



# Night Garden

Maggi Andersen

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*by Maggi Andersen*

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## Chapter One

England

Wimbledon

Summer 1899

Raindrops struck Laura's straw hat with a splattering sound. She ran over the damp grass, trailing the skirt of her blue-checked tennis suit over a rosebush, and sending bursts of crimson petals into the air. Ahead, the white-painted gazebo offered shelter. It also offered seclusion.

"Run or you'll get soaked, slow-top," she called to the man who ran behind her. Howard Farmer her associate from Cambridge University was her tennis partner for the weekend.

He leapt a rose bush, and then with agile grace, vaulted the gazebo balustrade. He stood with one slim, white flannel leg crossed over the other in a studied pose as she ran up the steps. "Slow top, eh?"

"I caught my skirt." Laura tossed her racquet onto the wicker table.

He smiled at her. "Are you mad because I didn't let you win the last set?"

She frowned. "My skirt. *Again.*"

A smile crinkled the corners of his hazel eyes. He came close and brushed a wet curl from her brow.

At the gentle touch of his fingers, Laura drew a deep breath and tucked her hair firmly behind one ear. Moving to the railing, she gazed out at the rain. If only she could wear the knickerbockers now in fashion. It didn't bother her that

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her mother would be shocked. Her father, however, would think she looked like one of the new breed of women who would rather bed a woman than a man. She had overheard him saying as much to Mother over the newspaper at breakfast. Her mother had shushed him with a glance in her direction. He already accused Laura of being far too competitive to be feminine. She could play golf and tennis as well as most men, so why should she pretend otherwise? As to her sexual proclivities, he would be quite wrong. She definitely planned to make love with a man.

"You often seem angry." Howard stood so close, his breath tickled her ear. "I don't understand why."

"Why should you?" she said folding her arms. "You're a man. You're free. I can only dream of such choices."

The shower eased off to a drizzle and a ray of sunlight broke through the clouds.

"I've enjoyed the tennis," Laura said, in an effort to regain her good nature. "But I must go and change for the party." Up at Cambridge she thought she knew who she was. She wasn't used to the complex feelings that now pulled at her.

They gathered up their rackets and balls, and strolled along the avenue of dripping beech trees, to its far end where the house stood.

Laura loved the garden after rain; it reminded her of replenishment and renewal. Of rebirth. A carpet of bluebells painted the ground beneath the trees and the grass seemed luminous. The pungent smell of wet earth drifted in the air. As they drew closer to the house, she slipped her arm through Howard's. She couldn't help smiling when she gazed

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at him. He looked so attractive with his keen hazel eyes and floppy, fair hair curling over his collar. Her mother had shaken her head and said he needed a haircut.

They reached the end of the avenue. Howard paused to gaze up at the warm brick walls of Grisewood Hall. "Quite a place your parents have here."

It was a pretty house, Laura had to admit, newly built in the Queen Anne style with a soaring roof, turrets and bay windows, settled into the grounds of an old garden. "Should be called the mad house," she murmured, as they entered the lofty marble-tiled hall. "Particularly today."

Black-skirted maids in white aprons, rushed past carrying silverware and crystal glasses, laying tables in the dining room. Waiters struggled with huge urns of exotic, hothouse flowers.

"Come through to the breakfast room," Laura said. "You can't go home damp, you'll catch cold."

"Do you care about my health?" Howard asked with a grin.

"I wouldn't like to be responsible for you catching your death," she said evasively. "I'll fetch you a towel."

The rain had driven the afternoon's garden party indoors. Laura's father, Lord Palmer, a prominent political figure in the Liberal party, held many such social events at their Wimbledon home.

She met her mother on the stairs. "You look like a drowned kitten, Laura." Lady Palmer's eyebrows rose. "You should be dressed to receive our guests. Your rose pink satin is laid out for you and Mary is waiting. I hope she can do something with your hair."



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"My yellow crepe with the navy braid shall do." Laura put her hand to the damp, auburn coil at her nape. Her neck felt hot and not just from the recent exercise. "I can manage my own hair." Her mother frowned. "If you insist on having Mary do it, Mother, I'll have it all cut off and sell it. Then donate the money to charity."

Her mother's frown turned to one of pained resignation. "Now that you have finished the ridiculous, literature degree, which did nothing but give you airy fairy ideas, your father and I intend to cast about for a suitable husband for you. Your future is not under your control." A jerky movement with her hand indicated the breakfast room where Howard waited. "And it won't be that penniless, young man."

Laura turned on her heel and headed down the hall. She found Howard chatting with a young maid. "You'd best dry your hair." She tossed him the towel as the maid scurried away eyes lowered. "Before you get the staff sacked."

He smiled as he rubbed his hair. "You can't be jealous."

"No. I can't." She folded her arms across her chest.

He threw down the towel, took her hand and drew her behind a marble pillar. "Why did you ask me down?"

She removed his hand from her arm. "You're good company."

He gazed at her, shaking his head. "I felt there might be something between us, but I can't get close to you. What are you defending? Your honor is safe with me, if that's what you wish."

Blond chest hair peeped from his open collar, unsettling her. He could make her laugh and laughter was an

aphrodisiac, or so her women friends at Cambridge told her, when they discussed their sexual exploits. She planned to have experiences of her own very soon. Why not Howard? The thought caused a ripple of excitement to pass through her. A warning bell sounded in her head and she moved away. "You're too serious."

His hazel eyes searched hers. "Too serious for what?"

She hesitated.

Hurt sparked in his eyes, making her regret her words immediately. "Oh. I see. I'm not rich enough. And my career is unsuitable. No one wants their daughter to marry a historian and bury themselves in a university town."

"If I was sure that was what I wanted, I would do it," she said.

"You are a lord's daughter." Howard walked to the window and stood with one hand on the curtain.

Laura came to stand beside him. Outside, shiny broughams and landaus lined the avenue. A pair of grey horses reared nervously as a horseless carriage appeared, belching smoke. The rain had returned, heavier still. Grooms darted around with umbrellas as ladies wearing cloaks over their party dresses emerged from their carriages. "Your father's soiree proves to be a bit damp."

Laura didn't like that he'd turned away from her. She stepped close to him, placing a hand on his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin through his thin, damp shirt. "Howard, I'd like you to be the first."

Howard raised his sandy brows and studied her. "The first?" He caressed her cheek with a finger and smiled sadly.

"Your eyes are the color of emeralds, did anyone ever tell you? And emeralds are costly."

Her hand flew to her cheek as if he'd slapped her. "Well, thank you. I would have expected something more ... poetical. Inspired by Keats, perhaps."

He sighed. "I find I can't take up your very attractive offer, Laura. To be your first." He repeated the last four words slowly like an affront.

Her cheeks warming, Laura said, "One minute you are desperate to make love to me and the next ...."

"I can't play your games," he said hotly. "I don't relish the idea of a broken heart." His glance traveled over her face and body, lingering on her breasts, as his hand touched her waist. "It would take me too long to get over you."

Laura smiled. "Coward."

"Maybe, I am. But I shall have this from you, my lady." His fingers gripped her more tightly, drawing her further into a secluded nook. She waited for his kiss, lifted her chin to invite it. The noise of servants and guests a step away in the hall excited her. His mouth came down on hers as exhilaration unfurled through her body. But he merely brushed his lips against hers. He drew away quickly and, without saying another word, left the room. Laura followed, convinced the servants would note her flushed face and guilty expression and discuss it in their quarters.

The butler handed Howard his bag, tweed overcoat and hat.

The chatter in the reception rooms increased to a crescendo as the house filled with guests.

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As Howard shrugged into his coat, Laura noticed a frayed cuff on his shirtsleeve. Pity seized her heart and squeezed it.

"You're a good daughter," he said politely, as if the kiss hadn't happened. "You'll marry someone of your class and live a very comfortable life."

Did he wish her to refute it? She couldn't, not because he was right, she just didn't have a clear picture of what the future would hold for her. The choice should be hers and not her mother's.

"There's no shame in such a life," he continued with a frown. He offered his arm. "Come, I must thank your parents before I leave."

Her mother and father barely hid their dislike of Howard beneath a veneer of politeness. Did their disapproval make him more attractive to her?

"The weather's turned inclement. My coachman will take you to the station," Lord Palmer said, after a perfunctory shaking of Howard's hand.

"Thank you, but I like to walk in the rain."

"Barker will fetch you an umbrella," Laura said when they reached the hall.

At the front door, Howard put up the umbrella. "Only the rich have these," he said. "The rest of us must rent them or get wet." He turned to nod at her. "Goodbye, Laura."

He strode off down the road on his two mile hike to the station. It occurred to her that she might never see him again, but she didn't call him back.

The heady perfume of vanilla and ylang ylang made her turn. Her mother stood arms akimbo in her burgundy and

white striped silk gown with its imposing bustle, a pearl choker at her throat. "Upstairs now. Quickly, please."

Laura found Mary hovering nervously at the top of the stairs. She rolled her eyes. "It's all right, Mary. You may do my hair."

Laura came down the stairs as Barker opened the front door to a late guest. A broad-shouldered man well over six feet tall entered the hall. His black hair curled over his collar, reminding Laura of Heathcliff from one of her favorite books. She halted on the bottom step, one hand on the banister. He studied her as he divested himself of gloves, coat, top hat, white silk scarf and cane, into the waiting arms of the butler.

"I'm Lord Lanyon." He came forward and offered her his hand. "I apologize for staring."

Laura stepped down onto the marble floor and gave him her gloved hand. She craned her neck and looked up at him. It was not something she was used to, being quite tall herself. "Laura Palmer."

"So, you are the young lady of the house." His full-lipped mouth lifted in a smile.

His powerful build and impressive height intimidated her. Grey eyes studied her approvingly.

Laura gave a polite smile. She smoothed her yellow crepe gown, regretting she hadn't worn the pink. "Father's party is in the drawing room. I believe the guests have finished dining."

"Yes. I am disgracefully late."

"It wasn't meant to be a criticism." Laura motioned down the corridor and they followed the butler as he led the way.

Lord Lanyon smiled down at her. "I take my medicine quite happily when it's delivered in such a fine package."

Laura's eyebrows rose at his self-assured tone. "I dislike flattery on such short acquaintance, sir."

A drone of conversation came within the drawing room. The butler threw open the doors, and Lord Lanyon turned to her, a gleam warming the grey depths of his eyes. "Then I shall store my compliments until next we meet."

Curious as to what her father might want with him, she said, "You plan to call on us again, my lord?"

"You shall see more of me, Laura. May call you by your given name?"

"You already have." The sound of her first name on his lips unsettled her strangely. She crossed the large expanse of thick carpet through the milling guests. He had said her name quite deliberately, of that she was sure. He toyed with her, and she had reacted. What would a man such as he make of her parent's home? She looked around her. Everything was so new. Mother had ruthlessly decorated the reception rooms in coffee and cream. A pair of chiffoniers displayed an abundance of porcelain and coloured glass. Framed prints covered the wall-papered walls. At the windows, white muslin curtains stirred below their scalloped velvet valances, and a gentle breeze wafted around the smoke from the gentleman's pipes and cigars in the smoking room. Ladies in their organdie, taffeta and silk gowns, their hats trimmed with plumes, ribbon and flowers, chatted on the cream serpentine-backed upholstered sofas, flanking the fireplace. Others perched on uncomfortable antique chairs. The rest stood

about in groups, through which wandered the waiters, refilling glasses.

Laura found her father holding court among the ferns and orchids in the conservatory where the smokers had been exiled, and left Lord Lanyon with him. Walking back through the room, she greeted guests as her mind stubbornly refused to remove him from her thoughts. Finally, her gaze was drawn back to him. She met his eyes from across the room and turned away hurriedly.

"Mrs Courtney-Smith, how nice to see you." Laura distracted herself with the wife of a politician dressed in a plum silk gown, her pigeon breast adorned with several rows of Venetian glass beads. After learning a potted history of that lady's week, Laura went on to greet another. She had known most of the guests all her life, but there were two or three here today she'd never met before. Strangers often appeared at her father's parties; he gathered their acquaintance and filed them away for possible future use. As Foreign Minister, his plans for his country were admirable, but his fierce ambition was to become Prime Minister. She loved her father dearly and hoped he would achieve it.

When her mother was angry, she accused Laura of being her father's daughter. Laura felt at least one aspect of that was true, she would fight for whatever it was she set her heart on.

"Miss Palmer?" She turned to find Lord Lanyon with two glasses of Champagne. He held one towards her.

"Thank you." She took the glass from him, glancing past him at the quill of feathers from her mother's straw turban

bobbing above the crowd. Laura raised the glass to her lips. "Mother won't approve of this." She took a long sip. The bubbles tickled her nose and the alcohol threaded its way through her body, warming as it went.

"Moet. One cannot refuse nectar from the gods."

Aware that her mother was a member of the Temperance Association, Laura sent him a challenging look, "You would encourage me to disobey my parent?"

His eyes were so unlike Howard's. Laura could read little in their grey depths, beyond faint amusement. She felt out of her depth with him. It disconcerted her, and yet, she wanted more of it.

"Surely your mother wouldn't deny you one glass? Champagne and life are meant to be enjoyed, to the last drop," he said.

Laura took another swallow and a frisson of excitement travelled up her spine that she doubted was from the wine. Over the rim of her glass, she watched her mother approach. The guests parted and allowed her to pass through like Moses in the Red Sea.

"Laura, I thought I told you .... Oh, Lord Lanyon, I didn't see you there."

Laura nearly choked. One would have to be partially blind to miss him, and her mother had eyes like an eagle.

"I do hope you're enjoying our little soiree, such a pity it couldn't be held in the garden. The flowers are wonderful this year."

"Indeed I am, Lady Palmer. Thank you for inviting me."

Lady Palmer gave Laura's half-empty glass a glance.



Laura waited for a thinly veiled censure, but her mother merely gazed around the room. "There's someone standing all by themselves. I'd best rescue them." With a nod to Lord Lanyon, she sailed off again.

"It was my mother who invited you?" Laura asked curiously.

He nodded. "We met at a dinner party. She wished me to meet her charming daughter."

Laura's anger at her mother's meddling fizzed through her like sherbet. Her face flamed as only a redhead's could. "I ask your forgiveness for my mother's action, Lord Lanyon." She felt ready to sink and searched the crowd for someone to rescue her.

"You've no need to apologize. I've enjoyed our meeting. And hope for more."

His boldness made the hairs on her nape stand on end. "I'm sorry. I just saw someone I should speak to."

He tilted his head. "You've apologized to me twice. Why?" Laura bit her lip. "Did I? I'm sorry."

They both laughed.

Laura couldn't tell him about the battle waging between her and her mother, without sounding disloyal and childish.

There was a pause while Lord Lanyon's eyes roamed over her face. Laura wanted to fill the silence but found nothing to say.

"You have inherited your beauty from your mother," he said thoughtfully. "She is still an attractive woman."

Laura smiled. "She is, and thank you."

"I'm glad she invited me to meet her headstrong daughter."

Laura raised her brows. "Headstrong?"

His mouth quirked in a smile. "I believe that was her exact word."

Laura's jaw tensed. "Mother and I don't necessarily agree on everything, Lord Lanyon."

"I can see that. It piqued my interest, nevertheless, and here I am."

"And now I must do my duty, excuse me." Laura placed her empty glass on a passing waiter's tray.

His low, deep voice pulled her back. "May I see you again?"

Her mother had picked him as a possible husband and that was reason enough for her to spurn him. She glanced up into his ruggedly handsome face, and found him intriguing.

He waited politely, raising a strong black eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Saturday evening? I have tickets for a concert at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden."

"That would be delightful." She smiled and moved away.

What had she done? Her mother would never give up now until she married the man.

Nathaniel Lanyon climbed from his carriage and entered his hotel. He was in town to attend parliament, and finding a wife had been the last thing on his mind. In fact, he had no intention of ever marrying again. Some men should never marry. He sought feminine company where no questions would be asked about his past, and no expectations made for

the future. A high-class brothel, discreet, clean, and filled with delectable women, served his needs.

His London stays were always filled with social engagements that bored him. When Lady Palmer invited him to their soiree, he'd been inclined to refuse. She sat next to him at yet another tedious dinner, and discussed her daughter Laura at length. He had listened with an abstracted smile, his mind on the next day's business. Her chatter began to inveigle his mind and caused him to sit up and take notice.

"What is happening to young women today?" she asked despairingly. "Laura is too independent by far. I am at my wit's end to know what to do with her." She fanned herself with a pretty painted fan. She had obviously been a beauty in her day. He wondered if the daughter was like her. "She read far too many novels up at university," she continued. "Marriage to a strong man will settle her down. She is a good girl, if too wilful."

Intrigued despite himself, he had accepted Lady Palmer's invitation, although he doubted the girl would excite any real interest in him. He was quite aware of the thickness of the wall he'd built around himself in the last two years.

He stood transfixed in the front hall of the Palmer's Wimbledon residence watching the young woman descend the stairs. Holding her long slender neck straight and proud, she moved with lithe and grace. Her glowing auburn hair coiled stylishly atop her head, and when her gaze rested on him, her almond shaped green eyes studied him coolly. At the sight of her, all fears and regrets were forgotten. He knew instantly that he must have her. A myriad of thoughts spun in his

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mind. For a girl as gently reared as Laura, marriage would be a must. He could have gone down on one knee before her, there and then. But oh, those cool eyes, that independent tilt of the chin. He would have to fight to woo her. Once he had her, he would enjoy driving her to the heights of passion. By the time he and Laura entered the Palmer's drawing room, he was already sure of her passionate nature; it was evident in her full wilful mouth he wanted badly to kiss.

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## Chapter Two

Lady Palmer's countenance at breakfast resembled a cat that had just cleaned a quart of cream off its whiskers. "Lord Lanyon asked your father for permission to take you to the opera."

Laura continued to butter a warm roll. "I'm delighted to have the chance to hear that wonderful pianist, Paderewski."

"Lanyon is a very attractive man, although perhaps a little swarthy for my taste. Your father wasn't the most handsome man in the world. We must make allowances."

"Did you marry for love, Mother?"

Lady Palmer poured milk into her cup. "What a question. Marriage isn't about love."

"Can't it be?"

"A good marriage isn't based on passion, it's a business partnership."

"Didn't you ever want something more?"

Lady Palmer frowned. "I'm not the one we are discussing. You are turning twenty-three next birthday. If you manage to lead Lanyon to the altar, the whole of London will be at your feet." She stirred sugar into her tea. "An old title, not one recently bestowed like your father's, a very wealthy estate, his home an ancient abbey in Cornwall, Lanyon is known to be an excellent catch."

Her voice carried a satisfied note that made Laura push away her half-eaten breakfast. She touched a napkin to her lips. "It's only a concert, Mother."

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"Why, must you be so difficult, Laura? Eliza would have welcomed this. She would have been excited."

Laura took a slow, deep breath. "I am not Eliza, Mother."

"Some new shoes are definitely in order." Lady Palmer continued, her mind already ticking off an invisible list. "We'll have Robb drive us into London this afternoon to Worth for a pair of French kid opera slippers."

Laura knew every time her mother looked at her, she thought of Eliza. Since her twin sister had died eighteen months ago of diphtheria, Laura struggled with feelings of powerlessness. She seemed unable to assuage her own grief, let alone her mother's. And she hated how powerless she felt to make her way in a man's world.

"Of course, Lord Lanyon is a widower," her mother continued, breaking into Laura's thoughts.

"He is?" Laura was unable to hide her curiosity. Her mother saw it.

"His wife died two years ago."

"How dreadful. Was it an illness?"

"She died in a fall, apparently. She was with child. It was very sad."

"Poor man," Laura said softly. Had she caught a glimpse of sadness in his eyes? "Which gown should I wear, Mother?" she asked. "The blue?"

"The pastel pink silk Charmeuse with the sash at the waist," her mother said approvingly. "And you shall wear my pearls."

Saturday evening, Nathaniel, Lord Lanyon, called for her in his shiny black carriage. He charmed Laura's parents in a way

poor Howard could never have achieved. In his superbly cut evening clothes he looked every inch the Lord of the Manor. His black tailcoat fitted his broad shoulders and pearl buttons peeked from his shirtfront above the white satin waistcoat. An elegant stripe ran the long length of his trousers, failing to conceal muscular thighs beneath. A black silk top hat and gold-topped cane perfected the picture.

Lady Palmer came upstairs with Laura to fetch her cape. "My, he looks very well, tonight," she said. "Such a fine figure of a man."

"I think he would look finer in riding clothes." Laura smoothed suede gloves to her elbow. The sight of those powerful legs had unsettled her strangely.

"I believe the two of you will suit," her mother said emphatically, her brows forming twin peaks.

Laura longed to retaliate but knew it would fall on deaf ears and add a sour note to the evening, so she held her tongue as Mary helped her into the waist-length sable-collared evening cloak. Laura tucked a scented lace handkerchief into her beaded reticule.

"You look very nice." Lady Palmer tweaked a bow at the back of Laura's gown. "Don't spoil the evening with your foolish ideas of women's independence. Lanyon will not find it at all interesting, I assure you."

Laura bit her lip. "How do you know?"

"He needs an heir." Her mother flattened the fur collar. "His interest in you is not intellectual. He wants you for his wife, to be the mother of his children. It is what we women were meant for."

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Laura held her tongue. She studied herself in the mirror and had to admit her mother was right about the pastel gown at least, it did suit her.

In the carriage, Nathaniel turned to her. "You look like an angel."

"I am not one."

"Such a heated retort," he said smiling. "I recall you don't care for flattery."

"Only if it's sincere." Laura was aware her attitude could be a mark against her. She still seethed from her mother's interference.

"But it was I assure you." Nathaniel smiled his teeth white in the dim light of the carriage. "You are a determined young woman. Perhaps you would wish to follow your father into politics, should that be possible."

"But it isn't."

"There are many important things a woman can do."

"You mean bearing children and keeping house?"

"Those too."

The carriage swung round a corner and threw them together. The warmth of his strong thigh touched hers through her gown and stirred a sense of yearning within her.

"I don't dislike the idea of children," Laura said.

He smiled again. "I'm glad to hear it."

The carriage pulled up in Covert Garden outside the Opera House. Laura and Nathaniel climbed the steps, to join the crowd in their opera cloaks and finery. Inside the entrance hall, Laura listened to the buzz of conversation. Two men were talking of the Boer War. She had heard much of it from



her father. And Howard had hinted he might join up and go and fight.

"War is hideous," she said as Nathaniel tucked her arm in his to mount the red carpeted staircase. "If women were in charge of the country there would be no wars."

His eyes danced as he looked down at her. "You may be right."

"Would you fight for your country?" She was suddenly fearful that he found her ideas childish.

His grey gaze darkened. "Would I take another life to protect my family?" He frowned. "How could I not?" His fingers tightened around her arm. "What a solemn discussion for such a night as this. Let's just enjoy ourselves, shall we?"

Laura nodded, feeling chastened. If the conversation had taken place with Howard, she would have come back with a fine riposte, and it would have developed into an argument, but she merely bit her lip.

From Lanyon's excellent opera box, Laura looked down on the stage, soaking up every nuance of the music as the pianist created magic. She turned once to look at her escort and found him watching her, a soft smile on his lips.

When they stood in the street awaiting the carriage, she turned to him. "I enjoyed tonight very much," she said. "Thank you for inviting me."

His eyes narrowed in amusement. "I enjoyed watching you enjoy it."

Surprised, she frowned. "You didn't lose yourself in the music?"

"Music and art are very pleasurable, Laura. But true passion comes from living."

