. She wasn't beautiful like Elizabeth, but the red of her hair and the simpleness of her gown spoke of a strong character, and the character appealed to him. She was tall enough to reach past his shoulder, but her waist was incredibly slender. He wanted to test it with his hands. The thought of his hands on her waist made him think of moving his hands even higher, and his gaze focused on the proud swell of her breasts beneath the brown cloth. He gulped and forced his eyes back to her face.

Her cheeks were slightly pink, as if she knew what he was thinking. She didn't step away as she ought. She was a bold woman. Richard lifted one hand to her waist, as if to guide her somewhere.

She spoke hastily. "Terence is taking a job at the

newspaper here. He wants to settle down. He asked me to marry him once. How could he ask to marry me and then leave me like this?"

"Did you tell him you would marry him?" he asked. But he was more interested in the way the gaslight flickered across the red of her hair and the way her supple waist felt beneath his hand. He wouldn't dare touch Elizabeth like this. That in itself gave him an odd sensation.

"I didn't tell him no," she whispered, looking away. "I think I'd better go."

She made no effort to leave. They were both too aware of the spring night. From somewhere, a warm breeze rippled their hair, and the sweet scent of a honeysuckle hedge was all around them. It seemed natural to be standing here like this. Richard wrapped his arm around her and led her to a bench nearly hidden by winter-bare shrubbery.

"Not yet. Perhaps we can help each other. If I can help you understand Terence, maybe you can help me understand Elizabeth. I'm afraid to even touch her as I'm touching you now."

He was brushing a straying strand of hair back from her face. Lorna turned to meet his gaze without timidity. He liked that. She made it so easy for him. He felt none of the awkwardness he did with Elizabeth. He didn't understand why. He just knew it was so. He bent and pressed a kiss to her mouth to see if she would respond as she had earlier, at the picnic.

It was wilder and sweeter at the same time. Lorna had full lips that melted easily beneath his. Richard put his arms around her and pulled her closer, and she made no protest. She even brought her hands to his

shoulders so they were better balanced as he bent her slightly into his embrace. He felt her slight gasp as he deepened their kiss, but she was warm and pliant and willing in his hands. This was what he had wanted. This was what he had expected.

This wasn't the woman he had expected it from. Slowly, reluctantly, Richard forced himself away from her. He stared down into startled eyes, guessing she was as amazed as he. He could almost feel their hearts beating in tandem. It was an impossible feeling. He scarcely knew this woman. She was nothing like what he wanted in a wife. This was just a momentary aberration, albeit an aberration that had already happened twice.

"Terence is a fool if he lets you go," he muttered furiously, not certain at whom the fury was directed. "I will tell him so if you like."

Lorna brushed her hands against his shoulders, as if to steady herself, then pulled them back to her lap. She looked more thoughtful than shy. "He wants what I cannot give him," she answered pensively. "I will never be the domestic wife he imagines. I think he would like to have the home and family he never had as a child; I should have seen that. Perhaps I'm the one who has been blind."

Richard held her hand in his. "What will you do now? You cannot go gallivanting about the countryside alone."

She attempted a smile. "I will find some woman to travel with me, I suppose. It will be much more proper." She darted a look up to him. "If you kiss Elizabeth as you have kissed me, I don't think you'll have any trouble persuading her to do as you like."

Her words struck Richard like a blow in the stom-

ach. She rose from the bench and he followed her, but she held out a hand to stay him.

"I can find my own way home. I need some time to myself, if you don't mind. Thank you for taking your time with me. Perhaps not all men are hopeless, after all."

She left him feeling bereft. It was as if he'd found something valuable, only to have it torn from his hands before he could appreciate what he'd found. She was an extraordinary woman. He had kissed her like a man possessed, and she'd not played the part of coy maiden afterward. Perhaps she had been kissed many times. But he'd seen the surprise in her eyes, and he didn't think so. She'd felt what he had, what he shouldn't have felt. And she was releasing him from obligation by walking away. He wasn't at all certain that he wanted to be released.