"Life would be dry as dust without them."

"You have not even begun to live." A wicked glint crept into his eyes that made her quiver. "How can you know? But we don't have to live without them, do we?" He assisted her into the carriage and settled close beside her, taking her gloved hand in his. The carriage lurched away from the pavement, the horses trotting down Bow Street. "I'm sure you wish for a spirited discussion on the subject, but I have more important things to say."

Laura drew a deep breath. "You do?"

"My estate in Cornwall demands a lot of my time, as does the House of Lords." His gaze moved over her face, settling on her mouth, causing her heart to beat faster. "I need a partner in life, Laura, someone who can take on a good deal." He peeled back her glove and pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist, the touch of his lips on her skin sending a thrill through her. "I'd like that person to be you."

"You hardly know me."

"Oh, but I do know you, my dear."

"On such a short acquaintance?"

"I know you to be intelligent, resourceful and strong." He lifted her chin with a finger and gazed into her eyes. "You are also a romantic, and very young."

Laura stared into the warm grey depths of his eyes sensing his strength and power. These qualities were not so surprising in a wealthy Lord, but would she find the other things she sought in a life companion, compassion, intimacy, love? But

she couldn't contemplate marriage when she wanted so many other things from life. Could she?

"Will you marry me, Laura?"

Laura wanted to refuse him, because she was sure no one ever had. "I have many things I wish to do before I marry," she said rather stiffly, annoyed with her own response to his charm.

His eyebrows rose. "You do? Pray tell me what they might be."

"Are you interested, really?"

"Of course I am. Everything about you interests me."

Laura swallowed. "To go on with my studies of art history. I plan to travel and visit other countries where those wonderful art treasures are found I've only seen in books."

He continued to hold her hand, rubbing the inside of her wrist with his thumb where her pulse raced. "We shall visit the art treasures of the world together. The Louvre in Paris, all that splendid Rome has to offer, the Parthenon in Greece."

Excitement churned low in her stomach, and she took back her hand. "Have you been to those countries?"

He nodded. "I have, and more."

"But would you want to do it all again with me?"

Nathaniel smiled. "Of course. I will enjoy them through your eyes."

He moved his hand to her waist and pulled her closer making her gasp. Leaning forward, he brought his face close to hers. "Marry me, Laura."

She breathed in the scent of him, his hard body against hers. She suddenly felt languid and had the insatiable need to lean closer, much closer. "I ... need to think."

He took her chin in his hand. "No, you don't," he said softly. Knowing he was going to kiss her, she closed her eyes. The force of his soft lips on hers surprised and thrilled her. It was a long passionate kiss and when it ended she was breathless. His mouth hovered close to hers, their breaths mingling. "You know, don't you? That first moment we saw each other? It was Kismet." Again, his kiss claimed her mouth, making her pulse pound in her ears. Her hand moved to his shoulder, feeling the muscled strength of him beneath the fabric of his coat. Warmth spread down her throat making her breasts throb with need.

"Do you believe in destiny?" she asked weakly, when he moved away.

"I do." He peeled off her gloves and pressed his lips to her palms. One burning kiss on each.

Laura sank against him, taking a deep breath that failed to steady her. She opened her mouth to offer some form of argument, but her mind, usually so clear, became befogged. He lifted her chin and plundered her mouth again, more urgently, his breath growing heavy. The carriage rocked as it negotiated a corner. Laura had no idea where they were or who might see them in this scandalous position. Neither did she care. She kissed him back as desire unfurled through her body, warming as it went. Her body responded in the most extraordinary way. She felt lost when he drew away.

He reclaimed her hands, his skin warm and seductive against hers. "Can you deny a strong and immediate attraction?"

Laura couldn't but she was determined not to give in to him so easily. She drew away into a corner of the carriage. "You must let me think."

"Will you see me again, soon?"

Laura thought about how her mother would question her over the coming days. Her life would dissolve into torture. She didn't want to wait too long to see him again. "Yes."

"We shall have a picnic on Saturday."

"That would be nice. Where?"

"I know the perfect place. I'll call for you at noon."

Standing in the open doorway, Laura watched the carriage draw away. Unescorted at a picnic? What would her mother say to that?

Surprisingly, Lady Palmer acquiesced without a murmur, immediately turning her attention to Laura's choice of clothing.

"The yellow straw hat trimmed with daisies, I think." She tapped her chin with a finger. "Teamed with the flannel Eton jacket and skirt in Dresden blue, over a lawn shirt-waist. That's sufficiently dressy, yet suitable for an informal afternoon out."

Nathaniel wore cream wool trousers and a striped coat, a straw boater on his head. He looked so dashing, Laura caught her breath. The brougham took them to Richmond Park with another carriage following behind. The sky was the blue of Wedgewood china.

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With her frilly white parasol held aloft, Laura and Nathaniel strolled along the meandering path through a meadow of wild grasses dotted with bluebell, harebell and other wild flowers. Nathaniel's groom and a servant labored behind them carrying a rug and two large wicker baskets of food. They walked through a grove of oak trees where King Henry VIII hunted deer, centuries ago. A herd still grazed over a rise, a huge stag keeping guard. It occurred to Laura that Nathaniel might have brought a woman here before. He seemed sure of his destination. They passed a reedy pond where several family parties had gathered. Children threw bread to the ducks, tossed balls and rolled their hoops.

Arriving at a sheltered copse away from the crowd, which was private yet not scandalously so, Nathaniel signaled to his servants and they hurried forward. The groom spread out the rug. Shooing away a grey partridge intent on building a nest, they unpacked the hampers. When everything was laid out in readiness, Nathaniel dismissed them. The pair bowed and left them.

There was food enough for a family of ten: cold roast beef, a roast fowl, ham, lobster and salad. A choice of cheese cake or pudding for dessert. Nathaniel handed Laura a crystal glass of champagne chilled with ice.

Laura took a deep sip. Her desperate need for independence still raged within her. But she had begun to question her plans. Might she have all that she wished within the framework of marriage? Her parent's marriage did not inspire that confidence. Her mother was merely an adjunct to her father and his career. If she had ever had dreams of her

own, her mother had never mentioned them. And yet ... Laura glanced at the handsome man lounging on the rug a respectful distance from her. She took a bite of lobster. It was fresh and cold and smelled of the sea. She had never seen the sea.

"You had a twin sister." His voice softened. "I believe she died. That must have been very hard for you to bear, I'm sorry."

"Thank you." She shivered. It had been a terrible time when Eliza became ill. She was taken from them so quickly. The two girls had been like two sides of the same coin; they looked alike but had different personalities and interests. Eliza wasn't interested at all in books, art or sports. She shared their mother's interest in decorating the new house and they would spend hours discussing fashions with the fashion periodicals spread out before them. When Laura was low Eliza buoyed her up, or vice versa. Laura swallowed as sad memories returned to torment her. Death was so final. "You too have known loss," she said.

Nathaniel tossed a chicken bone back onto the plate. He wiped his hands on the linen napkin then propped himself on his elbows, spreading his long length over the rug. "I have." He met her gaze. "Perhaps we can help each other forget our sad pasts." Desire warmed his grey eyes and she heard it in his voice. Despite his relaxed pose, Laura could sense the passion coiled within him like a spring. Her cheeks began to burn.

"I asked you a question last evening," he said. "Can you deny the attraction?"

She had spent the night tossing and turning. Her plans for the future had not included a husband and certainly not one of her mother's choosing. And yet, Nathaniel was right, the attraction had been physically powerful and immediate from their first meeting. But was it merely physical? She dismissed this thought immediately, there was so much more about Nathaniel that drew her. "Perhaps not," she found herself saying.

Nathaniel looked over his shoulder. There was no one within sight. He moved to sit beside her. "Then marry me, Laura. I will worship you body and soul."

His heavy-lidded grey eyes held the invitation to implicit pleasures. She shivered and wished he would kiss her again. "I rather thought we might become lovers," she said boldly.

Nathaniel's eyes widened. For a second he studied her, and then began to laugh. "Lovers?"

Laura held her bonnet in her lap toying with its imitation flowers. "I don't find it amusing."

"A gently reared girl like you?"

"I fail to see what that has to do with it."

He watched her, amused. She began to feel like a finch stalked by a cat. "Why would you want an illicit affair?" he said with a grin. "When you might have marriage?"

Under Laura's nerveless fingers, a daisy fell off her hat. She flicked it away; she never liked the straw bonnet anyway. "What if I plan never to marry?"

Nathaniel sat up. "My dear girl. You are innocent of the ways of the world. If I wanted a mistress, I would look for someone far different from you."



She flushed. "Because of my inexperience?"

He nodded. "That and other ... considerations."

"Am I not desirable enough for a mistress?"

"You are most desirable. If we were not in plain sight, I could show you how much.

"Nevertheless ..." He drew her towards him and kissed her. The noise of families enjoying the sunny day beyond the shrubbery receded as her pulse pounded in her ears.

He moved away, placing a respectable distance between them. "Say yes. Or I'll have to kiss you again, and this time, your reputation may well suffer."

His kisses moved her in a way Howard's had failed to do. She may well lose all sense of propriety should he kiss her again. Laura felt the strength of this man, tasted him and breathed in his intoxicating male smell, and she longed for more.

She made up her mind. "I'll marry you, Lord Lanyon."

"Nathaniel." He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Thank you, my love."

She realized in that moment that he'd always been sure of her answer.

He sat back, his lips curving in a smile. "I have to ask, would it be just to escape your mother?"

Laura gave a gurgle of laughter. "Perhaps a little." She studied his face, the strong chin, the noble brow; it was already familiar and dear to her. She wanted to ask him if he believed in love at first sight, but his accusation of her youthful romanticism still rang in her ears. "I like the idea of

standing by your side," she said, "aiding you in your endeavors."

He smiled into her eyes, his gaze moving to her mouth. "I like that idea too."

"And should I wish to do more," she asked, "will you allow it?"

He leaned over and kissed her nose. "Providing you don't go off to study art on your own or decide to take a lover."

It was said lightly, but there was a steely note beneath his words. Laura felt sure she would never wish for another lover, the man before her would fulfil all her dreams of love. But as to any other plans she might have, she was secure in the knowledge of the strength she had inherited from her father.

Nathaniel helped her up. He walked to the edge of the copse and beckoned to his servants who were enjoying their own picnic a discreet distance away. "Now I must do the proper thing and ask your father for your hand."

After departing the Palmer's residence with Lord Palmer's acceptance of his offer for their daughter, Nathaniel wondered at his behavior. He wasn't a man who acted rashly. He tended to think things through. He'd developed a thick skin at school when bullied after his mother died. He worked hard to keep a cool head, although at times in his turbulent marriage he'd failed, disastrously. His impulsiveness now worried him. He had not considered this enough. For all her feistiness, Laura was a green girl. How would she cope with life at Wolfram?

He shrugged. Well, it was done, there was no going back. He didn't wish to anyway. He smiled as he thought of what lay ahead for them. He was sure his stony heart remained

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uninvolved, but her affect on him was like water to a man dying of thirst. He couldn't explain it; it wasn't as though he went without sex. Why, even a week ago, he'd tumbled a lady into bed and they'd both thoroughly enjoyed it. Laura offered him something intangible. He was both excited and disturbed by it. And now he feared for what he might have done to her life.

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### **Chapter Three**

Laura sat across the table from her aunt in her Camden Town house. The room was a riot of flowers, birds and peacock feathers, on curtains, sofa cushions, rugs and wallpaper. The furniture, stained to a black ebony finish, was gilded and carved with flowers and feathers. Even the blue and white porcelain filling every shelf displayed a similar theme.

In the midst of this exotic splendor, Aunt Dora appeared like a plain little brown bird in her shapeless linen dress that hid the curves of her body and did nothing for her complexion.

Laura swiveled the large solitaire diamond on her finger, causing it to flash the colors of the spectrum in the light. "Mother is driving me mad planning this wedding," she said. "I had to fight her to allow me to wear a tailor-made suit to travel to Cornwall. She is firmly of the belief that men hate to see women in suits, but she finally agreed when I chose pink brocade from the House of Redfern."

"Catherine is in her element. You can't deny her this, Laura." Although Aunt Dora refrained from adding there would no more weddings after Laura's, it hovered unsaid in the air.

Laura took a bite of a crumpet as her aunt poured the tea. She loved to come here. Her visits were always a sheer delight, especially when Dora's rooms were crammed with

artists and writers, Oscar Wilde and William Morris often among them.

Dora's black cat, Sprite, climbed onto her lap and sat staring at Laura, its brilliant blue gaze unblinking as it purred loudly. Dora lowered him gently to the floor. Pushing her cup away and tucking the sleeve of her gown back, she bowed her grey-streaked brown head over her well-worn pack of Tarot cards. She removed the Significator, the page of wands. She always used this card to represent Laura. Cutting the pack, she divided it into three. "Shuffle and cut three times," she directed Laura, pushing the pack across to her.

Her mother's stepsister, Dora had never married and was considered the most disreputable member of the family. Adding to her sins, she dressed in a fashion Laura's mother disparagingly labelled bohemian. Dora was unruffled by the criticism, stating she preferred to be known as bohemian rather than bourgeois. An arrow that found its mark as Laura's maternal grandfather had made his money in trade. Aware, she was playing into her mother's hands by marrying Lord Lanyon, Laura dutifully shuffled the cards and handed them back. Dora laid ten cards out in their familiar pattern.

"My goodness," Laura exclaimed, as The Tower and the Death card emerged from the pack. Although she didn't really understand them, she knew enough to know they were not the cards one wished for.

"Change," Dora muttered groping for her lorgnette. "It's everywhere. Understandable though."

"Good change?"

"Good and bad," Dora said ambiguously.

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Laura pointed at a card with two lovers closely entwined.  
"The Lovers, that's a good sign isn't it?"

Dora tapped it. "Placed as it is, here, it's a happy ending to a period of difficulty. It crosses the King of Pentacles, a dark-haired man of means. This could be interpreted to mean that only by you can this man complete himself. "

"Oh!"

Dora reached for the pack. "That will do."

"Wait!" Laura waved away her hand. "What about the other card. The King of Cups?"

"A fair-haired man, one who will be of service to you."

"Service? In what way?"

"I don't know, but it will be most unexpected."

"My goodness." Laura pointed. "And the Knight of Cups, here?"

"The emotional seeker. He represents your quest—you search for something that's difficult to obtain."

Aunt Dora began gathering up the cards.

"That wasn't much of a reading," Laura protested. "I suspect there's a lot you aren't telling me."

"Some things are better not to know."

"You are naughty, Aunt Dora. Can't you tell me more?"

Her aunt shook her head looking mysterious. "What month was Lanyon born?"

"November. He's thirty four."

"Scorpio. The most murdered sign of the zodiac."

Laura laughed.

"You can laugh, Laura," Dora said. "But a Cancerian girl like you is no match for a Scorpio man. It will be difficult for you to ever know him completely."

"Maybe I like a challenge." Laura frowned. Nathaniel hadn't tried to kiss her again, although to be fair, the opportunity hadn't presented itself. "I haven't seen him alone since we became engaged. We've been so busy with parties and dinners. Not to mention fittings for the gown and the trousseau. Mother has engaged Worth for the wedding gown and Lucile for lingerie and tea gowns." She jumped up and gave her aunt a hug. "I'm so glad you're coming to the wedding. Heaven knows when I'll see you again. We are travelling straight down to Wolfram Abbey after the reception."

"Curious name."

"It's an ancient place."

Her aunt fixed her with an eagle eye, not unlike her mother's. "No honeymoon?"

"Nathaniel has to get back. We plan to take a trip later in the year."

Aunt Dora put the cards back in their box. "If you ever need me, you know where to find me, child."

Laura stood impatiently as the dressmaker pinned the hem of a new ensemble made for her trousseau. The promenade costume was of flowered silk and lace applique. When it was done to her mother's satisfaction, they were driven home in the carriage.

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Lady Palmer turned to Laura as the carriage wound its way through the crowded London streets. "I haven't discussed with you what you might expect from the marriage bed."

Laura's face grew hot. "Oh, Mother, you needn't."

Her mother looked at her sharply. "You and Lanyon haven't ...?"

Laura looked down at her ring. "No, he's been very respectful."

She nodded with relief. "I was sure a man of Lanyon's ilk would never step over the line."

They'd been chaperoned on every occasion they met, but Laura knew she would not have refused him. She'd been unable to talk privately to Nathaniel and desperately wished to do so. There was so much she wanted him to tell her. She would be treading on egg shells until she learned more about his past and understood how it might affect their future relationship.

"Men expect their wives to always be accommodating in the bedroom," Mother continued. "You must endure, Laura, no matter how little you wish it. It is Lanyon's right as your husband. You must never refuse him."

"Refuse him?" Laura had no intention of it. "Didn't you ever enjoy it with Father?"

Lady Palmer cleared her throat. "In the first few years, it wasn't unpleasant. Not at all. I hope you find it pleasurable. It is an act for the procreation of children and once that is done ...."

"It's all right, Mother, you don't have to prepare me. It was spoken of often at Cambridge."



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"Of that I have no doubt," Lady Palmer said dryly.

Laura saw with relief that the carriage had turned into their street. Her mother began to speak about the flowers chosen for the reception.

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## **Chapter Four**

The wedding, held at St Margaret's Westminster, was all that Laura's mother prayed for, except for the weather that had dawned grey and threatening. Even Lady Palmer had no control over that. Laura walked down the crimson-carpeted aisle past three hundred guests, which included the Prime Minister among other notables, her hand on her father's arm, her ankle length veil floating behind her. Her ivory satin gown embroidered with seed pearls fitted perfectly, testament to the many fittings that had produced it. She was quietly thrilled with the effect of the gauzy headdress garlanded with orange blossom. Her two cousins, Georgina and Phoebe were bridesmaid and matron of honor, pretty in deep rose pink, their wide brim hats laden with pink roses.

Devastatingly handsome in a grey morning suit and top hat that matched his grey eyes, Nathaniel stood waiting with his best man, Horace Tothill, a friend from university. His cousins, Ambrose and Phillip were his two groomsmen. Nathaniel had no siblings and his parents were dead. He smiled at Laura as she handed her white rose bouquet to Georgina and took her place beside him. With a squeeze of her hand and an encouraging murmur, her father stepped away. In a sonorous voice the minister began.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Nathaniel lifted her veil and kissed her lightly on the mouth. Laura smiled up at her handsome husband, thrilled at the prospect of a rosy future lying ahead of them. They left the church as the heavens

finally opened. Everyone scattered, the gutters filling with dirty brown water that stank of horse manure and worse. Laura hesitated, holding her skirts high.

Nathaniel scooped Laura up in his arms. He ran across the wet pavement with her to the carriage, and followed her inside. Smoothing her skirts which suffered very little water damage, Laura laughed. "You are my gallant hero."

The laughter faded from his eyes. "I do hope so," he said soberly.

The reception was held at the Savoy Hotel in the Strand where they were to spend the night. With her train over her arm, Laura danced the wedding waltz, gazing into her new husband's admiring eyes. Having made up her mind to marry him, she had not questioned her decision again. She had slept soundly the night before and woken filled with joy. How strange it was. She hardly knew this man, and yet she felt as he did, that they were destined for each other. Her strong feelings for Nathaniel had not removed all of her plans and resolutions, however. She knew herself too well. She may not be able to study art, but she wanted to learn and be tested in many ways and was confident that such things awaited her in the future.

When it was time to depart, Nathaniel took her hand and they walked among the guests, accepting their best wishes. Laura kissed her mother, who gave her a smile of approval. At last, she thought, I've done something right. She hugged her father and kissed his bristly cheek. "Have a grand life, Lady Lanyon," he said, winking at her.

Laura's cheeks flamed as it occurred to her that she was now a baroness, and had left her father's protection forever. She looked at her husband. Upstairs in their suite of rooms, this handsome man would make love to her. She shivered slightly.

"You're not cold, Laura?" Nathaniel asked her politely.

She smiled up at him, searching his eyes for a sign of love and not the overused endearment she feared. "No."

He put his arm around her and guided her through the throng. Laura stood on the bottom step of the staircase and threw her bouquet. She was delighted when Georgina caught it, her eager swain at her side.

Tomorrow, she and Nathaniel were to depart for Cornwall, and heavens only knew when she would see any of them again. Laura took Nathaniel's hand; with a deep breath they mounted the stairs.

Laura followed the porter across the red, green and gold Savonnerie rug covering the floors of their hotel suite. She approved of the elegant rooms, the pastel floral drapes at the windows and matching wallpaper, the polished rosewood armoire and dressing table. She glanced at the half-tester bed with its green-satin cover and turned away, as apprehension mixed with desire swept over her. "We have our own bathroom," she said to Nathaniel as she pulled the hatpin from her hat.

Nathaniel tipped the bell boy and closed the door. Their luggage waited stacked in a corner. "I'll call for a maid to come and help you undress."

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Laura crossed the room and gazed up into her husband's face. "There's no need. I can manage, if you help me."

"You must be tired."

She drew breath. Why couldn't his concern dissolve into unbridled passion? During the ceremony and the reception, desire and admiration had showed in his eyes more than once when he looked at her. She wanted to kiss him. "Not really."

He took off his coat, his broad chest and muscular arms straining against his shirt as he eased off his cravat and undid a button. Laura longed for him to sweep her up, carry her to the bed and ravish her. The Suffragettes would hardly approve. But since she'd met him, her strong convictions on women's independence had meant little. Swallowing, she went to the window and gazed out. "You can see the Thames from here."

"Come here, Laura," he said softly.

When she came to his side, Nathaniel drew her down with him onto an upholstered chair. She settled against him. She could feel his heart beating and saw the pulse in his throat. It was a sign that she moved him, that he desired her.

"I hope I can make you happy," he said, kissing her forehead.

"I'm happy already," she said surprised. She had been so concerned about pleasing him, she hadn't thought he might have a similar concern.

"Your life will be very different in Cornwall, to what you are used to."

"I hope it will be," she said.

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He began to talk of his home: the ancient abbey, the tiny fishing village that bore its name, the acres of parkland and the deer filled woods, and the sea, the soul and the heart of the Cornish coast. She could hear the emotion in his voice. It touched her deeply.

He had never told her he loved her. Laura hoped he would this day. She thought of his lost first love, the wife and unborn baby that died tragically in the fall. All that she'd learned about her was her name, Amanda. He must have loved her very much not to be able to speak of her now. She'd heard it said that one's first love was very special. Could he ever love her that much?

Laura vowed to make him love her so much he would forget his sad past.

"It's growing late, and we have an early start in the morning." He rose with her in his arms and set her on her feet. He began to pull the pins from her hair. Released, it swung heavily down her back, as he wound his fingers through it, breathing in its fragrance. "There are streaks of gold amongst the red."

"Mother complains that I'm in the sun too much," Laura said nervously.

His movements were measured, perhaps practiced. It sent her mind whirling at the thought of the other women he had made love to. She was aware of the high-class brothels in London where men such as he visited beautiful woman practiced in the art of lovemaking. Ease dropping on her father's conversations had proved fruitful, but now she wished

she hadn't heard of it. Would Nathaniel find her beautiful? Or clumsy and inept?

Nathaniel's quiet intensity made her tremble. He helped her out of her jacket, and then unbuttoned the pearl buttons on her blouse. Quickly stripping the exquisitely pin-tucked and lace trimmed garment from her, he tossed it onto the chair. Her skirt and petticoat fell to the floor and she stepped out of them.

"Turn around." He unlaced her corset and helped pull her chemise over her head. She resisted covering her chest as he knelt to roll down her stockings. She leaned her hand on his shoulder and watched his dark head as his fingers moved over one silk-stockinged thigh. He slid one stocking down, then turned his attentions to the other, his light touch making her legs tremble. Off came her lace-trimmed bloomers. Laura put her hands to her face to find it burning.

His stood close behind her, his hands spanning her waist. "You're beautiful Laura. I knew you would be." He kissed her neck as he cradled her breasts, her nipples firming under the gentle pressure of his thumbs. "Beautiful."

He moved away and began to undress.

Laura hastened into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Don't do that." He turned to her, his shirt open to the waist. "Never hide yourself from me."

Her eyes lingered on his broad chest with its soft mat of dark hair, the muscles so defined they looked carved in marble like a Greek statue. But he was real, the muscles rippling with each movement, his skin smooth and tanned and

glowing with health. Women swooned in moments like this and reached for their smelling salts. She'd read such things in books. Laura had no intention of doing so now, she was far too curious. Her skin had suddenly become alive under his touch, and her body burned for him.

She had never seen a man naked. Her breath shortened as she watched him remove his trousers. She tucked her hands between her legs to hide herself from his gaze, but when she felt the heat and yearning there, she shivered. He was well proportioned for a large man, and graceful. Naked and aroused, he turned to her and she gasped.

He joined her on the bed gathering her up in his arms. His mouth came down on hers, and Laura kissed him back, winding her arms around him, finding his hair, strong and silken beneath her fingers. Where his skin rubbed against hers, she was sure there were sparks; everywhere he touched was on fire.

His tongue probed her mouth, and she boldly responded, exploring that sweet cavern, feeling a corresponding, strange and powerful throb low in her belly. His hands roamed her body, leaving a trail of sensation. When he sought that magical part at the apex of her thighs, and softly stroked her there, she moaned at the incredible rush of pleasure.

His breathing grew heavier and his grey eyes turned dark. "I'll be gentle," he said. "Your first time can be painful."

She wanted him so much, she could feel how moist she was when he touched her there, and closed her eyes to hide her nervous excitement from him.



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"Open your eyes, Laura. I want to see how you feel when I make love to you." He kissed her again, a long passionate kiss that left them both gasping. Slowly he entered her. She felt a burst of pain as he pushed further. He filled her, and it felt so right that the discomfort meant nothing to her. Her hands slid around his back and she murmured endearments in his ear.

He began to move within her, stirring up emotions she could not have described and could barely comprehend. She spread her thighs and gripped his buttocks urgently. She was losing control, losing herself, as his strong thrusts took her away. It was as if she was moving towards something just out of reach. She rushed towards it, moving her hips to join in with his rhythm as an urgent and exquisite pleasure built within her.

Nathaniel kept up his steady rhythm. Then he shuddered and groaned in her ear.

But he wasn't done with her. He began to stroke her until her pleasure reached a crescendo and she cried out.

When he settled beside her, she thought she would burst with love for him, and wanted desperately to tell him. But she would wait to hear those words from his lips, for not even in the throes of passion had he uttered them.

He propped his head in his hand and studied her, smiling. "I look forward to all I can teach you about the art of lovemaking."

She reached up to run a finger along his sensual bottom lip. "I'm an eager pupil."

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He kissed her briefly, and then leapt up out of bed, leaving her feeling oddly lonely. "I can't wait to show you Wolfram," he said. She watched the play of muscles on his back and buttocks as he crossed to the bathroom. "That's where our lives together really begin."

Nathaniel stood in the hotel's ornate bathroom staring into the mirror. His brows rose in query at his behavior. He wanted to return to the bed, to hold his beautiful wife in his arms and tell her what she wanted to hear. That he loved her. But how could he? *Love*? He didn't know what love was. His tortured soul could only wonder at it. What he offered was a poor substitute for love, and he feared it would not be enough for the lovely girl who was now his bride. His lips firmed, and he bent to splash cold water on his face. He came out of the bathroom and found Laura had slipped on her nightgown, a modest thing with dainty embroidery. She sat in bed with her red hair tumbling around her shoulders and a smile trembling on her lips. Compassion struck him like a knife shaft to his heart. What had he done?

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## **Chapter Five**

"This is your first time on a train?" Nathaniel said with a smile and a raise of his strong brows.

Laura nodded, embarrassed that she'd led such a cosseted life. Even attending university her parent's had insisted she travel by carriage.

The journey was long and dusty, the train carriage steamy and crowded even in First Class. It was difficult to talk above the noise of a crying baby and a demanding young child. She sat holding Nathaniel's hand and watching the green fields rush past the window. The noise of the steam train sent three horses dancing away in fear to the far corner of their paddock.

Smoke wafted through the window and the carriage swayed, making her feel slightly ill. She had had very little sleep and they had risen early to go by carriage to Paddington Station. The journey to Penzance took nine hours. It would be close to five o'clock when they reached Wolfram. Nathaniel's carriage would then take them on to Wolfram. Nathaniel explained to her, that he always traveled by train as he was constantly needed at the House of Lords in London. There would be times when she would be left alone at Wolfram.

"I hope you won't be lonely," he said.

"Don't be silly, I'll be too busy for that," Laura spoke firmly, but felt a rush of unease. It left her as swiftly as it came, when she looked into her husband's beloved face.

When they stepped onto the station, a mist clung to Penzance and Laura could see little of it.

"There's Ben Jarvis." Nathaniel nodded towards the road where a young man with a peaked cap jumped down from a smart brougham and came towards them.

"Jarvis, this is Lady Lanyon."

He touched his cap. "Welcome home, your lordship, my lady."

Laura smiled, she liked his open face. "Thank you, Jarvis."

Nathaniel placed his portmanteau and Laura's carpetbag into the brougham, and then assisted her up the step. "Jarvis has been with the family all his life, and his father before him."

When the sun briefly broke through the bank of clouds, the heat was surprisingly intense. Laura put up her pink parasol as Jarvis and another man stacked the trunk and bandboxes into the trap which would follow later. It was far more humid here. She sweltered in her brocade suit and planned to change as soon as she reached home. *Home*. The word sent a shiver of excitement through her. She was impatient to see the place Nathaniel described so lovingly.

As they travelled down a lane way bordered by cottages, something struck the carriage door and bounced away.

"What was that?" Laura asked, as Nathaniel stood up and stared back along the road. She looked back too but could see no one behind the hedgerows and banks of trees.

"Someone voicing their opinion," Nathaniel said grimly.

"Opinion? On what?"

Nathaniel sat down again, his face strained. "It's nothing. Forget it please. I want you to enjoy your first day in Cornwall."

Laura fell silent, but she felt uneasy.

The carriage drove along a river and through a green valley ringed by forest. The misty scene muted the cries of a flock of birds disappearing into the fog like magic. Stone walls criss-crossed the countryside, confining sheep to the meadows. Finally, at the top of a rise, the clouds shifted and Laura caught sight of water, turned gauzy gold under a westerly sun.

"I can see the sea!" she said, craning her neck.

"I'm sorry about the fog." Nathaniel said. "This was not how I planned your first sight of Wolfram."

She patted his hand, resting on hers. "I shall love it. I just know it."

They drove down the hill to Wolfram village. Laura looked eagerly about her as they passed small houses hugging the warren of narrow, cobbled lanes leading down to the bay. The fog was even thicker here. The smell of the sea, salty and unfamiliar, washed over her. Gulls cried, swooping above them in the grey sky, the horizon cut off by the wall of fog.

The carriage traveled down the hill to the harbor where fishing boats were moored along the quay. A row of houses, shops and an inn rimmed the seawall. A curtain of spray from surging waves sent fingers of foam over the promenade. Nathaniel nodded towards an ancient Tudor inn bearing the sign *The Green Feather*. "We'll have some refreshment." He jumped down and turned to assist her.

"Why? Can't we go straight home?"

"The causeway's underwater, your ladyship," Jarvis said, holding the horses steady. "We must wait for the tide to turn before we can take the carriage across."

Laura raised her eyebrows and looked at Nathaniel. "Causeway?"

The abbey is cut off at high tide," he explained.

Laura fell silent, dumbstruck that he had not felt the need to explain this to her before. She felt unnerved at the idea of being cut off from the mainland. Beyond a glowing description of the abbey's history, Nathaniel had told her very little of his life here. *And nothing of his first wife at all.*

"We'll take the boat," Nathaniel said to Jarvis. "You can follow with the luggage. My bride is eager to see her new home."

"Right you are, your lordship," Jarvis said touching his cap.

Laura walked with Nathaniel along the harbor foreshore where a fishing boat was unloaded of its catch onto the wharf. The men doffed their caps at Nathaniel and studied her with open curiosity. The smell of fish was overpowering and the noise of the gulls jangled at her nerves. Nathaniel stopped in front of a rowboat tied up at a wharf, bobbing about in the water.

He picked Laura up and descended the mossy steps, placing her into the boat. "Sit there in the middle and don't move."

Laura did as she was bid. Feeling unstable in her high-heeled boots, she clung to the hard wooden seat as the boat danced on the waves.

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Jarvis untied the rope and kicked the boat away from the wharf as Nathaniel picked up the oars. He began to row strongly. Laura watched, admiring him. Within minutes, they were well out into the bay. The boat dipped and spray splashed over the side, running towards her feet. The ultramarine sea rushed by alarmingly close. The thought that she couldn't swim and would sink quickly in her heavy suit and boots made her swallow nervously. She clung to her hat knowing it would be limp as an old cabbage leaf but it did shield her eyes from the glare.

"It's not far," Nathaniel pulled at the oars.

"It's on an island?"

"Only at high tide."

Laura gave up trying to question him further as he rowed effortlessly on. Suddenly, a narrow wharf loomed out of the mist. Tied up to it a small sloop rocked on the waves.

"Welcome to Wolfram," Nathaniel said, a note of pride in his voice.

As he secured the rowboat to the wharf, Laura looked up at the abbey, its tower, as unyielding as a mountain peak, emerged from the fog as the sky began to clear. Nathaniel helped her onto the wharf. She caught sight of a garden of flowering trees and shrubs and her heart leapt. Laura followed him along the path.

Nathaniel gave a low whistle. Excited barking rent the air. Two red setters raced down the path, their glossy ears bouncing, their tongues lolling. They pounced on their master in delight. "Meet Orsino and Sebastian."

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Laura laughed in delight. "From Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*?" Her husband constantly surprised her.

He grinned. "One of my favorite plays."

The dogs barely gave Laura a glance, their love for their master took all their attention. After he rubbed their ears and gave them a pat, they continued up the path, the dogs rushing ahead.

They passed through a gate in a stone wall.

The garden, with its rose-pink magnolia and white azaleas that had touched her, proved to be a graveyard filled with ancient gravestones, the scent of jasmine on the air suddenly cloying. She was not sure what she had expected, it just wasn't this. It looked so ... forbidding. "Your ancestors?" she asked.

Nathaniel glanced away over the grounds. "Yes."

She bit her lip. Of course, Amanda would be buried here.

"It's a pity about the fog. Wolfram looks magnificent on a sunny day." He smiled and held out his hand to her.

She took his hand and they climbed the hill, leaving the water's edge behind. Laura's breath shortened as emotion mixed with exhaustion began to take its toll on her energy reserves. She chided herself on her sudden weakness, not at all something she was used to, as they arrived at a tall iron gate. Nathaniel opened it with a formidable creak and they stepped through onto a cobble-stoned courtyard. The abbey loomed above them, sheer walls of granite darkened to black by the fog. Long, mullioned windows looked blankly down. Wide steps led up to a heavy set of arched oak doors set



within a square frame of ornamented molding. A solid brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head graced the door.

"Orsino, Sebastian, to the stables!" Nathaniel commanded. The two dogs whined in protest, but realizing their master meant business, quickly disappeared around the corner.

They climbed the steps, and before they reached the top, the door opened. A brown-haired young maid in her white apron and mobcap gave them a quick bob.

"Where is Rudge?" Nathaniel asked with a frown.

"He's gone into the village, your lordship."

"Dorcus, this is Lady Lanyon."

"My lady," Dorcus gave another bob.

"Have tea brought to the library."

They stood in the Grand Hall. It reminded Laura of a cold, fossilized forest. Solid columns like the trunks of giant oaks formed graceful arches rising to a giddy height above. The carved staircase decorated with branches, leaves and fruit. A chill radiated up from the floor of stone-flags, despite the mugginess of the day outside. Their footsteps echoed as Laura followed Nathaniel and Dorcus down a passageway passing massive tapestries of ancient battles hanging on the thick walls. Through an ornamental arch, they entered a long room with a series of decorative ribs in the high vaulted ceiling, like the insides of a giant whale. At its far end, a magnificent stained-glass window dominated, glowing jewel-like with the faint rays of sun struggling through the fog.

"Oh, how lovely." Laura was unable to suppress the relief in her voice. The room was far more inviting than the little she had seen of the abbey. The oak-paneled walls were lined

with bookshelves filled with leather-bound tomes and delicate Chinese porcelain. Comfortable leather sofas grouped around a baronial fireplace above which a fine Canaletto landscape hung. A leopard skin rug with bared fangs, stretched out in front of a roaring fire.

"Sit down, Laura," Nathaniel said. "I'll have tea with you, and then I must consult my overseer."

Laura hid her sense of abandonment. There was a shift in Nathaniel's focus as soon as they arrived here. It was as if Wolfram owned a large part of him. She shrugged at such a silly thought, but couldn't help another creeping in to replace it. Would this place ever feel like home? "You said the abbey was built in the 16th Century?"

He nodded. "It was a nunnery at that time. It's been in my family since the abbey was abandoned."

"When was it used as a fortress?"

"In 1714, the Jacobites holed up here. Their plan was to seize Exeter, Bristol and Plymouth, in the hope that the other smaller towns would join the cause. But the militia put paid to the uprising."

"So, your ancestors supported the Jacobites?"

He smiled. "They supported King James II in the Stuart claim to the British throne."

The silver tea service arrived carried in on a magnificent silver tray by Dorcus. Another young maid followed and placed a plate of pastries and one of some kind of fruit cake on the table.

Laura found she was hungry. She picked up a pastry and bit into it finding it savory and delicious. "What is this?"

"A Cornish pasty. Traditional fare in these parts."

Nathaniel put down his cup. He rose, bending to kiss her.

"Dorcus will take care of your needs."

Laura poured another cup of tea. Her delicate china teacup was Spode. It had the family crest emblazoned on it in gold. As she took her last sip, Dorcus opened the door and peeped in. "I'll take you to your chamber, if you're ready, my lady."

"Where is the Baron's chamber?"

"It's next to yours." Dorcus waited with her hands clasped in front of her.

Laura rose quickly and followed the maid. Her parents had separate bedchambers, but she had expected to share a bed with her husband, as they had the previous night. He had made love to her again upon waking. They'd been rushed for time and he'd been less careful, but he'd only left her wanting more. She swallowed her disappointment. One day they would share the same bed. She urged herself to be patient.

She climbed the stairs behind Dorcus. A maid stood in the hall with linen over her arm, head bowed. "How many on the staff here?"

"There be about thirty at present, my lady."

"I've only sighted you and two maidservants where are the rest?"

Dorcus looked down at her hands. "Busy at their work, my lady."

They walked down another corridor. Laura began to worry that she might easily get lost, when Dorcus paused before a door. They entered a large, lofty room. Against one wall sat a four-poster bed dressed with gold brocade silk bed hangings,

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a washstand and basin nearby. A tapestry chair with carved feet perched beside a writing desk near the window. A French armoire stood in a corner, its mahogany wood gleaming. A richly-colored Oriental rug covered the floor and a gilt mirror hung over the fireplace. Laura caught sight of her pale face in it. She went to the narrow casement window and pulled aside heavy brocade curtains woven with gold thread. She looked down on the garden she had first seen from the jetty, the long grass dotted with headstones. The sky had finally cleared to a smudged blue-gray. She could see the causeway, a built up carriageway of about a half-mile or so, the receding tide lapping at its rocky foundations. The land was terraced with greenery, and granite steps cut into the stone walls led down to the restless expanse of slate-colored sea. Movement at the stables caught her eye. The trap had arrived. Two burly men unloaded her trunks as her husband stood watching, tall, dark and magnificent in his riding clothes, tapping his knee with his riding crop, his dogs romping about close to his heels.

"Agnes will attend you, my lady," Dorcus said. "I'll send her to you when your trunks are brought up."

Only a few hours of daylight remained of a very long day. "I think I'll rest for a little while, thank you, Dorcus."

"As you wish, my lady."

Laura sank onto the bed. It was quiet except for the mournful sound of the gulls through the open window. Tomorrow, her adventurous spirit would return to her, she was sure. She lay back and closed her eyes.

*She ran blindly down one corridor after another, but the wisp of white still followed. It seemed such a fragile thing, like*

*smoke, and yet it filled her with a terrible fear. She could not escape it. She called out.*

"Laura?"

She sat up quickly, her head spinning. "I must have fallen asleep."

"I heard you call out." Nathaniel sat on the bed beside her. "Were you dreaming?"

She pushed her hair back off her forehead. "Yes. A kind of nightmare." It had been so vivid. She trembled and wished he would hold her, but gazing at his concerned face, she forced a smile. "A daymare, perhaps." She put her hand to his cheek. "I'm all right now."

"It's been a long tiring day. Do you feel better?"

She slipped her hand into his. "Yes. Much."

"I thought you might like to come for a walk before it grows too dark."

"Oh yes." She jumped up.

"Put on your cloak, its growing cooler."

They emerged into the passageway. "Where is your chamber?" she asked.

"Close by." He opened a door. A similar room to hers appeared, decorated in somber dark green.

Determined to shake off the lingering affects of the dream, Laura took his arm.

"I'll take you up to the tower. You'll have a wonderful view of Wolfram from there."

They descended the staircase. At the far end of the corridor on the ground floor, behind a curved door lay a winding stair. Laura followed Nathaniel round and round to

the top. He opened a door and they stepped out onto a narrow parapet with a stone wall. Laura clutched the edge and looked down. The ground seemed a long way away. She gazed out across the endless sea. The village looked tiny, linked to the abbey by the carriageway. She could see the church spire and the cluster of dark trees of the churchyard, the schoolhouse tower with its bell, and the square of village green.

Below, a lane lined with ancient oaks led to the stables then branched around the abbey to a row of stone cottages on the ocean side. Rolling parklands stretched away to the woods. Where they had arrived at the wharf was the land's lowest point. At its highest the cliffs looked sheer and impenetrable. A tree-lined lane linked the stables to paddocks where horses frolicked, stretching away towards dense woodlands.

Laura followed Nathaniel's pointing finger. "You can't see it, but beyond the woods is a small home farm that supplies most of the food for Wolfram."

"It's all breathtaking," Laura said.

He smiled. "Come, it's growing late."

Having returned to the ground floor, they left the abbey by another door which led into a tiny rose garden. The bushes were heavy with blooms and their delicate perfume scented the air. Laura thought it heavenly; there wasn't a gravestone in sight, just a small stone statue of a lady in a wide-brimmed hat. It wasn't old, but Victorian in style and Laura wondered if Amanda had chosen it. A stone bench sat under a spreading chestnut tree. "I shall spend quite a bit of time here."

"Shall you?" Nathaniel said, delight filling his eyes.

"It will be my special place."

"You haven't seen all of Wolfram as yet."

She slipped her hand in his. "Surely, nothing can be more charming than this."

"Come," he held out his hand. "I'll show you a little more before the light goes."

They passed the tiny stone cottages. "Who lives in these?" Laura asked as they strolled down the lane bordered by hedges.

"Gardeners, grooms and stable workers. Some are used for storage, some are empty." Nathaniel whistled and the two dogs appeared, tails wagging, and joined them on their walk.

"How big is the island?" she asked. She'd been surprised by its size.

"It's not an ..."

She laughed. "I know. It's not an island. But how big?"

"Two miles long by a half mile wide. Every century that passes, the sea erodes a little more of it. One day, who knows? It may be gone."

Beyond the lane were rolling green hills of parkland. In the distance, Laura could see an isolated cottage with a steep slate roof looking out over the bluff. Red and pink geraniums spilled from its window boxes and a riot of flowers crammed the small garden. "How pretty that cottage looks."

They strolled through the trees of the park, the dogs gambolling ahead. To the west, the sunset cast a pink-tinged, golden glow over the water. Nathaniel took her arm. "It will

be dark soon. We'd best go back." He hesitated, and she thought he looked troubled. "You think you'll be happy here?"

"I'd be happy anywhere you are." She smiled up at him.

"You're a sophisticated young woman, though. You'll find few that fit that description around here."

"I have you. You were educated at Oxford, were you not?"

"Feminine company, I mean."

"You're not sorry you married me, are you?" She tilted her head and laughed confident in her heart of his answer.

He gathered her into his arms. Bending to kiss the top of her head, he murmured, "Not a bit of it."

Arm in arm, they ambled down the lane towards the house. They were brought up short by the cry of a small grey-brown bird. It swooped down over their heads and settled on the lowest bough of a tall ash. One of the dogs barked at it.

"Sit!" Both dogs immediately obeyed Nathaniel's order.

He left Laura's side and crouched down in the grass at the base of the tree.

Laura joined him, one hand on his shoulder, "What is it?"

He glanced at the branches overhead. "A baby greenfinch. That's the mother up there."

Laura eyed the little finch. "Oh, the poor thing."

The tiny bit of fluff opened its beak and made a feeble chirp, while its anxious parent called from the tree.

Nathaniel straightened and peered up. "I can see the nest. If I can get it back up there ...."

Laura's gaze followed his. "It's right at the top of the tree."

"I've had lots of practice tree climbing," he said with a grin. "Although, not for some years." He bent down and



carefully picked up the bird, cradling it in his long fingers. "It still has plenty of life in it." He opened his shirt and placed the little bird inside.

Grasping the lowest branch he swung up and began to climb. His strong legs carried him swiftly upwards through the branches.

"Careful," Laura cried as he disappeared into the foliage. She stepped back and craned her neck. Nathaniel was close to the top of the tree. Holding on with one hand, he reached into his shirt and removed the bird. He placed it in the nest as the parent bird flapped around him.

"Well done." Laura applauded as Nathaniel started down.

The olive-green and yellow male arrived to join the female, both fluttering around Nathaniel.

"That's not very grateful," he said. One of the birds flew at his face, and he put up his hand to shield his eyes. Laura watched horror-struck as his foot slipped off the branch. He grabbed a branch with his free hand and swung by his hands high above her. She swallowed a scream, too scared to cry out, while the dogs whined at the base of the tree. A few nerve wracking moments later, Nathaniel regained his footing. He climbed to the lowest branch before jumping down.

Once he'd found his feet, Laura launched herself at his chest, throwing her arms around him.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I feared you would fall."

He laughed. "I was never in danger."

He gently extricated himself from her arms.

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As they continued down the lane, she sensed the intimacy they had shared earlier had vanished, and wondered if her display of emotion had upset him.

Nathaniel hated to see fear or disquiet in Laura's eyes. She looked so young in her tan cloth cape and hat with its absurd feather. Her green eyes turned emerald with alarm as they gazed up at him.

He fought an overwhelming urge to draw closer, knowing if he did it would open the door to emotions he kept safely under control. As they strolled down the lane, he was careful not to touch her until the blood pounding in his veins slowed and his emotions cooled. By the time they'd reached the house, Laura had regained her buoyant nature and giggled at something she had seen from the train. A silly, nonsensical thing but it dissolved the dark mood he was sliding into. He breathed more easily.