Shaken to the core by the realization that all his careful plans could be coming asunder so easily, Richard turned and walked back toward his boardinghouse. He needed time to straighten out his muddled thoughts.

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"I have only the one more lecture, then I must make arrangements to leave. I've been interviewing several women for the position of travel companion, since Terence will be staying here." As they walked, Lorna trailed her gloved fingers along the frail greenery of a privet hedge coming to life. The fact that this childish gesture wasn't at all ladylike did not seem to concern her.

Elizabeth was more occupied with her cousin's words than her actions. "Surely you do not mean to leave so soon? I hoped, I thought... Richard will be here only another month. I'd hoped you'd stay until we..."

Lorna lifted auburn eyebrows as she glanced at her usually imperturbable cousin. "Until you married? Has he asked you yet?"

Elizabeth hesitated. The sky blazed a bright blue and a robin was singing somewhere close by. Spring was almost here. She had always thought to be married in the spring. "He hasn't asked, but he is very cautious. We have an understanding. It is just... Well, there is so little time. If only we could be engaged for a little while, and then he could come back here and we could be married. But to marry, and then to move... I'm not certain I'm strong enough."

"Perhaps you should marry and then he should go off to find a home for you. That would give you a little time to adjust, and he would know that he had a wife waiting for him."

"Perhaps that is it." She didn't sound very certain. "I wish you would stay. I find it so easy to talk to you."

Lorna's better feelings battled with her lesser ones. For the moment, the better ones won. "You could write. I will send you my new address as soon as I have it. I won't travel very far, so that when you announce your wedding date, I can come here to see you married."

Elizabeth sent her a worried look. "What about Terence? I thought maybe you and he..."

Lorna shrugged. "It would never work; I see that now. He is my very best friend, and I wish him happiness, but I could never live here. I need travel and excitement and adventure. I need people who think like I do. I need new places and new ideas. Even if I settled down and did nothing but write, can you imagine how the ladies here would think of me? Terence needs a wife



who will fit in, who will attend teas and report to him so he knows all the news. He needs a helpmate, not a rebel."

It was a brilliant day, with all the prospects of the future before them, but neither appeared happy with their plans. Elizabeth played wistfully with a pussy willow branch she had plucked, and Lorna stared morosely at the road ahead.

Their wandering thoughts were interrupted by a woman who rushed from a side street to greet them. It took them a moment to recognize the drooping feather and worn velvet, but the woman's words told them who she was without introduction.

"I have come to pay back the first dollar on my loan," she said eagerly, pressing a crushed and folded bill into Lorna's hand. "You will see that it goes to the gentleman, won't you? I can't thank you enough for what you have done for me. I have more orders now than I have time to fill. I actually raised my prices and the orders still come in! If only I had a bigger stove and someone to help, I could do twice as much business. I'm setting aside a little every day so I can put a down payment on a new stove, and to pay back the loan, and I still have enough left to buy little extras."

Lorna shook the woman's hands. "That's marvelous! And how is your husband doing? Is he working again? Does he mind your working now?"

Some of the happiness drained from the woman's face, but she managed a brave smile. "He's found a job out of town. He comes home on Sundays." She bit her lip and looked down at her feet. "I haven't told him what I'm doing." She looked up again at the silence greeting her statement. "But I will, I promise. I just wanted to be certain that I could do it all on my own."

It's not as if I'm working for someone else, now, is it? I'm my own boss, and I work at home. Now that he's working again, I think he'll understand. I mean to buy him one of those cigars he likes so much, and surprise him with it when he comes home. Then I'll tell him how I earned the money."

The woman hurried away. Lorna and Elizabeth exchanged looks.

Lorna was the first to speak. "I refuse to marry if I must ask my husband's permission to do something I enjoy. Women aren't children who must be guided by a man's supposed wisdom."

"I thought when people married, it meant they loved each other and wanted each other to be happy. Why can it not be that way?"

Lorna gave her a sharp look. "Do you love Richard? Has he said he loves you?"