\* \* \* \*

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## Chapter Six

Every room in the abbey was of mammoth proportions. The dining room was no exception, banquet sized with a similar vaulted ceiling to the library, the polished oak table long enough to seat King Henry VIII and all of his courtiers. Laura and Nathaniel dined together at one end, with silver candelabrum casting a soft light over the table. The butler, Rudge had returned from the village. A dark-haired gentleman of mid-years, he stood in attendance pouring the wine and keeping a sharp eye on the staff as they brought in the courses. Fish was the main staple, roast bream, lobster in a cream sauce, limpets, oysters, vegetables and fresh salads from the castle gardens, finishing up with Cornish treacle tart and clotted cream.

Laura's corset gripped her tightly. She pushed away her plate. "I'll get fat if I continue to eat like this."

"We'll go riding tomorrow." Nathaniel took her arm. "Come into the library. It's where I like to spend my evenings."

Laura sank into a comfortable chair. She rested her cheek against her hand and stared into the fire. Rudge appeared with a tray of port and brandy. She accepted a small glass of port and sipped it. It was smooth and sweet. If only her mother could see her now. The thought brought an unexpected bout of homesickness that quickly passed when she gazed into her husband's smiling grey eyes.

"You like the port?"

She licked her lips with her tongue. "Delicious."

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"It's from Portugal." His eyes were on her mouth and the warmth of desire and expectation passed through her.

"Mm." After another deep sip she put down her glass. She slipped off her shoes, tucking up her feet. The strong drink made her muscles loosen and her mind drift.

A half hour passed in compatible silence with only the crackle of the logs in the fireplace. Laura yawned behind a hand. It had been a long exhausting day filled with discoveries. Now the port made her sleepy.

"I think it's time for bed," Nathaniel said, rising.

Laura slipped on her shoes. "As you wish, my lord."

In the hall, Rudge appeared from nowhere to light their candles from a lamp.

Nathaniel placed his arm around Laura's waist and they leisurely climbed the stairs.

He stopped at the door to her chamber. "Your maid will be waiting to assist you." She left him, entering her room. Agnes rose from the chair. "I've laid out your nightgown, my lady," she said.

"Thank you, Agnes." Agnes was a country girl, with freckles and carrotty red hair that looked orange in the firelight. She was a friendly, willing girl who had brought the bath in by the fire and assisted Laura to dress for dinner. Now Laura just wished her gone. "Undo the laces of my corset for me, and I'll manage the rest."

A few moments later, Laura sat on the bed in her nightgown; she had brushed her hair and was braiding it when she heard a noise. "My goodness!" she exclaimed, as a

panel of the timber wainscoting in the wall slid open. A dark head appeared.

"I hope I didn't startle you." Nathaniel stepped through dressed in a dark blue silk robe embroidered with dragons. He carried a bottle of Champagne in one hand and two glasses by their slender stems in the other.

"Not really. A secret panel! How fascinating."

"The abbey's riddled with them. I spent my childhood learning every one."

"You must show me," Laura said. "I love such things."

He settled beside her on the bed and poured her a glass of Champagne.

Laura sipped it as the bubbles tickled her nose. She giggled.

He smiled. "What's funny?"

"You, appearing like a ghost through the wall."

He took her glass from her and placed it back on the table beside his. "A welcome ghost?"

"Most welcome," she said as he reached for her.

He kissed her and she tasted sweet wine on his lips.

He unplaited her hair.

"Have ghosts appeared here?" she asked.

"Only for those who believe in them."

"And do you?"

"No."

Laura remembered her dream. "I'm not sure if I do or not."

"Your hair glows like fire in this light." He eased her back on the bed, his hands sliding up her thigh. "I can't get enough

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of you," he said, his voice muffled against her breast. "When we're apart all I think of is this."

After the lovemaking, Laura lay with her head against his chest beneath snowy, crisp linen sheets, her body sated, but her heart still held a longing for something more. It confused her and she pushed the thought away. Nathaniel rolled away from her. He reached for the bottle and topped up their glasses. She sat up and plumped up the pillows, feasting on the beauty of this gorgeous man in her bed. It seemed so gloriously decadent. Golden, tassels tied the bed curtains to the carved oak bedposts. A rich swathe of gold cloth festooned the bed above them. The fire crackled as they sipped their champagne.

"We'll ride after breakfast tomorrow and then I must leave you again," Nathaniel said, "In the afternoon I thought I might take you to meet a friend of mine."

"Who is this friend? Does he live here?"

"Yes, she does. In that cottage out on the point. She's an artist."

"Wonderful. What's her name?"

"Cilla. I think you will like her. Knowing how you both love art you may find common ground."

"How does she come to live here?"

"She arrived one day and asked me if she could turn one of the empty cottages into a studio. She offered to pay rent, but she doesn't have much money, so I allow her to stay for free."

"How kind you are, Nathaniel," she said with a warm rush of feeling. "Is she from these parts? A poor family?"

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He patted her cheek. "All these questions. I'll allow Cilla to tell you her story herself."

"I can't wait to meet her."

Laura gazed at her husband, finding a new respect for him. While their lovemaking developed in bounds, she was getting to know the man by inches, but loving all that she saw.

Nathaniel watched Laura sleeping. She looked so innocent with her long golden lashes resting on an alabaster cheek. How lovely she was. His bride. Cilla was an offering, a hope that she would not find it too lonely here. But what would Laura make of her? He was a coward not to have explained the curious relationship he and Cilla shared. Laura would find out soon enough. He wanted to stay here lying beside her. But he would not weaken his resolve. And there was work to be done.

Laura woke, and turned to find Nathaniel gone. When she lifted her head off the pillow it began to swim. She realized he'd refilled her glass more than once before she'd fallen asleep in his arms. The moon filled the room with its silvery light through a gap in the curtains. Laura slipped on her nightgown. She had no need for a candle when she rose to use the chamber pot. A privy was one convenience she sorely missed from home. Pouring water from the jug, she washed in the basin. As she dried her hands she thought she heard footsteps outside her room. Hoping it was Nathaniel returning, she waited, and when he didn't come, she went to open the door. It was darker in the corridor where the moonlight couldn't reach, and colder, making her shiver. It took her a while for her eyes to adjust before she saw it was

empty. The only movement was a huge tapestry hanging on the wall stirring in the draft.

She shut her door and went to the wainscoting. Running her fingers along the panel, she tried to open it. Failing, she went to pick up a shawl. Wrapping it around her shoulders, she slipped into the corridor and stepped quickly over to Nathaniel's room and scratched on it. When she heard no reply, she opened his door. His curtains were drawn and the room dark.

Laura hesitated, listening. No soft snore, no movement. "Nathaniel?" She fumbled her way to the bed. Reaching down she touched his pillow. He wasn't there.

Laura could just make out the window, she walked towards it, banging her knee on a carved wooden box. Cursing, she pulled back the curtains. The room was empty. The pillow unrumpled and the bed clothes still smoothly turned back and not slept in. Puzzled and a little alarmed, she hurried back into the corridor. Light crept from under a door further down. She walked towards it.

Laura stood outside it. Whose room might it be? Aware of how late it was, she watched the crack of light spilling into the corridor. She reached out to grasp the doorknob as a shadow moved across the light. Laura drew in a sharp intake of breath. She could hardly go into someone's room in the middle of the night. She smiled nervously. It would be such a bad beginning. But why hadn't Nathaniel told her someone else slept on this floor? She had the impression this wing comprised only of guest chambers besides theirs. She turned and hurried back to her room, steadying herself against the



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wall. Odd to feel a trespasser in her own home. A thought struck her, would she always? Reaching her chamber, she stepped inside and shut the door.

Shivering, she climbed back into bed and pulled the coverlet up to her chin. She lay there for a long time tossing and turning as thoughts fluttered through her mind. Her ears were pricked for any sound, but she heard nothing. Was Nathaniel in that room? Servants did not sleep on this floor. If not he then who might it be? And where was Nathaniel?

Nathaniel ran down through the grounds, he knew his way so well he could do it blindfolded, but there was barely a cloud in the sky tonight. That made it easier for what he planned to do. He glanced up at Laura's window. It was dark. He was confident she was deeply asleep, safely tucked up in her bed. An owl hooted and the shrubbery along the wall shook violently; probably a badger or a fox. The heavy, salt-laden breeze blew in his face, clearing away his fatigue. Nathaniel reached the water and stood listening. Nothing, but the slap of waves against the sea wall.

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## Chapter Seven

The next morning, the sky was a clear azure blue and sunlight shone through the narrow windows. It warmed and brightened the rooms and even the long, stone corridors appeared more welcoming than the day before. Despite her restless night, Laura's spirits rose. Nathaniel had warmly clasped her hand over the breakfast table. She basked in his smile, wishing everything to remain fine between them. Coming to the conclusion that he'd gone to check on something about the estate during the night, she pushed the whole incident away. She adjusted her riding hat in the mirror over the fireplace. It was a handsome one of green-gold felt adorned with net and a graceful feather, her mother had chosen for her trousseau to match her riding outfit. Laura smiled, about fashion, Mother was always right. She picked up the watch hanging from a gold chain at her breast and glanced at it.

Half past nine. Nathaniel had gone off early to attend to business. He said he would return at ten o'clock for their ride.

Laura wasn't sure what she intended as she left her room and walked along the corridor. She found she hadn't pushed last night's incident away after all. Passing Nathaniel's chamber, she knocked at the door where she'd seen the light the night before. There was no sign within, so she opened it. A beautiful chamber lay within, far lovelier than hers. Intrigued, she stepped inside. The walls were papered in deep magenta overlaid in gold. The bed hangings and coverlet of

ruby silk glowed jewel-like in the light from the window. A rose velvet armchair sat by the window. The room felt cold, as though shut up for a long time. But a candle burned down to a stub in a plain silver candlestick, sat on the dresser, and the smell of tallow lingered in the air. Two mahogany armoires stood side by side against one wall. She crossed the crimson rug to open one.

"My goodness," Laura said aloud. The armoire was crammed with exquisite dresses of every hue. Taffeta silk, appliqued velvets, organdie and India muslin, capes trimmed with ostrich or fur, and silk tea gowns. She pulled out a drawer and found silk underthings and nightgowns folded neatly. Picking up a delicate, soft grey chemise trimmed with Valenciennes lace, she breathed in the delicate perfume that permeated the whole room.

Carefully folding the chemise, Laura returned it to the drawer and closed the armoire door. A row of sterling silver and cut glass perfume bottles lined up across the dresser. She picked up a lantern-shaped bottle. Removing the diamond-cut-glass stopper, she held it to her nose, recognizing the scent, a hint of ylang-ylang and exotic vanilla. It was Clive Christian Number One, Queen Victoria's favourite, and her mother's. Laura replaced it beside a silver-plated comb and mirror set inlaid with rubies and crystals, laid out on a muslin table mat. The dresser top was crammed with treasures, a rope of creamy pearls flung carelessly down; a pair of golden candles in crystal holders, pink artificial roses in a dainty vase. She opened a jewel box to Chopin's Nocturne. It was crammed with necklaces, earrings and brooches. Her

fingers hovered over a pretty coral necklace, but she felt as if someone looked over her shoulder, and replaced the lid, moving away to the window.

The chair was placed as if the occupant often sat there, gazing out at the view. Laura leaned her elbows on the sill and looked down. This room had a fine view of the causeway. Perhaps Amanda spent her days here, watching and waiting. But for what? Visions of Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* swam into her mind.

The thought that Nathaniel came here after making love to her, struck Laura like a blow. She didn't want to think it true. But who else would have been here in the middle of the night? Was he still in love with his dead wife? They must talk about this. She *would* ask him.

*Soon.*

She hurried out the door.

"There you are." Nathaniel stood at her chamber door; his strong legs encased in fitted riding pants, glossy boots on his feet. He tapped his riding crop against his thigh and frowned. "You went into Amanda's room?"

Laura flushed. "Yes ... I'm sorry. I wasn't aware it was hers." She straightened her shoulders. "I was just exploring."

He turned away. "We'd better get that ride in. It looks like rain."

"Does it?" She hurried after him, pulling on her gloves. "The sky had scarcely a cloud when last I looked."

"The weather changes quickly here." She watched his broad back as he started down the stairs, the unapproachable

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set of his shoulders. He seemed so distant. She bit her lip and followed him.

With the dogs at the horse's heels, they rode over the estate lands and into the woods. Laura followed Nathaniel along a bridle path through the trees. Deer darted away out of sight. The dogs unearthed a flock of birds and they exploded into the air as if at the sound of a gun. Laura's mount followed Nathaniel's and they emerged onto a narrow strip of land covered in wild grasses above the bluff. "Careful, here," Nathaniel called, reining in his horse.

The sea wind threatened to rip Laura's hat from its pins. One hand to her head, she attempted to steady her horse. Above them, clouds scudded across the sky, and seagulls swooped. She followed the birds dizzying path as they dove down into the white tipped waves to rise again, some with wriggling fish in their beaks. The sound of pounding waves was like thunder as they dashed against the rocks. The ever present salty brine rose strongly to permeate the air. Out on the ocean, a three-masted ship disappeared into the haze.

To Laura, there was something timeless about Wolfram. It had stood relatively unchanged for so many centuries. So many lives played out day by day, year by year, and generation by generation. It made her sense her own fragile mortality. She gave herself a mental shake. Was she becoming maudlin? She gazed at her husband, completely in command of his huge stallion. She had everything to live for. Was it Amanda's room, so carefully preserved as if she'd just walked out the door that had put thoughts of death into her mind? Or was it the shifting horse beneath her and the

closeness of the cliff. Too close for her liking. Nathaniel's chestnut mount stamped and snorted. He seemed deep in thought, turned away from her, gazing out to sea. The wind plucked at her hat again and the veil of net tightened becoming claustrophobic against her face. She turned her horse's head and cantered back along the path.

"Laura!" Nathaniel rode after her. He headed her off on the narrow path, pushing his horse in front of hers. "Did she bolt?"

She swallowed. "No."

"Then, why did you take off like that?"

She couldn't explain it. She looked into Nathaniel's face, finding a mix of alarm and annoyance there. "The cliff ...."

He backed his horse away, his face relaxing. "Goose. Come on, let's ride into the village."

Nathaniel ordered the dogs home, and they rode over the causeway. The whitewashed cottages blended into the landscape, echoing the clouds above, their slate roofs the colour of the sea. Some of the villagers came up to pay their respects to Nathaniel and Laura, as they trotted down the main street, but several others hung back talking among themselves. Nathaniel appeared not to notice those that snubbed him as he helped her dismount. They entered the old Tudor inn on the quay-side Laura had noticed the day they arrived called The Green Feather, its window boxes spilling over with crimson geraniums.

The inn was gloomy inside with heavy dark beams in the low ceiling and a slate-flagged floor. It smelled heavily of hops from the local brewed ale and cider.

Nathaniel nodded at the two people behind the bar. "Roe, a glass of port for Lady Lanyon."

"The serving woman curtseyed and gave Nathaniel a sly glance beneath her lashes.

"M' lady." The innkeeper, Roe nodded. He picked up a cloth and scrubbed at the bar. "Excuse me, y' lordship, while I wipe up the tears of the tankard. Can't have you wetting the sleeve of your good jacket."

Nathaniel ordered a pint of ale for himself. He led Laura through a door into a small parlor.

Roe appeared with their drinks. "It's a pleasure to have you in my humble establishment." He grinned exposing a missing front tooth. "Not like the swindlers and sharps that usually frequent the place."

"What does he mean by calling the drinkers here swindlers and sharps?" Laura asked after he'd left the room.

"Nothing complementary that's certain." Nathaniel drained his tankard. "Stay here, Laura. I won't be a moment." He rose and returned to the bar.

Laura heard him say, "I need to have a quiet word with you, Roe."

"If you'll step into the back room, y' lordship?" Roe replied.

A good fifteen minutes passed. Laura finished her drink. She left her table and walked to the door. A soldier stood at the bar in a murmuring conversation with the serving maid. He lit a pipe and the smoke seeped into the small parlor where Laura stood. The pair turned to glance at her. The soldier said something Laura couldn't catch and the woman,

her breast rising like two half-moons from her low-cut white blouse, threw back her head and laughed.

Laura's outrage grew. What was Nathaniel thinking bringing her to this place and leaving her alone? As her fury mounted, he reappeared. Roe returned to his place behind the bar. "No fear, y' lordship," he said. "That business shall be dealt with."

Nathaniel frowned and murmured something in a low voice as he threw some coins onto the bar.

"Right you are," Roe said, reddening. He weighed the coins in his hand. "Thanks for the strike, y' lordship."

They returned to the street. Nathaniel tossed another coin to a young lad minding the horses. He helped Laura mount.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the curious villagers, Laura turned to him, anger causing her voice to shake. "How could you do that to me?"

"Do what?" he asked coolly, raising an eyebrow.

"Take me to that ... place."

"It is the local inn." His eyebrows met in a puzzled frown. "I have been going there all my life."

"Why did you leave me alone?"

"I had business to see to."

"What business?"

"That's my affair. If I choose to tell you I will."

Laura drew in a deep breath. She kicked her horse into a canter and took off over the rough ground of the causeway.

"Laura!"

She heard Nathaniel behind her as they reached the solid ground of Wolfram. He rode up beside Laura, reached across



and grabbed her reins, pulling her horse close to his. His face looked thunderous and Laura quaked. "Are you going take off every time something happens that doesn't suit you? This is the country, Laura. Things are done differently here."

Laura faced a thought that had lodged in her mind since her aunt had first expressed it. Would she ever really know him? She tried to pull her horse's reins from his grasp. "Let me go, Nathaniel."

"When you have cooled down."

"I'm not used to being treated this way."

He studied her for a moment and then released her reins. "Of this I am patently aware." He rode on. "If you can recover your good humor," he called, the anger gone from his voice, "We shall go and take afternoon tea with Cilla."

He seemed to be on very friendly first name terms with this woman, Laura thought, biting her lip. And as usual, had told her nothing of her history. Laura was determined not to like her.

They rode on in silence. Laura pressed her lips together to prevent herself from questioning him about the night before. It was neither the time nor the place, but it didn't stop her from silently seething. She was not Amanda. If she had put up with Nathaniel's ways so be it, but Laura would not be treated in this fashion.

They had to negotiate the narrow track along the bluff. Laura's heart pounded in her ears by the time they'd reached the cottage. She still burned with anger at Nathaniel and was now angry with herself for being so vulnerable. A feeling that she'd thought she'd finally conquered after Eliza's death. She

tried to shrug off her disappointment in him as he tied up the horses.

Nathaniel secured the horses to the fence near the water trough and left them to drink aware that Laura stood waiting. He could see by the set of her shoulders she was unhappy. She was young and a trifle spoiled, he'd known this when he married her. He would have to learn to handle her better, or their marriage would have a very bad beginning. He knew that his own actions were wanting, that he did not measure up as well as he might. But he seemed powerless to change it. There were things he could not speak of; they were so deeply embedded in his psyche, he was afraid to dig too deep. Better leave the past safely in the past. He forced them out of his mind, but that just left the worry of what Laura would make of Cilla. He sensed she needed a friend, but there were good reasons why they may never get on. Once again, the fear that he'd made a serious mistake bringing Laura here arrested him, causing his shoulder muscles to knot. He shrugged, trying to ease them.

Laura followed Nathaniel through the garden filled with delphiniums, hollyhocks and daisies to the brightly painted yellow front door. Was she being childish? She glanced at his face, noticing a muscle had begun to tick in his cheek. She had been rash to criticise him, she supposed, but what on earth was it that made him so brooding and difficult at times? If only he would talk to her. She took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face as Nathaniel grasped the knocker and banged on the door.

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## Chapter Eight

Nathaniel knocked on the brightly painted yellow door again, but no sound came from inside.

He turned away. "It appears there is no one at home."

Laura felt almost relieved as they retraced their steps to the gate. When they reached it a woman appeared riding down the lane on a bicycle.

"I am sorry." She hopped off the bike. Laura saw she wore a divided navy skirt. "I went to fetch sugar from the shop." She grimaced. "I thought I'd be back in a trice but I ran into Mrs. Hartwell and she does talk so."

Nathaniel stepped forward and took the bike from her. "Cilla, I've brought my bride to meet you."

Startled by the informality between them, Laura studied the woman as she came towards her with her hand outstretched. She was a tall, broad shouldered brunette, close to Nathaniel's age. More handsome than pretty.

"Lovely to meet you at last, Laura."

"So nice to meet you, Cilla." Laura shook her hand, her gaze resting on the man's tie she wore round her neck.

Cilla's amused hazel eyes met hers. "Please both of you come inside."

Taking their coats she hung them on the stand in the tiny hall. She pulled off her gloves and rubbed her hands together briskly. "Come through to the back terrace. I find it the best place for tea this time of day."

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The cottage was filled with light and bursting with odd things. Sculpted pieces, some finished some not, sat amongst rocks, feathers, driftwood, books and dried flowers, bunches of fresh flowers too, shoved into vases without a care to their arrangement, and placed wherever a spare space offered itself. Hook rugs covered the bare boards. An embroidered fringed shawl hung over the back of the crimson sofa with cushions of all shapes and sizes thrown on it willy-nilly. Thick, brightly painted canvasses in the loose and bold style of the French Impressionists covered the walls. Sheer white curtains stirred in the sea breeze at the open windows.

The acrid smells of oil paint and varnish fought with the sweet scents of the flowers and the salty brine of the ocean. An easel with a half finished painting covered by a cloth was propped in a small annex off the sitting room that had been turned into a studio. Beside it, a small table held all the paraphernalia of the artist, a pallet, half-squeezed tubes of paint and a jar filled with brushes.

Nathaniel led Laura to a leafy, vine-covered loggia, and they sat on wicker chairs.

Laura gazed directly out to sea, the cliff being only a few yards away. The sea breeze toyed with her hat again and she eased the net away from her face.

"Laura ..." Nathaniel placed a hand on her arm and leant towards her.

Cilla bustled out of the doorway carrying a tray. She unloaded tea things onto the wicker table and was gone again.

"Yes?" Laura searched his face.

He frowned and shook his head. "We'll talk later, now is not the time."

"I'm glad you acknowledge that we do need to talk, Nathaniel."

Cilla returned with a plate in each hand, food which Laura had begun to recognize: Cornish heavy cake and Cornish pasties.

"I didn't make the cake, Mrs. Hartwell did and she's a splendid cook. Eat up." She pulled off her straw bonnet and threw it on the ground. "I'll be mother shall I?" She seized the teapot and proceeded to pour the tea into each cup. "So nice to see you, Nathaniel." She glanced up, smiling warmly at him. "And you, of course, Laura. I've heard wonderful things about you. And it's been an age since I've enjoyed decent company."

Their whirlwind courtship could not have provided Cilla with much information, Laura thought. "And I you," she said honestly. In a way, Cilla was like a younger version of her aunt. But while Aunt Dora scribbled poetry and mixed with writers and artists, this woman was a highly competent artist, if the paintings in the cottage were anything to go by. Laura had to admit to being a little intrigued by her. She studied her husband as he sipped his tea. He looked at home here. How often had he visited? And what had taken place between them? A shaft of jealousy hit her at the thought of the two of them in a tete-a-tete. Had Nathaniel opened up to Cilla and told her the secrets he held so tightly in his heart? Secrets he refused to tell his own wife?

An even more unattractive situation occurred to Laura. Had they been lovers? She took a gulp of tea. It was hot and burned her throat. "Oh!" she said, choking. She reached for a napkin.

"Are you all right, Laura?" Nathaniel leaned over to gently pat her back.

"Fine, thank you." She moved away from his touch.

His dark brows drew together in a heavy frown, but he said nothing.

"What do you think of Wolfram, Laura?" Cilla asked.

"I've still seen little of it thus far," Laura said. "But what I have seen is extraordinary. In London, when Nathaniel told me about his home, I never envisaged anything quite like this."

Nathaniel put down his cup, rattling it in the saucer. "That didn't sound like a ringing approval."

"Didn't it? I certainly meant it to."

"You love Wolfram, Nathaniel," Cilla said, refilling his cup. "But it does take time to get used to its ... differences."

"That's not what I said." Laura flushed hotly.

"But it's what you meant." Nathaniel's sombre grey eyes searched hers.

Filled with uncertainty about many things since she'd arrived, Laura felt unequal to the task of refuting it.

"In time," Cilla said, smiling, "You will come to love it, its lack of modern comforts and all."

"Those things don't really bother me," Laura said stiffly.

Cilla abruptly changed the subject. Laura could only feel grateful as she adroitly discussed village affairs with

Nathaniel, even though it was a conversation that excluded her.

When their discussion paused, Laura said, "You're an accomplished artist, Cilla. Where did you study?"

"I was lucky to have a very good tutor in Paris."

"Paris! How wonderful. How did that come about?"

"My mother and father were artists, my mother French, a distant cousin of Berthe Morisot's, in fact. Perhaps you've heard of her?"

Laura nodded. "I love her work, so sad that she died. A few years ago wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Were you long in Paris?"

"Some years, until both my parents died of the influenza."

Laura reached across and touched the other woman's arm. "How awful for you."

Cilla shrugged. "It is a while ago now. Unfortunately, they left very little money. I was forced to leave Paris and return to England."

Nathaniel said little as Laura and Cilla chatted. Although Cilla's life was an incredible one, Laura's thoughts strayed to him. The cross words they'd had caused more of a dent in their relationship than it should. Perhaps, unlike Wolfram, built to last on a foundation of rock, they'd built their relationship on the shifting sand of passion, and the slightest disagreement caused a large rift. She was lonely and knew that making love to Nathaniel, as wonderful as that was, would not make her feel any less so.

Dark clouds rolled towards them over the sea. Nathaniel rose. "We'd best get the horses back to the stables."

They made their way back through Cilla's chaotic little house. Laura caught sight of a painting hanging near the front door, she'd been too distracted to notice when she came in. It was a night scene, candlelight shone out from a cottage in a moonlit landscape, the woods in the distance. It was eerily beautiful. She stopped to examine it more closely. A woman in a long red dress stood at the doorway with the light behind her.

"Come, Laura." Nathaniel took her arm and hurried her out to the waiting horses.

They took their leave and rode back to the stables. As Nathaniel had predicted, the sky darkened and the wind grew stronger. By the time they reached the house, it began to rain.

Nathaniel started to follow Laura up the stairs, but halted at the approach of the butler.

"Your lordship?" Rudge spoke quietly in his ear.

"I'll see you at dinner, Laura." Nathaniel ran back down the stairs and out the front door.

Laura stood there for a moment, holding the banister. The granite felt cold under her hand as she continued her climb.

Leaning into the stiff rain-laden wind, Nathaniel walked beside his overseer, Hugh Pitney, to where another lane branched off heading down to the sea. Hugh's shoulders were as broad as Nathaniel's and he was about the same height. Their gait matched as they strode along in companionable silence. The right fork continued on up into the parklands and



woods. They took the left and strode down to where two stone cottages sat apart from the rest on a rise above a small, sandy beach. A long funnel of rock like a pointing finger, reached out into the dark grey sea, turbulent now with the force of the wind. It increased to gale pitch and began to howl around them, blowing Nathaniel's hair in his eyes. He swiped it back impatiently and raised his voice. "How did you find out about this?"

Hugh's brown eyes looked troubled as they entered the grounds of the first cottage. "I stumbled on it, milord. I noticed part of the roof caving in and went to inspect it."

"Good thing, you did." Nathaniel gestured towards the beach. "Did you check the caves?"

Hugh nodded. "Empty, and no signs of recent activity. They know better than to try that again." He forced the door open and they hurried inside as the rain turned into a deluge, coming down like a river from the broken gutters. The small sitting room remained dry however, and was filled with boxes, stacked across the floor, and heaped almost up to the beamed ceiling.

Nathaniel bowed his head through the low doorway. Taking a knife from his pocket, he squatted down and prized open the lid of a box. Bottles clanked. "Port." He leavened another open. "Bolts of silk." He sat back on his haunches and shook his head in disgust. "Get the constable over here," he said grimly. "I'll wait."

Hugh drew the collar of his coat up around his ears and shouldered his way out into the rain.

Nathaniel stalked about the room. Could anything get worse? His reputation would be in ashes if anyone in London got to hear about it. What would happen to his marriage then? Anger and despair seeped into his bones like poison.

"Wine my lady?"

Laura nodded. "Thank you, Rudge."

Nathaniel had not made an appearance at dinner. Rudge stood in his usual place as the servants brought in the first course.

Laura had been determined not to ask him where Nathaniel was, but found she couldn't swallow a mouthful of food until she did. "Where is his lordship, Rudge?"

"I beg pardon, my lady. His lordship didn't see fit to tell me."

Laura wondered if he lied to her, for it had been him who sent Nathaniel rushing off. She looked into the man's fathomless black eyes. He didn't like her. It perplexed her for she believed she'd done little to warrant it. "What was the message you gave him on the stairs?"

Rudge blinked. Laura realized with satisfaction that she'd surprised him. "His overseer, Mr. Pitney wished to see him about a problem, my lady."

Laura put down her soup spoon. "What sort of problem can't wait until morning?"

"I don't know, my lady. More wine?"

Laura realized she'd drunk a full glass. Was the butler's voice slightly critical? She nodded. As the ruby liquid swirled into her wine glass, she looked up into his face. He was younger than she first thought. Less than forty perhaps, the

grey at his temples lent him a gravitas one associated with age. "Have you been with Lord Lanyon long, Rudge?"

"Eight years, my lady."

"You served the first Lady Lanyon."

"Yes, my lady."

"Was she a good mistress?"

Rudge put down the wine carafe and stepped back into his position. "It isn't my place to say, my lady."

Laura knew that wine mixed with anger and dismay had loosened her tongue, but she didn't care. "I wish to learn something about her."

"She was very beautiful. A very fine lady." He clasped and unclasped his hands. "Shall I serve the next course, my lady?"

Laura regretted asking. She took another sip of wine. "Is there a likeness here? I haven't seen one."

"His lordship had them removed, my lady."

Laura sat stunned. Amanda's room was kept as she left it, yet her likeness had been removed. It made no sense. She frowned. Unless Nathaniel could not bear to look at one.

"There is a portrait stored away in the library," Rudge said. "I could show it to you after dinner should you wish, my lady."

Laura toyed with her wineglass. Candlelight flashed rainbow colors across the cut glass. "Perhaps I'll wait for Lord Lanyon to do so. Serve the next course if you please."

As Laura sipped her coffee in the library, Rudge entered and stood before her.

"Do you require anything, my lady?"

"No. Thank you Rudge."

"Perhaps you'd like me to show the portrait, the one of the first Lady Lanyon now, my lady?"

Rudge seemed very eager and she wondered why. She should refuse him. Laura casually put down her cup. Would she know better what she was dealing with if she saw it?

"Very well."

Her pulse quickening Laura rose to her feet. She followed Rudge to the far end of the room. He opened a cupboard door and drew out a large painting from inside, wrapped in a cloth cover. "It used to hang above the fireplace in this room," he said, his dark eyes shining. He pulled away the fabric. His thick fingers caressed the gilt frame as he held the painting up for her to see.

Laura suddenly understood why Rudge didn't like her. The thought sent a shaft of unease up her spine.

She studied the painting silently. It was of an unusual composition. The painter had placed his subject in this room, with the magnificent stained glass window, the baronial fireplace, even the leopard skin rug just as it was now. Again, the feeling that it was just a moment ago, made Laura draw breath. Amanda stood in the centre of the stone-flagged floor with a flowery bonnet in her gloved hand, as if she was about to go out or had just returned. She looked directly at the artist, a smile curved her lips and filled her blue eyes with laughter, her blonde hair drawn back into a smooth knot from a pale brow. Her gown was of a blue stuff that matched her eyes. She was not at this stage, increasing.

"She was lovely," Laura said honestly, with a stab of guilt at the shaft of jealousy she felt for the dead woman.

"Yes, she was." The crisp reply came from behind her. "Put it away, Rudge."

Laura whirled. Nathaniel stood at the door.

"That will be all, Rudge," Laura said, not taking her eyes from her husband.

Nathaniel went to the chair by the fire and threw himself down. "Bring me a brandy before you leave, Rudge."

Her throat tight, Laura went to sit on the sofa. When the door closed behind the butler, Nathaniel said, "You're interested in my first wife. It's part of my history, I can understand that. I should tell you more. I will tell you more, Laura. Just not now."

"Where were you tonight?"

He passed a tired hand over his eyes. "Business called me away. I'm sorry I couldn't make dinner."

"Business? At this time?"

"Running an estate this size doesn't fit neatly into the hours of business," he said, sharply.

Hearing the edge to his voice, Laura rose. "I think I'll retire, Nathaniel."

He frowned. "Isn't it a little early?"

"I'm tired." In truth, she was exhausted. All of a sudden, everything overwhelmed her. How could she compete with a past that included Nathaniel's memories of a beloved, who would stay forever young and lovely? The present was just as confusing, a secretive, short tempered husband, and a butler

who measured her unfairly against his previous mistress. Was it an impossible task to make Wolfram ever feel like home?

Nathaniel looked down at the half-glass of amber liquid. "I'll follow you up shortly."

After Agnes was dismissed, Laura pottered around her chamber trying to still her mind. She wore her most sensible nightgown buttoned up to a high collar. Once her hair was plaited she climbed into bed. As she waited for Nathaniel, a sob rose in her throat. Where was her eager lover now? Had she failed so miserably he didn't desire her anymore? The clock on the mantelpiece ticked away the hour.

Nathaniel sat staring into the fire. Laura's curiosity about Amanda was understandable. Yet, how could he explain, put into words what had taken place here, and not have her turn away from him? His tired mind tried to come to grips with what he'd just discovered, and who might be behind it. When smugglers last targeted Wolfram, he'd dismissed two men in his employ, Ben Jerkins, who worked in the home farm, and his head gardener, Thomas Mallory, both without a reference. They would have struggled to find another position, and most certainly not found one as good.

Nathaniel sighed. Of Ben Jerkin's guilt he was sure, but with Thomas Mallory, he regretted being so hasty. He wanted the man back where he could size him up with a cooler eye. The familiar horror rolled over him and he took a long swallow of brandy. Jealousy ate a man up, turned him into a monster. He hated being unable to control any part of his nature, but was sure he would suffer jealousy again if Laura gave him

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cause. The very thought made him feel like committing murder.

Laura lay upstairs waiting for him. Tired as he was, the thought of her filled him with desire. Their lovemaking had surprised him. He suspected they'd be good together, but the depth of their passion was extraordinary. Laura matched him perfectly. He could not, would not, live without her, yet how could she continue to have faith in him, once the truth came out?

He took a candle and ran up the stairs. Reaching the upper corridor, he slowed. Each night he became determined to talk to Laura. To respond to her obvious need to understand him. And each night he turned away. He knew he would fail again tonight.

Laura heard the panel slide back. Her heart responded as it always did, leaping with joy and expectation at the sight of him.

Nathaniel threw off his robe. He was naked beneath. The candlelight played lovingly over his strong shoulders, torso and arms as he pulled back the covers and climbed in beside her. His body was cool against hers. He gathered her up in his arms and buried his face in her neck. "You're so warm, and you smell wonderful, darling."

Laura slid helplessly towards desire. Her body had come to expect it and now demanded the sensations only his hands and body could produce. No matter how desperate she was to confront him, the touch of his mouth on hers, probing and insistent, sent every thought from her mind. Only one remained.

She loved him.

Nathaniel rolled over and lay beside her, as a delicious lassitude spread through Laura's limbs in the aftermath of lovemaking. She heard him sigh and opened her eyes to glance at him. Surprised by his look, she raised her head on an elbow. "Darling, what is it?"

His grey eyes clouded with doubt. "I have to go to London on Friday; I'll be gone for the best part of a week."

"I thought that was weeks away."

"I told you Laura, when we first met. This is the way my life is."

"I thought we'd have more time together."

"Perhaps I shouldn't have brought you to Wolfram."

Laura sat up. "Not brought me here? How can you say that?"

Nathaniel dropped his gaze to her breasts, exposed as the sheet fell away. He stroked a rosy nipple. "From the moment I set eyes on you, I was lost. I couldn't help myself."

Laura moved away, annoyed with herself for her body's immediate response to his touch. "I don't understand you, Nathaniel." Tears gathered and she left the bed lest he should see them.

He rose to follow her. "Perhaps you need more than I can give you right now."

Laura slipped into her gown and sat in front of the mirror. She grasped the pearl handle of her hairbrush, feeling its reassuringly familiar smoothness under her fingers. Her movements were jerky and she snagged a curl.



Nathaniel took the brush from her hand. "I must attend Parliament, there are issues my constituents wish me to raise."

"May I go with you?" Laura searched his face in the mirror for a sign that he wished it.

He met her gaze with a smile as he untangled the knot. "I thought you might go to Wimbledon to visit your parents." He ran the brush smoothly through her hair. "I stay at a London hotel, but I'm hardly there. I'm busy night and day."

"I promised to open the village fete next Saturday." She had no desire to have her mother's eagle eye upon her. Certainly not now when she felt so confused.

Nathaniel's gaze clouded. "As you wish, my dear. You must take any worries to Hugh. He will assist you."

Nathaniel leaned back against the leather seat as the steam train chugged northward. He had instructed Hugh Pitney to keep an eye on Laura during the day. He was confident she would be safe at night locked up within the walls of the abbey. He had set the wheels in motion for an investigation into the smuggling, and prayed something would come of it quickly. The smugglers had been put on notice, and their goods removed. They wouldn't dare return to Wolfram. Perhaps when all this was over, he and Laura could settle into a peaceful life together. The past could be buried. He amended the thought. Some aspects of the past could be buried. He shrugged and stared sightlessly out of the window. How long would Laura remain his sweet wife? He could not bear the thought of the love and trust fading from her eyes when she looked at him. Gaining her trust had become

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important to him. Whether he deserved it or not, it had become everything.

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## **Chapter Nine**

Laura stood on the courtyard cobblestones watching as the carriage bore Nathaniel to the station in Penzance for the London train. His words returned to sting at her. He had suggested he shouldn't have brought her here to Wolfram. Did she disappoint him? One thing was clear, she did not disappoint him in the bedroom. She'd begun to suspect he used lovemaking to smooth over any disagreements between them. And he would continue to do so, unless she demanded more openness from him. She was ordinarily a fighter and yet she hung back. Was she afraid she would have confirmation of what she feared, that he still loved Amanda?

A walk before lunch would have the dual purpose of ordering her thoughts, while at the same time, discovering more of Wolfram. Deep in thought, she strolled along the hedge-lined lane past the row of stone cottages. She found herself outside a cottage very much like the one in the painting. Yes, there was the band of tall fir trees that isolated it from the rest. She opened the gate and entered the weedy front garden that had been such a riot of colour in Cilla's painting. Holding her hand to shade her vision she peered in through the dusty window. The cottage looked abandoned, with bare boards and no furnishings to speak of, but it wasn't entirely empty. A couch and a table with a ladder-backed chair remained in the narrow sitting room. A fire had been laid as if someone was due to arrive to light it. A branch of candles stood on the mantle. At the sound of a horse in the

lane, Laura glanced up. The overseer, Hugh Pitney pulled up his horse and nodded at her, before riding on. Had he followed her? Laura swallowed down her annoyance.

There was no sign of Hugh when Laura closed the gate behind her. She walked to the end of the lane and entered the leafy woodland along a well-trodden path. It was peaceful here with the strong scent of the pines and the chirp of birds. She heard rustling among the trees and, although her commonsense told her it would be a deer or some other animal, she hurried out onto the cliff path. She stood and stared straight out to the rim of dark grey on the horizon, above the roiling silver sea. She'd never been aware of her fear of heights until she came here, and felt perplexed by it. A stiff salt-laden breeze grabbed at her clothing. It blew her skirts up, and as she smoothed them down, her shawl ripped from her shoulders. She moved forward to grab it, and found herself far too close to the cliff edge. A clawing fear tightened her throat before she stepped back to steady herself. She could only watch as the pretty fringed Cashmere shawl floated beyond her reach. It sailed over the cliff and down onto the water, then disappeared below the white-capped waves as they surged onto the rocks. Laura cursed, and held onto her bonnet with both hands, which threatened to join the shawl. The shawl had been a present from Aunt Dora. She turned and quickly walked along the narrow lane, finding herself outside Cilla's cottage.

"Laura. This is a nice surprise." Cilla rose from the garden with a trowel in her hand. She wore a plain straw bonnet in a sad state of disrepair and an apron over a grey linen gown.

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"I've been exploring more of Wolfram." Laura wasn't sure she was up to facing Cilla when she felt so low. But perhaps she'd unconsciously brought herself here, for Cilla might supply the answers to her questions.

"And you're just in time for lunch."

Laura hesitated. "Thank you, but I'd better go back. They'll be expecting me."

"Nonsense." Cilla opened the gate and stood aside. "My maid is here today, I'll send her off to tell them where you are."

"Well, if you're sure."

"I'd be delighted."

Laura followed Cilla inside. She paused in the tiny hall, in front of the painting of the garden at night. "I saw this cottage on my walk."

"It's empty now."

"Who lived there before?"

"Thomas Mallory, head gardener at Wolfram." Cilla turned and walked through to the sitting room.

"I've met the head gardener, and it isn't Thomas. Does he still live here at Wolfram?"

"Not any more."

Although she sensed Cilla was reluctant to discuss it, Laura persisted. "Who is the lady in the long red dress? Was she real?"

Cilla swivelled. "Yes. She was real. Tell me. Has Nathaniel divulged anything about what happened here?"

Laura shook her head. "He's told me nothing."

"Then perhaps I shouldn't either. Come and talk to me while I prepare us a simple lunch. I have cauliflower soup and herby pie. If that's all right?"

"That will be lovely. As you've sent your maid off, allow me to help."

Cilla smiled as she removed her hat. The emerald scarf tied in her hair brought out the green in her hazel eyes. "You can set the table. Such a nice day, we'll sit outside."

They chatted as they ate, the conversation centring on art. Laura found herself enjoying Cilla's company.

Cilla pushed her plate to one side and rested her elbows on the table. As if responding to Laura's silent pleas for information, she asked, "Do you know how Amanda died?"

"I assumed in a fall down the stairs."

"Well, you're going to find out eventually. I'm not surprised Nathaniel hasn't told you more. He's not dealt well with it."

Laura leant forward, her heart beating fast.

"Amanda disappeared early one evening. Nathaniel had the staff and half the village searching the estate for her. They found her body the next day, lying on the rocks. She had fallen from the cliff, right at the end of this lane. There was an inquest. A lot of questions were asked. The Coroner concluded it was an accident."

Laura gasped. "With the baby coming? Why would she be wandering about alone?"

Cilla shook her head. "There are rumors aplenty. Don't ask me for more, Laura. I would only be gossiping and I like to

think I'm above that. I feel a sense of loyalty to Nathaniel, for his kindness to me."

Laura suffered a twinge of jealousy. Ashamed, she swallowed and fell silent.

"The servants will gossip," Cilla said. "Try not to believe everything you hear. It's a mystery that is best forgotten."

"I don't agree. You can't just forget that a woman has died. And her unborn baby."

Cilla pushed her chair back from the table. "We'd better go inside, it's growing cold." She gathered up the plates and cutlery, and placed them on a tray.

They settled in the sitting room. Laura accepted a cup of tea from Cilla. She peered over the cup's rim. "I'm asking a lot of questions. I'm sorry, but I must know."

"Then ask your husband."

A mix of shame and frustration brought tears to Laura's eyes. "Thank you, I will." She put down her cup spilling some in the saucer.

"*My dear.*" Cilla rose and put her arm around Laura's shaking shoulders. "I can see you are troubled. I wish I could help."

Laura sagged back down. "Is love a necessary ingredient to a successful marriage?" *He had said once they were destined to be together. Did he mean it, and did he still believe it?*

Cilla stared at her. "Nathaniel? I'm sure he loves you. You're very pretty, Laura."

"I know he desires me, but that's not what I mean." Laura picked up her cup in shaky fingers and took a gulp. The tea

helped her gain her composure. "I beg your pardon, Cilla. I should not be burdening you with my troubles." She brushed straying tendrils off her forehead. "It's just that I've felt so isolated here."

Cilla smiled. "You can come and unburden yourself to me at anytime."

"I've become a bore. Please tell me more about yourself. What brought you to Wolfram?"

"My father originally hailed from Wolfram village. We lived here when I was a child. I knew Nathaniel then. He was a friend and we ran around together and climbed trees. My family was not of his class, but children care nothing for that." She leaned back in her chair. "After my parents settled in Paris, life became difficult for me." She looked down at her hands. "I found it hard to deal with their deaths, within a week of one another, and then a broken romance."

"How dreadful that must have been for you. Were you about to marry?"

Cilla tilted her head. Her clear hazel eyes met Laura's. "I feel I can trust you with a secret, Laura. My lover was a woman."

"Oh." Laura found it hard to hold her gaze. "Your secret's safe with me, Cilla." Her friend Eloise Travers at Cambridge had confessed to a similar desire. She would have loved to ask Eloise more about it, but of course she didn't. What two women did together when alone was never discussed by the rest of the women. Thinking of all she and Nathaniel shared made her feel it must be a poor imitation. Why, men and women fitted together like two spoons! It suddenly struck her



and she almost laughed; she had been jealous of Cilla. Would she never have any sense where Nathaniel was concerned? Jealousy was such an ignominious emotion, but born out of insecurity. If only Nathaniel was more open with her. If only he told her he loved her. When he shut her out it tore her heart in two and made her feel so helpless.

"It's impossible to live as I wish in Wolfram. I plan to return to Paris one day, if I can sell enough paintings. I have a contact in London who is prepared to give my work an exhibition."

"I wish you great success." Laura felt better about her own embarrassing, uncharacteristic outburst. It occurred to her that Cilla's confession may have been timed for just that reason and she was grateful.

"You're very kind, Laura. I should like to paint you, perhaps when you're feeling more settled you'll consider it."

"Would you? I believe I'd like that. Did you do any other paintings of Amanda?" It was out before she realized it.

Cilla tilted her head. "Yes, several."

"The painting in the library?"

"That one too."

"I thought it might be yours. It's wonderful."

"I like that one myself. I feel it captured the essence of Amanda. Her openness to life. She had that wonderful ability to grasp it with both hands. Who showed it to you? It's been taken down now, I believe."

"Rudge. He took it from a cupboard and almost insisted I see it."

Cilla's eyebrows rose. "Did he? Awful man."

Curious to know what kind of man he was, Laura asked, "Does Thomas Mallory ever return to visit Wolfram?"

Cilla shook her head. "I haven't seen him since he left, soon after Amanda's death."

"Why paint Amanda at the door of his cottage? It seems a humble setting for a baroness."