Elizabeth picked at one of the fuzzy buds on the branch. "Mama says these things come with marriage. If you trust and respect a man when you marry, you will come to love him afterward."

"You just saw an example of the fallacy of that," Lorna pointed out. "Women may marry because they must, but that does not mean they will ever come to love their spouses. I trust and respect Terence, but I'll never love him as more than a brother. Once I thought that might be enough, but I realize it's not now."

Elizabeth gave her cousin a swift, terrified look, then returned to demolishing her branch. "How will you know if you love a man?"

Lorna turned around and began a brisk stride back toward the house. "When I'm insane enough to want to carry a man's baby, then I'll know I'm either ready to be

locked up, or I must be in love."

Elizabeth laughed, but it was a weak imitation of her usual laughter.

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"Do you usually attend church on Sunday, sir?" Elizabeth twirled her parasol and looked up at the man walking by her side several days after their encounter with Mrs. Slovoski. He looked very distinguished in his new outfit, and she wondered if Terence had worn it to impress Lorna. She was sorry if that was so. Lorna hadn't attended services.

"You must call me Terence as your cousin does, and no, I do not usually attend because we are so often on the road. I thought the time had come to change my ways."

Elizabeth brightened. "Then you really do mean to stay! That is wonderful."

He gave her a look of curiosity. "I told you I meant to take the position at the newspaper. Did you think I would change my mind?"

She turned her head to glance up the road and away from him. "Lorna was so adamant... I thought perhaps she might change your mind."

Terence tucked her arm in the crook of his. "Lorna and I grew up together, but we've grown apart these last few years. We can always hope she will consider this her home and come back to visit, but I don't expect more."

Elizabeth gave him a fleeting look of alarm at the familiarity of his tone and his touch, but then the sight ahead of them distracted her. "Look, there is Lorna with Richard. They must have come to meet us."

The two were in deep discussion but looked up and waved at Elizabeth's call. They hurried forward, and

Richard properly took Elizabeth's arm, relieving Terence of his duty. As usual, Lorna took the lead, stepping ahead of her and Richard.

Elizabeth was left somewhat uneasy by this change of position, perhaps knowing that Terence and Lorna no longer wished to remain together as a couple. But though they did not touch, they did not seem awkward with the situation as they fell into step ahead of her.

"Lorna tells me you wished to go bicycling if the weather was fair, but I haven't found enough bicycles to rent," Richard said. "I thought perhaps we could just stroll through the park, then stop at the drugstore for sodas later. Will that be a sufficient substitute?"

Elizabeth smiled obligingly. "We will ruin our dinners. Mother expects us all to come eat with them. Perhaps we can save the sodas for afterward."

The conversation suddenly seemed stilted and polite, but she couldn't understand why. These people were all her friends. They had much in common and there should be plenty of topics to converse on. But there seemed to be a strain between them that she could not identify. Richard didn't seem to be quite listening to her, and Terence and Lorna had nothing to say to each other.

She sought for some common topic. "Did Lorna tell you that Mrs. Slovoski has become very successful in her baking business? Your generous loan has been well utilized."

Richard frowned. "I am still not comfortable with interfering in the lives of others. What if her husband objects? It looked to me as if she had been beaten before."

Lorna turned to look back at him. "But now she has

the confidence to leave him if she must. That is the whole point!" Her eyes widened at the sight of something over their shoulders.

At her gasp, Richard glanced behind him. The sight of a man carrying a shotgun on this lovely spring day was a trifle jarring, but he saw no immediate reason for alarm. He tugged on Elizabeth's arm to keep her walking away from the man. There was no point in taking chances.

"Hold up there!" The shout echoed after them as they entered the park gates.

This time, Terence turned to look. Without hesitation, he grabbed the arms of both women and shoved them behind him, then stepped forward to stand beside Richard.

"Hold it there!" the man shouted, approaching rapidly and removing his gun from his shoulder. His words were slurred with drink and a heavy accent, but the shotgun spoke for him.