Cilla looked down at her hands. They were large hands, the fingers long and pointed. Artist's hands, Laura thought. "I passed by and saw them. He and Amanda were discussing the planting of the rose arbour. In her ruby colored gown she looked striking against the rustic backdrop, like a rose amongst weeds. I rushed away determined to paint it. And the very next day I did, from memory."

"Strange, that he left Wolfram so soon after her death."

"I believe he was in love with her. But I'm equally sure she didn't return it."

"Did Nathaniel and Amanda have a happy marriage?" Laura rushed on as Cilla shook her head. "I'm sorry, I seemed to need to know this."

"Hard to know what happens behind closed doors." Cilla looked sympathetic. "Would my opinion mean much to you?"

"I'm making you uncomfortable and that's unpardonable of me. I don't know what's got into me." Laura rose feeling ashamed. She swallowed the lump blocking the back of her throat. "I'll leave you in peace."

As Cilla opened the door, she said, "You didn't make me feel uncomfortable at all. Please come again, soon."

Laura walked down to the garden gate. The narrow path along the cliff lay ahead. Knowing that Amanda had tumbled

to her death from it made it even more forbidding. Why would a young woman in the eighth month of her confinement, walk alone here in the evening? Laura stopped and looked back. If Amanda hadn't come here to jump to her death, and no one suggested that she had, her only possible destination could have been Cilla's cottage.

Sitting alone at the long table in the dining room, Laura toyed with the roast mutton stuffed with oysters on her plate. Rudge stood near the door with his gloved hands clasped together. In the silence, the gilt clock on the mantel and the patter of the rain against the window sounded abnormally loud.

Usually, Laura's focus was on the conversation Nathaniel and she enjoyed. Tonight, she pushed the food around her plate as she took in the details of the room, noting what pleased her and what she didn't like. The well-proportioned room had been decorated in gold and soft olive. A buffet displayed an impressive array of decorated china and ceramics. Above it, shelves of glassware sparkled in the firelight. An antique embroidered screen sat in a corner. Laura dismissed with distaste the cage of stuffed birds, but admired the choice of regal gold wall paper above the oak wainscoting. The faded green damask material covering the row of arched windows sorely needed replacing. She found herself developing a strong desire to alter things. To make this house hers. This room was the perfect place to start.

"I believe we need new curtains for this room," Laura said, as much to herself as to Rudge. "Something warmer. It appears rather cold."

"Lady Lanyon ...." Rudge cleared his throat. "The first Lady Lanyon planned to change them also."

"What did she have in mind?"

A smug expression stole into his eyes. "Pompeian red velvet, I believe, my lady. Lady ... the first Lady Lanyon had excellent taste."

"I can see we would have agreed on the need for warmth."

Rudge's eyes brightened. "I believe she had some samples. They would still be here. I could find them, my lady. Should you wish?"

"I prefer one of those charming chintzes about today, to pick up the colors in the Axminster carpet. It would tone well with the oak wainscoting. And I may have these dining chairs recovered to suit."

Rudge's mouth firmed and his gaze dropped to his highly polished shoes. "As you wish, my lady."

"I'll write for a decorator to send samples. I agree that Pompeian red velvet works well in this room. But for the chairs only."

Laura pushed away her plate. She left the table to wander about the room. She sensed Rudge watching her. He never did anything to step beyond the bounds of propriety or raise himself above his station, and yet, she sensed a rebellious streak and a dislike of her still. "That leather corner chair shouldn't be in here. Please have it moved to the library. By the fire. It will be perfect for Lord Lanyon." She felt the need to assert her authority. If Rudge didn't like her, at least he would respect her.

"Why is there not a housekeeper at Wolfram?"

"She succumbed to an illness, my lady. About a year ago it was. Lord Lanyon hasn't yet replaced her."

"Then I shall have to start interviewing a replacement immediately." Laura rose from the table, "Oh, and have that cage of stuffed birds removed. Some potted plants can fill the space. Orchids and ferns." She walked to the door. "I believe I'll retire, Rudge."

In the hall, Rudge lit a candle from the Argand oil lamp and passed it to her. Laura gathered up her skirts to mount the stairs. Tonight would be a long and lonely one without her love. She sighed. She would have to get used to it, for Nathaniel would be gone for many days yet.

It was still early when she blew out her candle, and although her head was filled with disturbing thoughts stirred up by her conversation with Cilla, she fell asleep well before eleven. She woke hours later and sat up, immediately wide awake and wondering what woke her. It was still dark. At the sound of a scraping noise and a soft shuffle, she threw back the bedclothes, and reached for the candle. She fumbled for the matches, which eluded her panicky fingers. Finally, she found them and lit the candle. The noise ceased. It had not come from this room for it was empty. And yet it had sounded so close.

Her heart pounding, Laura pulled on her dressing gown and went to the door. She opened it and tiptoed out into the dark corridor. The floor creaked beneath her feet. At the end of the corridor, she thought she saw movement, a flash of white. It vanished so quickly she wasn't sure she seen anything more than a shaft of moonlight. She held up the

wavering candle in a trembling hand. Had it come from Amanda's bedchamber? She took two steps towards it, and stopped as her breath shortened into gasps. Without Nathaniel, she was vulnerable here. She turned and hurried back to her room. Easing the door shut, she turned the key in the lock. Climbing back into bed she hugged her knees, her ears straining for the smallest sound, but she heard nothing more.

During the hours she lay awake, Laura faced the fact that she had come to Wolfram determined to make Nathaniel love her so much it would blot out his sad past. The thought was unreasonable and childish. They both had to earn each other's love and respect, which only time could effect. She fell into a light doze and dreamed the dream again. This time, a lady hovered above her, dressed in a white gown. Her face was shadowy, her hair pale. Laura woke, heart pounding and lay with her head on the pillow. As grey light filtered through the curtains, banishing the shadows, Laura remained convinced that what she'd seen was a ghostly presence.

Wicker baskets were filled with Mrs. Madge's fine pasties and her famous Cornish heavy cake which was more like a fruity pastry than a raised cake. Laura had found it to be delicious served with preserves and clotted cream. Added to this were several jars of rhubarb, apple and blackcurrant preserves. Laura had Jarvis take her in the brougham to the park adjoining the vicarage, where the fete was to be held. She had dressed carefully in an outfit of dove-grey crepon which featured a short bolero jacket over a lace vest. Her yellow straw poke-brim had a high crown adorned with

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ribbons and flowers. When she alighted from the carriage, a crowd quickly gathered. She greeted the villagers as she and Jarvis made their way to the tables set up with their wares. Mrs. Madge's offerings were accepted graciously.

A stage had been set up for music and dancing. Couples performed a round dance. When it ended, a male tenor began a rendition of Sweet Nightingale, his fine voice carrying across the air:

Don't you hear the fond tale

Of the sweet nightingale,

As she sings in those valleys below?

Laura glanced at the table and found not one of Mrs. Madge's offerings remained.

When the song ended and the clapping died away, Laura was assisted to the platform by the Vicar. She looked down on the ring of faces around her, some smiling, some curious. She related her prepared speech to open the fete. She had added an amusing anecdote of how a northerner who couldn't swim had been rowed to her new home, hoping it might charm them, and when she finished was relieved by the enthusiastic response. She climbed down and accepted a cup of tea, sitting with a plate of cake balanced on her lap among the village ladies in the church hall. They chattered about how lucky they'd been with the weather and what a success the fete proved to be.

"So nice to have a new Baroness at Wolfram," said a lady dressed in a violet silk dress that contrasted poorly with her florid complexion, "especially one as elegant as yourself, my lady."

"Why, thank you, Mrs Matcham," Laura said smiling.

"So sad, what happened." Mrs. Matcham leant forward. "Don't you let those gossips distress you. Lord Lanyon is a fine man. I don't believe a word of it."

Before Laura could think of a tactful reply, one of the committee ladies, Mrs. Brown stepped forward. "Mrs. Matcham, I wonder if you'll organize some more hot water. I believe we're running out of tea."

When Mrs. Matcham moved out of earshot, Mrs Brown said. "I do apologize, my lady. There's some here far too free with their opinions."

"That's perfectly alright, please don't worry, Mrs. Brown," Laura said. "I am not at all thin-skinned, and treat gossip with the contempt it deserves."

As Laura made her way towards Jarvis and the waiting carriage, she heard more than one loud whisper from the gathered throng.

She frowned as Jarvis assisted her into the brougham. Surely no one would suspect Nathaniel of such a heinous crime? "How absurd," she said aloud.

"Pay no attention, my lady," Jarvis said over his shoulder as he drove the horses down the hill.

"I've heard some gossip here today, Jarvis," Laura said, "that I'd rather not have reached my ears. I'm not sure I understand it."



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"There are those that don't believe the inquest went far enough into the first Lady Lanyon's death. But it's a rare 'un who suspects his lordship. Lord Lanyon is well liked by most."

That wasn't enough for Laura; she suffered a surge of anger and dismay that flamed her cheeks. She was glad of the cool breeze as the carriage got up speed. It would not be enough for Nathaniel. Suddenly, the village appeared to be held back by the past. The end of this year would be the start of a new Century. And Wolfram Village would move forward with it, if she had anything to do with it.

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## Chapter Ten

Two days passed without incident. Laura interviewed one local woman seeking the role of housekeeper, but thought her unsuitable. She would have to look further afield. In the meantime, she took up the mantle, going from room to room with an upstairs maid, making a list of what was needed to be done in each. Thick dust and neglect greeted her more often than not. It was extraordinary that a house of this size did not have a housekeeper. Nathaniel like most men did not understand the importance of a well run house. Laura laughed to herself, how like her mother she sounded! She doubted the last housekeeper had been very capable. If no local woman would do, she fully intended to cast the net wider for just the right applicant. But until then, so many rooms, so much to organize, but at least it kept her mind busy.

After breakfast on Wednesday, Laura went to the rose garden to attend to her correspondence. It had rained earlier and the air heavy and humid in the house. It was fresher here where the breeze gently stirred the leaves of the chestnut tree. She paused to admire the arbor of pink and white roses intertwined into a fragrant arch that Amanda and Thomas Mallory had created. Settling on the seat beneath the low branches of the chestnut, she spread her writing things over the small table placed there for that purpose. She penned a dutiful letter to her mother, knowing her parent would fill in the gaps and guess things weren't quite right. Laura shrugged; she had no heart to embellish the truth. She asked

her mother if she or her acquaintances knew of a housekeeper with good references, and told of her plans for the refurbishment of some of the rooms. Running a house proved to be far more difficult than she imagined, and she'd developed a grudging respect for her mother's ability to manage Grisewood Hall as well as she did. Laura added a footnote of love and encouragement for her beloved father, who she knew was overworked and apprehensive as the Boer war raged on in Africa.

Laura scribbled another note. This time to Aunt Dora. She managed to sound light hearted while begging her to come and visit soon.

The butler appeared carrying the mail on a silver salver.

Laura gazed up at the man's stern face from beneath her wide-brimmed hat. "Thank you Rudge."

"Shall you take tea in the library, my lady?"

"I believe I shall have it here. It's so much nicer outdoors."

"Very well, my lady."

Laura watched his stiff retreating back, then glanced through the letters. An invitation from the Vicar to dine at the vicarage when Nathaniel returned, and one for afternoon tea from the two spinster ladies who lived at Thrompton, the small manor house a few miles outside the village. Another letter requested she open the annual flower show. Eloise Travers, a friend from Cambridge sent a letter filled with news of her latest literary conquest. She had been employed to write for a new ladies magazine, *Aphrodite*, in London.

Laura turned to another letter and gasped with surprise. It was from Howard Farmer, her old friend. He sent his belated

best wishes for her marriage. Reading between the lines, she saw the hurt there. She chewed her bottom lip, aware she was remiss not to have written and told him she was to marry. He must have learned it from her parent's. He now taught Classics at the University of London. If she ever wished to see him she was not to hesitate in contacting him there. She smiled. Perhaps, he had forgiven her.

The last letter was addressed to Nathaniel. Why had Rudge brought it to her? The envelope bore a hasty scrawl of one line: *His Lordship, the Baron Lanyon*. One word in the corner caught her attention. *Urgent!* Laura hesitated for a few seconds, then seized her pearl handled opener and sliced through the envelope, removed the letter and smoothed it out. It was exactly like the envelope. A scrawled brief message, not dated, nor signed.

"*Baron,*" it read, "*the man you sought has been found. I hope he may supply the answers you seek. And I pray the Lord protects you and yours.*"

Laura gasped. She read it again. Protect from what? Indecisive thoughts clouded her mind. Should she contact Nathaniel? Would he disapprove of her opening his mail? Was it as urgent as it appeared, or did the writer enjoy a dramatic turn of phrase? There was no telephone at Wolfram. But there was one at the post office in the village. Nathaniel had given her a number to call for emergencies. She gathered up her mail and rushed up to her room. She would change into her riding habit and go there immediately. A telephone would be installed at Wolfram just as soon as she could arrange it. She

would not be isolated here when Nathaniel was in London one second more than was necessary.

Laying her change of clothing on the bed, she realized she would have to summon Agnes to help her with the buttons. She heard a knock at the door. "Come in?"

Rudge stood at the door, eyebrows raised. "Your morning tea is about to be served in the rose garden, my lady. As you instructed."

"I find I have to go out, Rudge. I need to telephone. Send Agnes to me, will you?"

"Certainly, my lady." Surprise registered on Rudge's chiselled features before disappearing behind a mask of servitude.

Once dressed, Laura left her puzzled maid and hurried to the stables. Quickly mounted, she rode out to the village. Before she reached the water, a rider crossed the causeway towards her. She pulled up her mount and waited for him to approach. The young man swept off his cap and his blond hair gleamed in the sun. He wore nankeen trousers, and a tan leather jerkin beneath a shabby cloth jacket.

A wide smile lit up his brown face. "You can only be the new Lady Lanyon."

Annoyed by his tone and the bold look in his brown eyes, Laura nodded, anxious to get to the post office and ring Nathaniel. "You know who I am, but I'm at a loss to know who you are, sir."

He bowed in the saddle. "Thomas Mallory at your service, my lady."

"Thomas Mallory?" Laura's mount danced in a circle. "The head gardener here at one time?"

"The very same, my lady."

"To what do we owe this visit, Mr Mallory?"

Thomas frowned and replaced his hat. "I wish to see Lord Lanyon."

"His lordship is away at present. He's not expected back until Saturday."

"Then I'll ride into town with you and put up at The Green Feather."

"There's no need for that. The cottage you vacated is empty."

Thomas laughed. It had a scornful ring to it. "I think not, my lady. But thank you."

They turned their mounts towards the village. The tide rose fast; the water lapped a few feet below the causeway. "How long until high tide?" Laura asked.

"An hour at most."

"I must hurry. Perhaps we shall meet again." Laura urged her horse into a canter.

"I'm sure we will, my lady."

He followed leisurely behind her. His manner too informal, almost insolent, but she had no time for it now. As she guided her horse across the stone carriageway, her mind turned to the conversation she was soon to have with her husband. It would not be an easy one.

At the crank of the handle, a voice came over the line. Laura held the black hearing piece to her ear, and asked the exchange for the number Nathaniel had given her. Was this

an emergency? She had to repeat her request shouting into the mouthpiece. Moments later, she heard Nathaniel's voice echoing as if he was far away in another country. She had planned to be short and precise, but at the sound of his voice her emotions got the better of her and she relayed the contents of the letter in a breathy voice. "It said urgent!"

It was impossible to judge his tone. "I'll be home in three days. We'll discuss it then. Wait a moment." His voice grew fainter. He seemed to be conducting a conversation with someone else. Returning, he said, "There's a vote in the House. I have to hurry. I'm sorry. Laura ..." The line crackled.

"What? I can't hear you," Laura yelled.

"... miss you."

Hoping she heard him correctly, Laura cried, "Oh, Nathaniel, I miss you too."

The crackling on the line ceased and suddenly his voice was so clear he might have been standing beside her. "I'll attend to it when I return home."

She hung up the phone, relieved that Nathaniel had made no comment about her opening his mail. When she left the post office she found Thomas Mallory leaning against a lamp post, smoking. He straightened as she passed by. "Did you discover what you were in such a hurry to find out, my lady?"

"Please don't concern yourself with my affairs, Mr Mallory." Laura beckoned the lad to bring her horse.

As she seized the reins she heard him behind her. "Allow me to give you a leg up, Lady Lanyon."

"Thank you." She placed her booted foot in his clasped hands and he threw her expertly up onto the side saddle. She

arranged her skirts and looked down at him. "Shall we see you about for some time, Mr Mallory?"

"That you will, my lady. That you will." He touched his hand to his hat in what should have been a respectful gesture, but his brown eyes held an overly familiar expression that drew her ire. She found herself itching to raise her crop to him.

She rode back towards the abbey, relieved that the letter appeared to be nothing of concern. In a few days, Nathaniel would return and their lives together would continue where they left off.

Hoping to lift her spirits, she urged her horse into a canter.

Feeling uneasy and restless, Laura went for a walk before dinner. Wrapping herself warmly in a shawl, she wandered the grounds below the abbey. She found herself at the gate to the graveyard, entered and walked beneath the trees. The long grass had not been scythed for some time, and almost covered some of the old gravestones. Laura read each one, finding Nathaniel's father, but not his mother among them. Roaming further towards the water she discovered the one she'd been unconsciously searching for:

Amanda, Lady Lanyon. *Born: 1868. Died: 1897.*

*Her soul has now taken flight*

*To glorious mansions above,*

*To mingle with angel*



*And dwell in the kingdom of love*

A bunch of wilting wildflowers lay beside the stone.

Laura wondered if Nathaniel left the flowers, and if he had created the beautiful verse. The sea wind sharpened and she shivered, wrapping her shawl more closely around her shoulders. Feeling like an intruder, she hurried away.

Laura strolled the grounds down along the sea wall enjoying the gentle lap of the waves. She heard voices as she rounded the corner of the abbey and stopped. Where the land curved to meet the causeway, was a low stone wall, standing with one booted foot on it was Thomas Mallory. He was turned away from her, deep in conversation with one of the stable boys. The boy gesticulated, his manner apologetic, but his words were carried away on the wind.

Mallory straightened. "See that it's done," he said, his stern voice loud enough for her to hear. "I don't want a cock-up."

The boy nodded.

Laura retraced her steps before they could see her. Something about Mallory's attitude bothered her, she wasn't sure what. By the time she reached the house she'd worked it out. Mallory acted as if *he* was the lord of Wolfram.

When Laura's voice came over the line, Nathaniel's heart pounded in his chest, his first thought was that trouble had returned to Wolfram. He held his breath as she told him why she rang. His fingers clenched around the phone, he should have been there. Her voice faded in and out and the line was atrocious. He tried to summon the energy to calm her.

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by Maggi Andersen

Impossible when his blood drummed in his veins. He heard the bell ring for the next sitting. Damn it! He would have to go. It was only the letter, he told himself. It was unlikely that Mallory would arrive before he returned, and if he did, even more unlikely that he would speak to Laura.

That night in the library, Laura roamed the shelves looking for a book to make the nights less lonely and long. She found a slim volume with a red leather cover which was about a garden, and without opening it, tucked it into her pocket to take up to bed.

Settling onto the pillows, she opened it and began to read. She sighed. It was an old Arabian text translated into English and not at all what she had thought it would be. Something drew her on, and soon, its sensual pleasures made her breath catch in her throat and her face burn. She closed the book as if fire leapt from its pages, and gazed again at the title: *The Perfumed Garden*. She had never imagined that such a book existed; it was so blatant, and undeniably arousing. It was a graphic and beautiful account of sexual love. Intrigued, she opened the silken pages again. She read until the candle guttered, then tossed and turned in the dark for hours as her imagination placed her and Nathaniel into the scenes in the book.

Laura was still restless and troubled the next day. She found herself sitting in the chair at the window of her room. Rising in horror at the thought she would turn into some poor thing, existing only for her master's pleasure, she leaned on the windowsill and gazed out. What had happened to her dreams of a rich cultured life? The sky from the window was

clear and bright and she decided to ride to the estuary. Nathaniel hadn't had time to show her the surrounding countryside, and she'd heard it was a beautiful part of the country. She set out after breakfast and rode across the causeway, turning left to follow the harbor foreshore. Now familiar and comfortable with her mount, a good natured mare, she rode along a row of whitewashed cottages, and nodded to a man when he raised his head from his vegetable garden to give her a respectful salute. Further on, a woman called hello from the footpath as she walked to the market with a basket over her arm.

The harbor foreshore swept away out of sight behind a copse of trees and the cottages petered out. Laura continued along the road beside a rivulet. The terrain began to alter dramatically. The rivulet fed into a wide, briny lake, alive with bird life. Long-legged birds flocked noisily over the reedy water, feeding on a school of fish. The ever present gulls called from overhead. The wild grasses covering the rounded, sandy hills were bright with wild flowers. The hillocks sloped down to a wide strip of land lying between the lake and the sea. It took twenty minutes or so for Laura to circumnavigate the lake. She rode strongly to the top of a rise, eager to find the sea. The ocean's roar greeted her and the sea wind blew so hard the skirt of her riding habit flapped wildly around her legs. Below her, waves rolled up onto the soft sand of a sheltered bay. It looked as if a giant had taken a bite out of the coastline, with a rocky point reaching out into the sea at each end. Laura kicked her mount and they cantered down close to the beach. It was completely deserted.

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Laura dismounted and tethered her horse to a small tree bent almost double by the wind. She saw tracks from a set of footprints crossing the sand. Someone had been here, and not long ago, for the tide would surely have swept them clean. Removing her hat, the wind caught the soft bun at the nape of her neck and began to unravel her hair from its pins. She gave into it, removing the remaining pins and combs and allowing it to flow free. She stood staring out to sea with her auburn locks billowing around her. Cornwall made her feel alive in a way she'd never experienced. Facing this vast space was both humbling and awe-inspiring. Staring out over the ocean to the horizon was both humbling and sublime. Shelley's poem, Mont Blanc rushed into her mind, and she murmured a line:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,

If to the human mind's imaginings...

With a rush, she understood that Wolfram had become home to her. Her passion for this small piece of England, and for Nathaniel, filled her heart and made her gasp. She hugged herself with her arms.

*"My, my."*

Laura swung around. Thomas Mallory advanced on her from behind a pile of boulders, retracing his footprints across the sand with that insolent smile on his face.

On edge, Laura disliked being alone with this man. She watched him stony faced, annoyed at having her peace destroyed. His manner, compiled with all that Cilla had told

her about him, rose to the surface. "Mr. Mallory." She nodded her voice cold.

"Lord Lanyon does have excellent taste, I'll give him that," Mallory said, having reached her side. "Your hair is like a red sail at sunset." He gestured as if he wanted to reach out and stroke a lock of it, his eyes lit with an overly familiar light.

"You might keep your opinions to yourself, Mr. Mallory." Laura attempted to gather her hair into some kind of order. "I came here to enjoy the peace and solitude."

He laughed. "This is not Lanyon land, my lady. I admit there's very little around here that isn't. But I have as much right as you to enjoy the scenery." His gaze ran down over her body, as if he might see more through her clothing.

She resisted the urge to cover her chest with her arms. "Then you'll excuse me, I believe my pleasure in the peace has gone." Laura had managed to twist her hair into a rough knot and secure it with combs. She moved towards her horse.

He held up his hand. "Please don't go on my account. I was just leaving."

He turned to walk in the direction of the village.

"Mr. Mallory," Laura called after him, "I believe you worked closely with the first Lady Lanyon in the design of the gardens."

He stopped abruptly and turned to gaze at her. She was pleased to see the insolence gone, replaced by wariness. "I did."

Laura carefully watched his face. "The rose arbor is quite exquisite, you are to be congratulated."

He frowned and shifted his feet on the sand. "We had great plans for the Wolfram gardens, Lady Lanyon and I," he said softly, "many plans." He stared away towards Wolfram. "They came to an end when someone struck her ladyship down."

Laura took a sharp breath. "What makes you think it wasn't an accident? The Coroner came to that conclusion."

"Am ... Lady Lanyon disliked the cliffs. She wasn't happy at Wolfram, but she would not have killed herself."

"She confided in you?"

He nodded. "She did."

"But surely there was no one at Wolfram who would want her dead?"

He turned to look at her, his eyes distant. "Ask your ice-cold husband, my lady. He may know the answer."

Laura watched him until he disappeared over the hill, her heart beating too fast. Had his heated response been an attempt to hide his own culpability? She didn't trust that he might wait for her at the bottom of the next hill, so she walked down to the sea. Deep in thought, she sightlessly scanned the waves.

"Oh!" A glossy seal's head emerged from the water, so foreign and strange that Laura laughed in delight. She watched as it played amongst the waves. So transfixed by the amazing creature and her own reflections, she failed to notice a ship had rounded the point until it was almost in front of her. A three-masted vessel, it seemed far too close to the shore. It must have been making for Wolfram harbour, although she'd never seen it there before. Most of the fishing

boats in the area were smaller. Laura raised a hand to shield her eyes, but couldn't make out anyone on board. It sailed on and disappeared around the point towards the rocky cliffs of Wolfram. Once it had gone, Laura ran back to untether her horse. As she put on her hat, it occurred to her she had seen that ship before, disappearing into the mist. She rode home, her thoughts on her conversation with Mallory. His verbal attack on Nathaniel must have been due to pure spite. But why? What did he have against Nathaniel? Was it just that he had fired him? She suspected there was far more to it than that.

Laura went with Jarvis to Penzance to meet Nathaniel. She saw him step from the train and held herself back from rushing into his arms. He looked so tired and strained she merely stood and allowed him to plant a restrained kiss on her cheek.

"Was your trip a success?" she asked him politely as they drove through the green valley towards Wolfram. Their shoulders touched on the seat as the carriage swung round a corner, but she felt a wide gulf between them. He would make love to her tonight, and the thought made her treacherous body respond. She wished she could keep a cool head about him. He would lose himself in the lovemaking and for a while he would be hers. But no matter how closely he held her, she seemed unable to reach his heart.

Nathaniel's voice broke into her thoughts, discussing his week, pleased with some of the things he had accomplished, unsure of others. She asked a pertinent question when he paused for breath and was rewarded with a spark of warmth

in his grey eyes, he looked at her as though he only now really saw her.

"It was kind of you to come and meet me, but unnecessary, Laura."

"I thought you'd be pleased." She wanted to add that she couldn't wait another minute to see him, but the thought that he might not feel the same way rendered her silent.

"I'm sorry, darling." He kissed her gloved hand. "I'm tired and I'm boring you. It is good to see you." His eyes roamed over her appreciating the pink, green and white pique gown with its gilt buttons and Eton jacket, her straw hat with the green silk band. "Like a flowering peach tree," he said, drawing down her glove and kissing the inside of her wrist, "the fruit too tasty to ignore."

"Hush, Nathaniel," Laura murmured, aware of Jarvis's sturdy back near enough to hear every word, and her pulse that leapt at the touch of his lips on her skin.

He smiled and tucked her hand through his arm. "It's wonderful to be home."

While he was in a good mood she thought she would broach the subject of the phone call. "Nathaniel ... that letter ...?"

The warm spark disappeared and the grey depths of his eyes became unfathomable. "I told you I will deal with it, Laura."

Laura bit her lip. Her spirit, which seemed to have deserted her in recent times, rose like fire in her breast. She would have it out with him in the privacy of their apartments.



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Nathaniel gazed at his beautiful wife. He lost all perspective when he was with her. Damn, he wanted to hug and kiss her and lose himself in the touch of her body. He had lain awake every night in London, missing her and wanting her. He acknowledged his need to be with her again, and it made him feel vulnerable. He didn't like the feeling, for it brought back too much of the past. These feelings turned him into someone he didn't like and hadn't served him well, before.

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## Chapter Eleven

Settled in front of the library fire after an excellent dinner, Laura described to Nathaniel, the swatches of fabric she'd ordered to be sent down from London for the dining room curtains. "...a bright chintz would bring this room to life," she added, watching Nathaniel's unenthusiastic response with a feeling of unease.

He frowned in thought. "My mother chose those curtains. I suppose I've been reluctant to see them go."

"Your mother?" Laura flushed. Had Amanda abandoned the idea for this reason? "I didn't know."

"How could you know, my love." Nathaniel reached across and took her hand. He gave it a squeeze before returning to his paper.

Undaunted, Laura swallowed and continued, telling him of her foray with the maid to restore order. "I've interviewed one woman for the position of housekeeper, another has been refereed by a friend of my mother's." Her mother's reply to her letter had come swiftly with helpful suggestions. To Laura's relief she said nothing in it untoward nor asked any awkward questions. Laura tried to gauge her husband's mood by his sober expression.

He raised his dark brows. "You have been busy."

She tidied a stray lock of her hair away. "Don't you approve, Nathaniel?"

"I think you look tired, and I can't see the reason for such frenetic activity. But go ahead, make all the changes you feel

you need to. You are the mistress of this house now." He drank the last of his whisky, stubbed out his cigar and rose. "Shall we retire?"

He had acted as though indifferent to her schemes, but she thought she detected censure in his voice. With each step on the staircase, Laura's anger built. By the time she'd reached her chamber, she felt ready to explode. But Nathaniel went straight to his own room and left her to simmer.

She dismissed Agnes as soon as she'd unhooked her corset. She had just removed her stockings and was in the process of taking off her chemise when the panel slid back. Nathaniel entered the room in his silk dressing gown.

Caught with the chemise half over her head, she felt exposed. She pulled it off too quickly, and a delicate seam tore. She was hardly dressed for an argument, standing in her bloomers with an arm placed defensively across her chest, her hair swinging free with every deep trembling breath of anger.

Nathaniel paused mid way across the room and studied her, a speculative light in his grey eyes. "You've been quiet all evening. What is it?"

Tears formed at the back of her eyes, and she wiped them angrily away. "Is there nothing I can do here that meets with your approval?"

In two strides he reached her, his hands on her bare shoulders reminding her of the only thing that was right between them. "What's this then? Is there something you've done that I've failed to approve?" He laughed, and it only made her more furious. "You look magnificent when you're

angry." He brushed a strand of her hair from her cheek. "Your eyes flash like emeralds."

She turned away. "Someone else told me that once."

He grabbed her arm and swung her around. His eyes had narrowed. "*Who?* Who told you?"

She laughed suddenly taken by the power to make him react. "You're not jealous, surely?"

"I want to strike down every man who looks at you." He held her close, his voice sounding savage to her ear, and it sent a shiver through her.

She placed her hands on his chest to push him away. "I'm angry with you, Nathaniel. You shut me out. It's insulting. Don't try to sweet talk me now."

Nathaniel surprised her by sliding an arm beneath her knees and picking her up in his arms. The action fuelled her frustration, bringing it to fever pitch. "Put me down!" She hit ineffectually at his hard muscled arm with her fist. Ignoring her, he walked to the bed, and threw her on it.

She lay there panting, and stared up into his hard face. He was like rock.

"I'm not about to *sweet talk* you, Laura. I prefer to make love to you." He bent over her and kissed her lightly on the lips, then seized her bloomers at her waist and yanked them off, throwing them on the floor. "We shall talk afterwards."

"This is the only way you know to resolve arguments." She hated the fragile tenor of her voice. Already the blood pounded in her veins and her body said yes with every breath.

He grinned. A wolfish grin she hadn't seen for a while and it had its usual effect on her, turning her limbs weak. "It's an excellent beginning." His smile faded. "And then we will talk."

"Promise?" Her body responded to his touch, a spiral of warmth and need rendering her weak.

"I promise." He stripped off his robe and joined her on the bed. "Haven't you missed me?"

She thought she caught a glimpse of naked need in his eyes. "Yes, very much." If only that were true, he did need her.

She couldn't bear this chasm between them a moment longer, and moved to close it in the only way that worked. It was beneath her, yet she was unable to resist. She pushed him back onto the bed and leaned over him, seeking to take the upper hand, to gain some sense of power over him. A corner of his mouth tweaked as he lay back, and allowed her to have her way. Even as she ran her fingers over the smooth olive skin of his strongly defined chest and boldly down to touch his arousal, she expected him to eventually take control. Their lovemaking became almost a battle, she far more inexperienced, but she wouldn't give in easily. And she now had the knowledge gained from the book.

She kissed her way down over his muscled stomach and his soft dark hair brushed her face. Surprised at how good it felt, and how satisfying, she rejoiced when it made him writhe with pleasure and moan. In this, at least, she sensed her power. In this bedroom he was truly hers.

"Oh God, that's so good," he murmured.

Growing in confidence and eager to learn, she ran her tongue along the length of him, then took him in her mouth, and he responded, growing even harder.

Nathaniel groaned. Then he pushed her away and sat up, his brows in a puzzled frown. "What has happened since I've been gone?" His voice was rough with anger. "Where did you learn to do this?"

He looked so furious and unapproachable, their mood was spoiled, and Laura thought she'd made a bad mistake. "I read it in the book." She gestured towards the volume on the table beside the bed.

Nathaniel snatched it up. "*The Perfumed Garden!*" He chuckled and shook his head. "My bewitching wife!" His heavy lidded eyes gazed appreciatively over her naked body. "Shall we read it together? A different chapter every night?"

Thrilled by his passion, Laura could only nod.

"But we write our own chapter tonight."

He began to explore her body as if trying to commit to memory every small part of her, from her breasts down to her toes, then slowly up. She murmured encouragement as an exquisite sensation rose from her belly to taunt her further.

"I love the soft velvety skin here at the top of your thigh," he said. His fingers found the folds that covered her sex. When he stroked her, probing gently, he stoked the fire within her, until she bit her lip hard, determined not to beg him to enter her.

"I want to ...." Turning her face to hide her blush and not finishing her sentence, she pushed him gently back and

manoeuvred until she sat astride him. He carefully pushed into her. She had dreamed of being in some way completed by a man, but she had never imagined such pleasure as this existed. Sitting back against the pillows, he cradled her buttocks and rocked her against him. On her knees, Laura caught on quickly. She rose and fell, and directed her own pleasure, as unbridled passion turned his eyes a smoldering dark grey. Just as their rhythm grew so fierce she could feel herself close to that exquisite ending she sought, he released her. Drawing her to the edge of the bed, he entered her and rode her hard. She gasped as he quickly led her to the brink and she toppled over it with a scream. Soon, Nathaniel followed.

They lay there a moment not speaking as he stroked her hair.

"I rather like you in a rage." He smiled as he lay beside her. "Now tell me what's made you unhappy."

All her questions rose and demanded to be asked. But she couldn't utter them. Why did he keep Amanda's bedchamber as it was when she was alive? Did he visit her room at night? Had he loved Amanda so desperately he could not love her in the same way? Was he attempting to keep his sad past at bay by losing himself in her? She licked her tender lip. "For a start, I'd like to know more about that letter."

"That letter? Is that all this is about?" He seemed relieved as he rolled off the bed and pulled on his gown. "I've been looking for a fellow I want to question about some stolen property. That's all."

"Who would that person be?"

"Someone who was once in my employ. Thomas Mallory."

Laura propped her head up with an elbow. "He's here in Wolfram."

Nathaniel looked up from tying the belt of his gown and frowned. "You've met him?"

"He came to see you the day I telephoned. He's staying at The Green Feather."

Nathaniel went to the silver tray on the table and poured himself a whisky. He came back cradling the crystal tumbler in his long fingers. He had beautiful hands and she couldn't help remembering them on her body. "I'll seek him out tomorrow."

"What has been stolen?"

He took a sip from his glass. "I don't know that the fellow has anything to do with it. I just want to talk to him that's all. It's nothing from the house."

Laura slipped on her gown. "Doesn't seem that important."

Nathaniel placed his glass on the tray. "I told you it wasn't. Go to sleep, my love, it's late. I have some paperwork to do. I'll go down to my study."

"Do you often work in your study during the night?"

"I'm not a good sleeper. Sometimes, why?"

Laura deliberated about mentioning the noise that had woken her. But that had been when he was away and it didn't seem to matter now. "Nothing, darling. Good night."

He came to kiss her brow. "Sleep well."

The door closed. She washed and dried herself by the fire, then donned her nightgown and climbed into bed, pulling the coverlet up over her shoulders. The sheets smelt of



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Nathaniel's musky cologne, her perfume and the heady odour of their lovemaking. Perhaps when she wrapped her legs around Nathaniel, and held him tight, she too sought freedom from her troubled thoughts. Blowing out the candle, she pounded the pillows and lay in the dark thinking over their conversation. She'd learned very little, but was too tired and replete to care.

She closed her eyes.

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## Chapter Twelve

After breakfast, Nathaniel departed with Hugh to see to matters on the estate. They rode out to the home farm. Laura suspected he would also go in search of Thomas Mallory, but he didn't say so, he merely kissed the top of her head and left the room.

She went down to the kitchens to see the cook as the weekly menu had not appeared on her writing desk in the morning room, a small sunny room where she'd taken to doing her correspondence since the weather had turned inclement. As she stepped into the large kitchen, everyone came to attention. One kitchen maid paused in the act of scrubbing the sinks, then wiped her face with a soapy hand, her eyes like saucers. Another young girl looked up from destalking a colander full of berries. The cook, Mrs. Madge, had flour up to her elbows and a rolling pin in her hand. The kitchen, Laura was pleased to note, looked orderly and very clean. A tasty aroma rose from the oven.

"Milady." Mrs. Madge grabbed a towel and hurriedly wiped her hands as the other girls bobbed.

"Mrs. Madge," Laura said, nodding. "I'd like to discuss the menus for this week. It's his lordship's birthday on Thursday and we are to have dinner guests." They had discussed it at breakfast. The Vicar and his wife; the two spinster ladies from Thrompton, Misses Parthena and Orpha Fairfax, Cilla, also another friend of Nathaniel's and his wife that Laura had not yet met, were to come.

"I'll come right up and bring my menus." Mrs. Madge half-curtseyed, her hair grey beneath her white mobcap, her face lined with more than advancing years, some unknown sorrow. But she was an excellent cook and confidently knew it.

"I'd like to inspect the cellars," Laura said.

Mrs. Madge's eyes widened. "Oh! As you wish, milady."

Laura smiled inwardly. Rudge generally prevailed over the choice of wine, but this was her first dinner party. It was going to be special; nothing would be allowed to spoil it.

She followed Mrs. Madge's broad back down a stone passage, then down another flight of steps. Here, the low ceiling and granite walls seemed to lean in on her. She swallowed and held her skirts up above the damp floor. They came to a wide cavern which housed the wine, with shelf upon shelf of dusty bottles. Beyond the wine cellar the passage continued down into darkness.

"Where does that lead to?" Laura asked.

"Right to the water's edge, milady, but it's a long, damp walk and seldom used."

The young kitchen maid who had been preparing the berries appeared. She timidly wrung her hands. "Mrs Mallory, what do we do next with the pie?"

"Leave it, girl," Mrs. Madge said crossly. "I'll return in a moment."

Laura's brows rose at the name. "Mrs Mallory?"

Mrs. Madge nodded. "I'm not called that here, but that girl's new from the village."

"Are you a relative of Thomas Mallory?"

Mrs Mallory wiped her palms on her apron. "He's my son."

"I met him a few days ago."

She put her hand to her cap. "He's a man you can trust, milady. He won't cause any trouble here." Her rather good-natured face creased into lines of distress. "He never did."

Laura turned away and examined the bottles. "This, for the meat courses, this the fish, and this will be perfect for the dessert wine." Remembering her father's elaborate dinner parties, she chose chambertin, latour, champagne. She trailed along the rows and chose a sauterne, dying to ask the woman more.

"I'll make a note of these, milady. And tell Rudge." She sounded as though it was the last thing she wanted to do.

Thank you, Mrs. Madge."

Since the mention of Thomas, Mrs. Madge had become nervous, clutching her apron in her hands. "If that's it, milady, I'd best return to my pie."

Laura stood aside for the woman to pass through the doorway. "You must be glad to see your son again."

Mrs. Madge halted, one foot on a step. "He should never have lost his position here. The gossips brought it about, of that I'm fair sure. Vicious, they were."

"I doubt my husband would act on gossip, Mrs. Madge."

"Not normally, no. He's a good man, milady, but ...."

"But?"

"I understand that he was overcome by grief, milady. I fear it affected his judgement."

Mrs. Madge put a hand to her scarlet cheek, apparently realizing the inappropriateness of her comment. "If I don't get back that green girl will do something silly and there'll be no

dessert for lunch," she blustered. "If you'll excuse me, milady?"

Laura followed the woman back to the kitchen her thoughts returning to their conversation.

"I'll have that menu up to you in a trice, my lady." Back in her kitchen, Mrs. Mallory regained her confidence. "And my suggestions for your dinner party. I'll consult my cookbooks. I have some lovely ideas."

"That will be fine, thank you, Mrs. Madge." Laura climbed the stairs thinking there were two different Thomas Mallory's, the one Laura had disliked on sight, and the one Mrs. Madge thought she knew. But mother's always loved their sons no matter what they'd done. Laura hoped she'd have the opportunity to find out if she would do the same.

Nathaniel and Hugh rode to the village. They found Thomas Mallory in his small room upstairs over The Green Feather. It was a shabby place, just a bed, table and chair on bare boards.

"Mallory," Nathaniel said nodding.

Mallory ran his hand through his hair and gazed at them with puffy eyes. Nathaniel thought he looked seedy and hung-over. He'd never liked the man and was damned if he knew what Amanda had seen in him. He swallowed down bitter thoughts of the past.

Nathaniel rested his booted foot on a small wooden chair and leaned on his knee. "I'm glad you came back to straighten things out," he said in a conciliatory tone.

"Are ye indeed?" Mallory said. His shirt open he scratched at the matt of fair hair on his chest.

"We'd like you to tell us what you know about the smuggling at Wolfram," Hugh said roughly, his voice filled with doubt at the man's proclaimed innocence. He'd told Nathaniel he didn't believe it for a minute and he didn't know why Nathaniel gave him the benefit of the doubt. "If you're not mixed up in it, you surely know who is."

Mallory raised his brows. "And if I don't wish to tell you?"

"You came back to Wolfram to tell us, Mallory, because you know the constable is hot on your heels," Nathaniel said. "Guilty or not, you've been tarred with the same brush. If you don't come clean with what you know now, it could go very badly for you when the gang is rounded up."

Mallory swallowed. "I'm not involved in it, but I can tell you who's behind it," he said.

Several hours later, Nathaniel and Hugh left Mallory at the police station. "A good day's work," Hugh said.

"Now we know who's behind it, I feel confident we've broken the back of it," Nathaniel said. "And I doubt the local lads will get mixed up in it again."

Hugh looked at Nathaniel. "Mallory lies with ease, he's as mixed up in this as any of 'em."

"You think?"

"He's acted to save his own skin." He turned to stare at his employer. "What puzzles me is why you don't think the same."

"Maybe I do," Nathaniel said. "But I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"For heavens sake why?"

"To right a wrong."

"Want to tell me about it, your lordship?"

"I don't think so, Hugh. Not now anyway. But I fancy an ale."

After lunch, Laura walked over to Cilla's cottage on the pretext of inviting her to Nathaniel's birthday dinner.

Cilla appeared happy to see her. She wore her painter's smock and had daubs of paint on her hands. The smell of oil paints and turps filled the cottage. A painting rested on the easel, covered with a cloth.

"May I see?" Laura asked.

"I'm sorry." Cilla smiled. "I never reveal my work until I'm finished."

"Let me know when you are." Laura smiled back at the older woman, glad to see her. She was the closest thing to a friend she had in this part of the world.

"Would you care for tea?" Cilla asked as they sat on the velvet sofa.

"No, thank you." Laura explained about the dinner.

"Nathaniel's birthday. What a nice idea."

Laura grimaced. "He's agreed to it, but doesn't seem to welcome a fuss. But I cannot find guests to rival the company he keeps in London, apart from you. The Vicar and his wife are nice people, as are the ladies from Thrompton, but ...."

Cilla laughed. "Perhaps not."

"Nathaniel told me his mother died while he was away at Prep school, do you remember her?"

"Vaguely. She was lovely, but a bit aloof."

"Aloof?"

"Yes, very caught up in her social affairs—I doubt Nathaniel saw much of her."

"Any young boy would be sad to lose his mother at such a young age."

Cilla looked amused. "Yes, I dare say."

Laura realized her motives were painfully transparent and her need to understand her husband far too obvious. She swiftly changed the subject. "Thomas Mallory has returned to Wolfram. Did you know?"

"Nothing much happens in Wolfram without everyone knowing."

"I suppose not." Except why a young mother-to-be plunged to her death over a cliff, she mused. "Surely it wasn't idle gossip that caused him to lose his job."

"Nathaniel didn't let him go because of the gossip. I hope you don't believe that, Laura."

"I can't believe he'd do anything unfair. He's a stickler for correctness." Except in the bedchamber, she thought with a rush of remembering. "You'd better tell me." She rose and walked around the room, bending to smell late flowering camellias in an urn on the table. "I shall find out soon enough. Better that it comes from a reliable source."

"You may be right. It was a lot of nonsense." Cilla examined a finger nail, picking at crimson paint. "The gossips believed Amanda carried Thomas's baby. It was not true."

Laura almost fell back onto the sofa beside her. "Why would they think that?"

"Amanda spent a lot of time in his company. But she told me why. She had great plans for the garden."



"How can people be so horrid?"

"They can and frequently are," Cilla said bleakly.

Laura's thoughts were on Nathaniel and Amanda, but she was still aware of how much nasty gossip would have come Cilla's way. "Surely Nathaniel didn't believe it?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't."

"Then why did he let Thomas go?"

"I'm not privy to Nathaniel's thoughts, but it must have been something else entirely."

Laura wandered back across the park. The huge oaks threw deep violet shadows across the lawns. The trees were turning and the air fresh and crisp. Autumn was upon them. What had brought about such vicious gossip? It was inconceivable, and knowing Nathaniel as she did, she did not believe a woman would choose Thomas Mallory over him. A worry that plagued her often when she couldn't sleep returned. After so much lovemaking, why wasn't she with child? It would make all the difference to their lives and she desperately wanted a baby. There was also Nathaniel's need for an heir. Her mother had told her he married her for that very reason. She hoped it wasn't so, but would life be worth living here, if the years went by with no children to sweeten it and bond them closer together? She suddenly needed to see Aunt Dora.

She reached the lane and began to hurry. She would write immediately and try to persuade her to forgo her London soirees for a visit. Even as she ordered the words of her letter in her mind, she began to feel guilty that she hadn't thought to ask her mother.

That night Nathaniel was quiet at dinner. It was quite late when they settled in the library.

"Did you have a good day?" Laura didn't expect him to elaborate and was surprised when he did.

"Hugh, Mallory and I went to see the constable." He took a large swallow of whisky, and then another. "I gave Mallory the benefit of the doubt, I'm still not sure about him." He shook his head. "Every man should have the opportunity to defend himself." He put down the empty glass and Laura wondered if he thought of the vicious rumors still circulating in the village.