"Run," Richard whispered to the women. "We'll handle this."

"I will not," Lorna responded angrily. "There are four of us. What can he do?" She bent to pick up a rock lining the walk.

"I come to get my wife back." The man lurched as he stepped up to the walk from the street. His work clothes were stained and tattered, and his eyes showed the red of heavy drinking, but he was a large man and a formidable adversary. The shotgun he held aimed at them made him doubly dangerous. He glared blearily, trying to aim at the women. "Tell me where she is," he demanded.

He swayed, and almost dropped the shotgun.

Elizabeth shrieked, and cursing, Terence shoved them behind a brick column of the park fence. Richard bravely held his place.

"We don't know you or your wife," he said calmly. "We've just come from church. Would she have been there?"

"She's gone! That troublemakin' woman gave her big ideas. Who's goin' to fix my dinner now? I'm goin' to kill her!" He waved the shotgun wildly, trying to fix his aim on the women, who seemed to have disappeared into a brick wall.

"You can't leave Richard out there all alone," Lorna whispered, pushing at Terence. "It's me he's looking for. Let me out there!"

"You stay put or I'll tan your hide," Terence informed her impolitely. "I'm going over the wall to get behind him. You do anything to distract him, and I'll go after you with a shotgun too."

Elizabeth grabbed her cousin's arm as they cowered behind the column. "Listen to him, or you might risk their lives."

Terence gave her a brief nod of gratitude, then pulled himself onto the wall. He disappeared over the other side, leaving the women to watch the scene unfolding with anxiety. The park was deserted at this hour on a Sunday morning. Elizabeth was torn between the wish for someone to arrive and save them and the fear that an innocent bystander would stumble upon them and be killed. Her greater fear was for the two men bravely trying to hold off the drunken husband until he calmed down.

"Get out of my way!" the man was screaming in guttural tones. "If I can't have a wife, you won't

either!"

Elizabeth gulped as she watched Terence ease behind the man. Richard must see him too, but she couldn't imagine what either man could do. The shotgun was aimed directly at Richard's heart. Her own heart pounded furiously in fear.

"I can't let them do this," Lorna whispered behind her.

Before Elizabeth could stop her, Lorna stepped out of the bushes and from behind the column. "You want me, come and get me, Mr. Slovoski," she called.

The sudden distraction brought the shotgun swinging upward. Richard ducked and dived at the man's legs at the same time as Terence leapt on him from behind. The combination assault threw the man backward, and the shotgun exploded into the air.

Elizabeth screamed and grabbed a fallen branch from the ground. While fists flailed and the men struggled to hold their attacker, she came at him with the heavy branch. Lorna approached from the other side, wielding her stone.

As the big man roared in drunken rage, stumbling to his feet to throw off his assailants, Lorna smacked his head with the rock and Elizabeth hit his arm with her stick. He roared again, but with less power. Richard grabbed the gun and jerked it away, giving Terence the chance to drive his fist into the man's chin. Slovoski swayed and hit the ground.

The street suddenly filled with people drawn by the shotgun blast. As men hurried to surround the fallen drunk, Richard turned and caught a white-faced Lorna before she could drop like the rock she let fall to the ground.

"My word, that was brilliant!" he cried, hugging her to him. "You distracted him at just the right moment."

She murmured something less than comprehensible, clung to his coat, and stared as a policeman slapped handcuffs on their assailant.

Terence stepped over the prone figure to remove the stick from Elizabeth's frozen fingers. She looked up at him helplessly as the stick fell away.

"Are you all right? I'm going to have to kill that blasted redhead for nearly getting you killed, but let me see you home first. You shouldn't be exposed to this kind of thing." Terence caught Elizabeth's hands in one of his and used his other arm to guide her around the growing crowd.

She cast a quick look over her shoulder to where Richard was comforting a terrified Lorna, and nodding, she allowed herself to be led away. She didn't know herself right now. She certainly couldn't claim to know what was going on in anyone else's head. She just knew she wanted to go home, and this man was taking her there.

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"It's going to be all right," Richard said soothingly, taking Lorna in his arms in the dark shadows of the porch that evening. "I've talked to the police. Mr. Slovoski will be behind bars for some time to come, certainly enough to dry him out a little. His wife was with neighbors. He tried to beat her, but this time she had the sense to run. I've advised her on what steps she can take against her husband if she wishes. I can't do more than that. At least now she has the means to support herself. That should give her enough confidence to think clearly."

Lorna stood in the circle of his arms and rested her



head on his shoulder. "Having a lawyer around could become very comforting, I think. But you frightened me to death out there today. I thought he would shoot you to get at me."

"Terence is still ready to skin you alive for jumping out like that. He cares a great deal for you, you know." There was a question in his voice that could not be expressed in words.

"I know, and I care for him, but it's not the same, is it?" Lorna asked wistfully, pulling away from him. "I had better let you go up to Elizabeth. Aunt Jane insisted that she go to bed, but she's rested now and waiting for you."

Richard skimmed his hand across her cheek. "There are things I want to say, but I don't feel free to do so. But today reminded me very forcefully that we have only one life to live. We ought to live it as fully as we can. I don't think I've been doing that. I never expected to have much in my life, but now I want everything, and I'll not give up until I have what I want. Will you wait for me here while I go up to see Elizabeth?"

Lorna didn't know what to say. She thought she understood him, but she didn't trust her own judgment any longer. And she couldn't bear to hurt Elizabeth—not gentle, trusting Elizabeth. Yet... She looked up into this man's eyes and wished she could read the future. He was a strong man, one who would want his way in everything. He would go to California because that was where his future lay. He harbored an affection for Elizabeth, but was affection enough to comfort her cousin when she was so far from home?

Lorna prayed Richard knew what he was doing. She nodded her head. "I'll wait. If I know him, Terence

will be here shortly. I'd rather he not yell at me inside."

He brushed a kiss across her cheek, then lightly across her lips. She shivered at the touch, then watched him stride determinedly inside. She wouldn't allow the yearning she felt to cause her to do anything foolish. She could stand on her own. She didn't need anyone.

Terence strode up the walk some minutes later. His figure was so familiar to her that she could recognize him in the dark, and she smiled. She could even recognize his mood from the way he walked. He had made up his mind about something and was about to lay down the law. She really ought to let him go inside and make a fool of himself, but Richard and Elizabeth deserved this time together. She whistled softly to catch his attention.

He immediately diverted his path and found her in the shadows. "What are you doing out here? You'll freeze. It's scarcely spring and you act like it's summer."

"You always did treat me as if I were a little girl without any sense, Terence. I'm quite warm, thank you. I wanted to tell you how proud I was of you today before you started yelling at me."

He caught her hands and found them wrapped warmly in heavy gloves. "You could have got us all killed, you realize."

"You could have got yourself and Richard killed. I didn't think that any better. Let us not argue. I want to remember you as my good friend. I'm going to have to leave shortly, and I want to ask you a favor."

He searched her face in the darkness, catching some glimmer of the seriousness of her expression from the lights behind the curtained windows. "You know you can ask anything of me."

She smiled. "You're my best friend, Terence, and

Elizabeth is my dearest cousin. If things don't work out between her and Richard, will you look after her? She is meant to be someone's wife, but I don't think she's meant to be the adventuring sort. I very much fear that she will be like that flower she told us about. If he tries to uproot her, she will wither and die."

Terence grew still. He clasped her hands and threw a glance upward to the light in an upper-story window. Then he returned his gaze to Lorna. "He's with her now? Will he ask for her hand?"

"If he does, I think she will put him off. She's not ready to leave home yet. It will be very difficult for them."

He breathed a sigh of relief and released her. "No, it won't. I'll settle the matter now. He's too strong-minded for a gentle soul like Elizabeth. She'll listen to me."

He seemed so sure of himself as he strode toward the door that Lorna had to laugh and call after him, "What about Richard? If he's so strong-minded, don't you fear he will carry her off with him? He really does want to marry, you know."

"Then he can marry you, damn it," he answered as he pounded on the door knocker. "The two of you deserve each other."

That was as much of a blessing as he was likely to give her, Lorna mused as someone answered the door and let him in. But it was enough. She only hoped she had not mistaken Elizabeth's feelings. Her very proper, very demure cousin had been hanging on to Terence for dear life today. Terence, not Richard. Surely she would not have done that if there wasn't already something between them. Please, don't let it be wishful thinking, she prayed.

Restless, unable to stand still, Lorna wandered out into the yard. Glancing upward, she saw the silhouette of a couple outlined in the sitting room window. Her heart fell to her feet as the couple embraced. She had so hoped...

She turned away, unable to bear the surge of pain. She had not thought it would have mattered so much. She had known him only a few weeks. It had been foolish to think a man like that would want a red-headed hellion for a wife. He would never have a moment's peace. He was much better off with Elizabeth. She would be a good wife for him. She felt sorry for Terence, but he would find someone else. He was a good man. He would find a good woman.

She heard the clatter of shoes on the porch steps, and she swung around, startled. A glance told her the couple was still in the upstairs window. She didn't know if she could bear to feel Terence's disappointment along with her own. She didn't call out to him but stood motionless, waiting.

"Lorna!" The voice was anxious, frantic. "Lorna? Are you out here?"

She glanced back to the window, then to the man striding across the lawn. It couldn't be. Her heart pounded helplessly. "Richard?" she called in disbelief.

His strong arms wrapped around her and lifted her recklessly from the ground. "You know what I want to do with you, don't you?"

"With me?" she squealed as he swung her around in a mad circle.

"With you." He lowered her until their mouths met.

Her head was spinning from more than his whirling around. She clung to his shoulders and parted her lips and

felt the power of his kiss all the way to her toes.

Richard brought her down against him and wrapped her tightly in his arms, pulling his coat around her so she felt nothing but the warmth of his body. Never had she felt so sheltered and secure as she did now.

"I want to marry you, then I want to kiss you until you're putty in my hands, and then I'm going to take you to my bed and make wild love to you. Am I scorching your delicate ears yet?" he whispered into one of the aforementioned items.

"More than my ears." Her cheeks flamed and her body ached and she was certain she was already melting.

"Good. Now tell me you'll be my wife and go to California with me to convert the sinners and raise the flag for women's suffrage. We'll be good together, I promise. I'll bail you out of jail and defend your ladies and you'll keep me from becoming a boring, pompous old fool."

"Really? You'll really do all that? You won't mind if I'm called names and half of society thinks I'm a rabid madwoman? You don't mind that I'm not pretty like Elizabeth? You can't have thought this through. Put me down, Richard. You need time. Elizabeth hurt you." She struggled to pull away.

He raised a hand to find her breast. She wasn't wearing a corset. Sighing with unmitigated delight, Richard caressed the full curves his hand discovered until she quivered in his arms and forgot to pull away.

"Elizabeth is a lovely woman, and I wouldn't hurt her for the world, but we both know she'll be happier here. You and I are different. We need new horizons. Elizabeth didn't hurt me, but you can. I never thought I'd

have the nerve to say this to any woman, Lorna, but I love you. You're the only woman I could ever love. You're the only woman I could ever talk to. And you're the only woman I want to make love to for the rest of my life." This last he whispered in her ear as he bent his head to kiss her into acquiescence.

"Thornbushes transplant easier than crocuses, I guess," she murmured moments later.

"I think I've found a rose among the thorns. Was that a yes?" He ran his hand deep into the upsweep of her hair and held her tight.

"That's a yes, my love. Just don't ever write me a letter that begins 'dearest sister.' "

He laughed, and the embracing couple on the lawn complemented the one silhouetted in the window above, while the spring breeze sent the yellow heads of a patch of crocuses to nodding sleepily in their beds.