"Hugh believes he is involved in the smuggling ring that's been operating at Wolfram. Mallory has told the constable what he knows of it and given us the name of the man who organized it from London."

"Smugglers? Does that still go on? I thought the government put a stop to that."

He shrugged. "When there's money to be made in it. It's part of Cornwall's history, and deep-rooted. The Cornish coast was a favorite spot for contraband, and the locals supported the free-traders. Some still do. The excise men were seen as the villains. A hundred years ago, contraband was blatantly moved around during the daytime. Smugglers hid their French brandy in mine shafts and caves. Their local knowledge allowed them to keep one step ahead of the authorities." He paused for another sip of whisky. "They even hid here in the abbey."

Laura thought of the noises she heard at night. She shivered. "Might they still?"

"They surely wouldn't dare." Nathaniel's brows met in a heavy frown. "People will try to make money where ever they can. I would not interfere in that, times are hard, but I can't allow it at Wolfram!" He pounded the table beside him causing his glass to rock. "Where will my standing be in the House of Lords should they hear of such a thing!"

Laura had never seen him give way to anger. "How did you discover it?"

"I found boxes containing wine, lace and silk and other items in one of the cottages. They brought it in under cover of darkness and shifted it again so quickly, I didn't discover what was happening for a while." He brushed back his dark hair. "I'm angry with myself as much as anyone. At the time, I was taken up with other things. When I calmed down I realized I'd been rash, and tried to find Mallory to get his side of the story."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

She caught a flash of doubt in his eyes and held her breath.

"I wished to sort it out first." He shrugged. "I don't like the idea of seeing disappointment in your eyes when you look at me."

"You could never disappoint me," she said, reaching for his hand. She entwined her fingers in his long, warm ones. "I shall always believe in you."

He gave a grateful smile and squeezed her hand. "There may be times when you find that difficult, my love." He withdrew his hand and poured another whisky from the decanter. He threw it back in a gulp. It was uncharacteristic

of him. He was a measured man in many ways and always stopped at two drinks after dinner.

"Of course there won't be," she rushed to reassure him.

He put down the empty glass and stood. "I don't want to talk anymore, I'm blessed tired tonight." He held his hands out for her to rise. "Shall we go up?"

"I've selected the menu for your birthday dinner," Laura said as they climbed the stairs, in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

"I appreciate what you're doing, Laura, but I don't want a fuss made."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Everyone has been invited. I asked Cilla this afternoon."

"Very well, if you must." At the top of the stairs he pulled her to him. "I tell you what I'd like for my birthday," he said his cheek against her hair. "For you to come sailing with me. I haven't been out on a fine day since you came here, and winter is closing in."

"The only time I've been on water, was in that rowboat." Laura's heart sank at the thought of it. "I've never been in a sailing boat. I can't swim."

"You don't know you're alive until you get out there on the sea." He gazed away as if he could feel the rush of waves beneath his boat, feel the spray on his face. He turned back to her and smiled. "A land lubber eh? I'll look after you, never fear."

"But Nathaniel, I have so much to do for your birthday."

"Let Rudge take care of it all."

That was exactly what Laura intended not to happen. "I wish to do it, Nathaniel."

He gazed down at her, his expression warm and knowing. "You don't wish old Rudge to get the upper hand, eh?" It was like the sun coming out from behind a rain cloud. Nathaniel knew and understood her feelings.

She smiled. "It's my first dinner party. I would like to see to things myself."

"Then we'll go the day before. We'll sail right round Wolfram and along the coast."

"I'd like that." It was a small fib for she wasn't sure at all that she would.

After Agnes departed, Nathaniel came to her. Laura hoped to continue the intimacy of their conversation in the hall, before they made love. She put her arms around him and kissed him. "I can imagine you sailing around the bay as a youth. Tell me about your boyhood here."

He settled on the bed beside her. "We weren't much disciplined. We swam, rode, fished, climbed trees, and of course, we sailed."

"Then you went away to Prep school, and I guess life changed for you after that."

"Yes." The guarded note in his voice should have warned her.

"What were your parents like? I found their portraits hanging in the upper corridor; your father was dark haired like you and your mother small and fair. She was very pretty, wasn't she?"

He stiffened. "Questions, always questions. Can't you let things alone?" He pushed away from her. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me. I'm more tired than I thought. Good night."

The panel slid back and he was gone.

Laura debated whether to go after him and decided not to. Unable to sleep, she ran the events of the evening through her mind. Nathaniel had been in a bad mood from the beginning. What he told her about the smuggling worried her, but it didn't equate with his behavior, his heavier than usual drinking perhaps, but not his abandonment of her. Dispirited, she refused to blame herself. It wasn't that he wanted too much from her, but too little. She could not live like this. She would not.

She changed her mind and boldly went to the panel. Having spent some time locating the small lever hidden amongst the wainscoting some days ago, she pulled it.

The panel slid back to an empty room.

Laura whirled around to don her dressing gown. She left her bedchamber, a candle held high. Her slippers on the granite steps sounded inordinately loud as she descended to the hall below.

The house lay silent and still under the frail moonlight, the corridor leading off deep in shadow. Holding up the trailing skirts of her gown in one hand, and her candle in the other, Laura made her way to the room Nathaniel used as a study. It too was empty. As was the library, and the long drawing room they seldom used.

Bewildered, she stood in the hall sheltering her candle, which threatened to gutter in the draft. Where did that breeze

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*by Maggi Andersen*

come from? Was there a door open somewhere? She retraced her steps to check the door to the rose garden. It was closed and bolted. When she approached the end of the passage leading down to the kitchens, the breeze became so strong it lifted her gown and swirled it around her legs. Chilling her skin, it sent a shiver of foreboding through her.

Below her, the cavernous kitchens lay in darkness. Laura hesitated. Seizing the banister, she made her way down. It was even colder here. The stoves would not be lit until daybreak. A current of air strong with the briny smell of the sea, whipped up the stairs from the wine cellar and beyond. The door leading to the water's edge must be open. Laura went several steps down, her guttering candle threw wavering shadows across the stone walls. Below her lay total darkness. Her ears strained for a sound and she was rewarded with a loud scrape and the heavy clunk of a lock sliding into place. The breeze died away, and the sound of boots on the stone floor grew closer. Who was down there? Nathaniel? She didn't care to find out.

Laura retraced her steps rapidly. She reached the kitchen as the light behind her lightened from black to grey. Heart racing, she hurried back up the kitchen stairs, reached the ground floor, and began to run. Her footsteps echoed through the house. She almost fell into her bedchamber and shut the door. Leaning against it, heart thumping in her chest, she put her ear to the door. She heard nothing, not even the reassuring sound of Nathaniel returning.

Laura went to the window. Down in the garden dotted with gravestones she saw a tall figure emerge into the moonlight.

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He stood for a moment before blending back into the shadows. She watched for some time, but nothing moved.

She returned to bed and huddled there, as slow burning anger churned her stomach. Nathaniel had pleaded exhaustion and the need for sleep. But where was he?

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## Chapter Thirteen

The next morning Laura woke to the panel sliding back. Nathaniel threw the bed clothes back and lay down, wrapping her in his arms.

"Sorry, my love," he said, kissing her neck. "I was a bear last night. Best that I left you."

Laura pulled away. She propped her head up on an elbow to gaze into his smoky eyes that didn't always show the truth. "Did you sleep well?"

"Wonderful. I feel more like a lion than a bear this morning." He untied the neck of her nightgown and kissed his way down to her breast.

Laura rolled away from him. "You weren't in your bed last night, Nathaniel." She was gratified to see surprise widen his eyes. He thought it so easy to fool her. "I doubt you were in the house."

He sat up, his dark brows meeting in a frown. "You went looking for me?"

Her lip trembled. "Yes."

Jumping up, he paced. He stopped and focused his gaze on her. "Don't ever do that again!"

She took a deep breath. "What are you saying? That I can't leave my bedchamber at night?"

He sat on the bed and clasped her hands in his strong grip. "Promise me you won't."

She gasped. "Why not?"

"Don't ask me, damn it!" He flung her hands free. "You are my wife, I command it."

Laura bit her lip. "I will not be commanded. Not even by you, my lord! I will not be treated like a prisoner in my own home."

At her words, Nathaniel's anger seemed to lessen. He gave a bitter laugh. "Laura, for God's sake, do as I ask. Please?"

Laura retied the strings of her nightgown. "I'm glad you at least said please, but I need an explanation."

"I've explained to you about the smuggling. I know I should not have brought you here." He shook his head. "I had no intention of bringing another bride to Wolfram."

Laura gasped. "You didn't?"

"No, I did not."

"But Mother said ...."

"Until those responsible for what is going on here are put behind bars, I must ask you to remain in your room at night. Will you do that?"

Laura stared at him.

"Will you, Laura?"

"I've heard noises at night, and I saw a light at the end of the passage. More than once," she said, dreading what his reaction might be.

Nathaniel's brows shot up. "In which direction?"

"Amanda's bedchamber."

He looked puzzled. "It's an empty room."

Laura shook her head. "Someone was there."

Nathaniel jumped off the bed. He took Laura's hand and dragged her to her feet. "Put on your gown and show me."

They made their way to the end of the passage. Nathaniel opened Amanda's door. He entered the room and stopped.

"God damn it!"

Laura followed him in. "What is it?"

"I gave orders for all this to be packed away over a year ago."

Giddy with relief, Laura cried, "It wasn't you in this room at night?"

Nathaniel gazed at her as if she was mad. "Me? Of course it wasn't me."

"You don't still love Amanda then?"

"What on earth made you think that?" With a bitter laugh he turned away from her. He roamed the room flicking through the jewelry and perfume bottles lying on the dresser. "I must speak to Rudge." He put his arm around Laura's shoulders and ushered her out of the room. "Go back, call your maid and dress. I'll see you in the breakfast room."

Laura rushed to obey. Although relieved it wasn't Nathaniel roaming Amanda's chamber at night, his bitter laugh, so filled with emotion, did nothing to set her mind at rest.

She composed herself and entered the breakfast room having chosen her favorite lettuce green gown with the French gilt buttons for added courage. She found Rudge deep in conversation with Nathaniel.

At her entrance, Rudge bowed. "Your usual breakfast, my lady?"

When the door closed, Nathaniel gazed at Laura appreciatively. "You look very pretty in that shade of green."

He seized the coffee pot and poured her a cup. Strong, the way she liked it.

"Thank you," Laura seized the cup and sipped. It revived her immediately. "What did you learn from Rudge?"

Nathaniel buttered his toast. "He gave orders to have the room cleared, but didn't check it was done. He's very remorseful. He will see that it's emptied today."

Laura put down her cup. "But someone's been in there, searching."

"To steal something? The jewelry hasn't been taken." He took a bite of toast as he studied her. Did he think she'd dreamed it, or was subjected to flights of fancy? Her neck grew hot.

"I went to the kitchen last night when I couldn't find you. A strong breeze blew up from the steps leading down to the sea."

Nathaniel dropped his toast. "How far down did you go?"

"Not far, but someone was there. Was it you?"

He looked down at his plate. "Yes. I went down to check on my boat to check if it was secure. I thought a gale was blowing up."

Laura gazed out at the calm sunny morning. "But none came."

"No."

"And yet you can predict the weather here so accurately."

"I'm touched by your faith in me," he said. "But even I can be wrong on occasion."

"Do you know," she said in a conversational tone, aware her words would produce an outburst. "I've learned how to tell when you're untruthful."

She got a reaction. But not the explosive one she expected. Nathaniel flung his napkin onto his plate and rose from the table. He looked down at her, an expression in his eyes she'd never seen before. Grave disappointment. "The girl I married," he said shaking his head "Would never have thought that of me. Let alone said it."

Laura swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth. Why was she being made to feel in the wrong, when it was Nathaniel who had wronged her? "Was I mistaken, then, to accuse you of prevarication?"

Nathaniel held his tongue as Rudge entered with Laura's breakfast. When the butler had gone, he placed his hands on the back of a chair, his grey eyes bleak. "I wish you to go home for a while, Laura."

Laura's heart sank. "Home? This is my home."

"Home is where your heart is, Laura. Can you say your heart is here, when you accuse me so?"

Laura blinked away hot tears. She stood and turned to him, placing her hand on his chest gazing up to search his face. "Where were you last night, Nathaniel? Hand on *your* heart, where do you go at night that you must keep secret from me?"

Nathaniel stepped away from Laura. His eyes remaining on her, he tugged the bell cord. When Rudge appeared, he said, "Have the maid pack her ladyship's trunk for a prolonged stay. She is to visit her parents."

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*by Maggi Andersen*

Ignoring the satisfied look on Rudge's face, Laura turned to her husband, "You promised me a sail in your boat, didn't you?" Her voice sounded strained her voice constricted. She needed more time, she could not leave things like this. "I'd like us to do that before I leave."

"Of course," Nathaniel said grimly. "It's a perfect day for it. We'll go right after breakfast."

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## Chapter Fourteen

Should she choose, Laura could reach out and touch the white tips of the grey-green ocean that raced past them at great speed. The cold wind whipped across the water, churning it to grey foam. It stung Laura's nose and made it run. She fumbled in a pocket for a handkerchief to wipe it, and then abandoned the idea, quickly grasping the yacht's rail again in an unsure grip with her frozen fingers. Sailing proved to be frightening yet exhilarating at the same time. It would be so easy to fall into that dark roiling water, and sink without a trace. Her gaze fixed on the man at the helm, his hand on the tiller, his head turned towards the rocks a frightening few yards to starboard.

Nathaniel had explained the rudiments of sailing, and when his hurt gaze met hers, she desperately wanted to hold him. Strangely, even though she was upset, angry, and desperate to change things between them, she wanted him to take her to bed without words and love her in the only way he could express his feelings. Even if those feelings fell short of what she craved.

The foam crested waves swirled around them and the sea's roar made it impossible for her to make herself heard, even if she managed the words that set things right between them. She watched him in his element. He was graceful on land, which was unusual for such a big man, and that did not desert him on the water. He moved with assurance, raising the sail and yelling at her to avoid the swing of the boom. The

noisy gulls followed above in the grey-blue sky, perhaps hopeful of a free meal. The boat tilted on its side and drenched Laura in salt spray.

Laura gasped as Nathaniel tacked around the rocky peak, and Wolfram swung into view, displaying its wild beauty. Her gaze returned to the determined profile of her husband. He glanced her way, his face filled with grim pleasure. They sailed past the green-tinged rocks worn razor sharp from the sea's assault. Startled, she saw they'd reached the spot where Amanda died. She plunged from those magnificent cliffs that nurtured the nests of seabirds, decorated by gravity defying wild flowers and grasses clinging to pockets in the sheer rock face. She could see the roof of Cilla's idyllic cottage, teetering on the edge of a precipice. A metaphor for Cilla's life perhaps. If the villagers learned of Cilla's sexual proclivities she would be driven away from here. And how long could she go on denying her needs? Could it be possible for her to find love here in Wolfram?

At the bottom of the cliff where the waves tumbled onto the rocks, a dark shape like a bundle of rags floated in the water. Laura gestured to Nathaniel and found he had seen it too. He turned the boat and guided it close into shore. Only a few yards away from them, a body rose and fell with the waves to be dashed on the rocks then drift away again.

With a strangled sob, Laura put a fist to her mouth.

Nathaniel took the boat dangerously close to the rocks. The body was that of a man, lying face down. He wore a tan leather jerkin, like one she'd seen before.

"Come and take the tiller, Laura. Careful how you go."



As the boat rocked, Laura took several shaky steps before she reached Nathaniel. She seized the tiller in nervous hands.

"Like this. Hold it steady."

They edged closer still. Nathaniel reached down and seized an arm and a leg, heaving the man over the side. Any frail hope that he might be still alive was dashed when he fell like a sack of produce, lifeless and sodden into the bottom of the boat. Laura couldn't breathe; it was as though the air had been sucked out of her by some force. Feeling dizzy, she took several deep breaths. Nathaniel turned the man over and he flopped onto his back like a rag doll, revealing a face reduced to a mass of bloodless flesh, his features torn away by the elements. His hair, although plastered wet to his head, was bright gold. "It's Thomas Mallory!" Laura cried.

"Don't look, Laura." Nathaniel pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and laid it over the man's face. He took the tiller and turned the boat for home.

Laura stood damp and shivering on the wharf.

"Go up and change, there's nothing you can do here," Nathaniel said. "It might be a while before Jarvis finds the constable."

Laura found her maid waiting. Her trunk had been brought up and lay open waiting her instructions. "Leave that for now, Agnes, I shan't be departing yet awhile," she said. She hoped that Nathaniel would allow her to stay, for he needed her now more than ever.

Nathaniel and the police constable returned to the house. Laura came down to find them conferring in the hall. The body was removed to the undertakers in the village and had

been positively identified as Thomas Mallory. The two men went below to give the bad news to Mrs. Madge. A wail rose from the kitchens. Laura rushed down to see Nathaniel pat Mrs. Madge on the shoulder and offer the distraught lady leave to recover. The cook refused, saying work was the best cure-all for grief. "And I have my lady's dinner to organize," she said in a trembling voice.

Laura went to put her arm around the prostrate woman. "You need not concern yourself with that, now."

Mrs. Madge looked at her owlishly her eyes bright with tears. "Oh, but I'm looking forward to it, your ladyship. I haven't had the opportunity to prepare a dinner party for guests in ever such a long time." She turned crimson and glanced from Laura to Nathaniel, no doubt with the thought that the last time was for the first Lady Lanyon.

Nathaniel nodded at Laura. "Very well, Mrs. Madge. We shall make it a triumph."

Mrs Madge blew her nose. "Thank you, my lord, and now I'd best be getting on with the lunch preparations."

Laura didn't mention her trip over lunch. In fact they spoke and ate very little. Distracted and busy, Nathaniel went straight to his study. Laura left him to it and walked over to talk to Cilla.

She found Cilla working, the painting now hidden beneath its cloth cover.

"Hard to believe he's dead," Cilla said matter-of-factly, cleaning her fingers with a pungent rag. "He was always so full of life. Annoyingly so at times."

"You didn't like him?" Laura asked, surprised at her unemotional response.

"I wasn't fond of him, but I didn't wish him dead."

"What did he do that you found so disagreeable?"

"He was arrogant and ambitious. A bad lot I suspect."

"They don't know what happened. Do you think it might be the smugglers?"

"Smugglers? I've no idea." Cilla went to put the rag away with her paints.

"We found him in the same spot where Amanda died."

She returned and stood in front of Laura her hands in the pockets of her smock. "Did you? The tides I suppose."

"Have you seen him here at Wolfram of late? He stayed at The Green Feather in the village."

"What is this, Laura? Do you plan to solve this crime?"

Laura smiled. "No, of course not." She looked at Cilla. "It may have been an accident."

"Too many drinks at The Green Feather, then wandering around drunk at night. It wouldn't be the first time someone's drowned that way."

"Or killing yourself in the same way as the one you loved?"

"What a romantic you are." Cilla looked amused. "I came across Mallory once in the woods when gathering wild flowers. I find their colors useful for my work. He had Gertrude, the scullery maid from Wolfram, up against a tree. Her blouse was pulled down and her skirts up around her waist. It must have pained her, that rough bark rubbing against the delicate skin of her shoulders and back as he drove into her."

Laura's eyes widened. "Do you think he forced himself on Gertrude?"

"No. She loved every minute of it."

"Was this before he and Amanda ... planned the rose arbour?"

"About the same time."

"You don't think it possible that Amanda killed herself?"

The amusement fled from Cilla's features rendering her face pinched and rather plain. "Amanda did not kill herself. Why would she?"

"If she wasn't happy?"

"This is going to be hard on Nathaniel," Cilla said.

"Why?"

"There will be more rumors to add fuel to a smoldering fire."

Laura drew a sharp breath. "I can't believe people would think Nathaniel responsible for either death."

"There are always those who like to believe the worst." Cilla turned towards the door. "I'll make us a drink."

And now what would those doubting Thomas's believe? That Nathaniel killed his wife's lover? Laura shuddered and tried to push it to the back of her mind as she strolled around the small sitting room. There was always so much to see and appreciate here, from a delicate wildflower to an oddly shaped stone.

A tiny likeness in an oval frame hung from a blue velvet ribbon on the wallpapered wall. The woman's face looked very much like Cilla's painting of Amanda. Hit by a sudden thought, Laura whirled around. She moved quickly to the

annex and, with a glance at the door, lifted the cloth covering the painting. It was close to completed. A blonde-haired woman lay on a blue velvet chaise. Her expression was seductive; she invited the viewer in with a tempting curl of her lovely lips. Laura gasped. The position she lay in reminded her of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. She held a posy of flowers in one hand, the other rested at the top of her thighs. Lying beside the chaise, incongruously, was a blue parasol with a pearl handle. It was unlike the rest of Cilla's paintings, the fine detail in this was lovingly wrought. Hearing the rattle of the tray, Laura dropped the cloth and turned to see Cilla staring at her.

Cilla placed the tray on the table. "I asked you not to look, Laura. I thought I could trust you."

"You can trust me. It's Amanda isn't it?"

She nodded.

"You loved her?"

Cilla sank down on the sofa. The cups rattled as she unloaded the tray. "Yes, I loved her."

"Did Amanda know?"

Cilla's face crumpled. "She knew." She handed a cup to Laura. "Amanda was not at all what she appeared." She continued to empty the tray of its contents onto the table. "Her beauty mesmerized one. So delicate of feature, so slender a body, and her skin ...." She shook her head. "But inside, she was conniving, she used people. And I don't believe she was capable of love."

Laura had to ask. "Did she break Nathaniel's heart too?"

Cilla shrugged. "How can I know? He doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve, does he?"

"Where does Mallory fit into all this?"

"Just another of her conquests she used to her advantage."

"But she was carrying a child. Nathaniel's child."

"Yes. But she didn't want to be a mother. She hated the changes the baby wrought on her body. And she made no secret of the fact."

Aware of the depth of emotion which lay beneath the bitterness, Laura grasped Cilla's hand. "You loved her very much didn't you?"

Cilla's fingers trembled in hers. "You can't stop loving someone, even knowing their faults."

Laura wondered if Amanda still held Nathaniel in thrall. "Do you think Nathaniel knew her the way you did?"

"Was he aware of the selfishness and spitefulness that lay beneath her beautiful exterior?" Cilla took a long swallow. "Nathaniel's no fool. But he is a man."

"She doesn't sound like the type of woman who would jump to her death. What reason would she have? Even if she didn't want the baby, she was the wife of a wealthy man. The child need not impact on her life greatly."

"It's hard to know what goes on in a person's mind," Cilla said.

"It must have been an accident. She grew dizzy, perhaps near the cliff edge. If she didn't fall, who would have done such a terrible thing?"

Cilla shook her head as if to clear it. "When I heard of the smugglers it occurred to me she may have seen something they didn't want her to see."

Laura shivered. "That's unlikely, for they do their nefarious deeds at night. And to strike down the Baroness of Wolfram would call too much attention to them."

"Someone she'd treated badly, hurt in some way. There were a few like that, believe me."

"I've not met anyone here capable of murder."

Cilla clasped her hands together. "You can't trust people."

Laura put down her cup and rose. "I must go back now and assist Nathaniel in any way I can." She looked at the other woman with compassion. "You need not worry that I'll repeat any of this." Laura hugged Cilla, sensing the vulnerability in her limp body.

The walk through the woods was quiet, but for a black chough calling to its mate. The scent of pines drifted in the air as Laura strolled towards the old abbey. Autumn sunlight sparkled off the pointed arch windows; turning granite walls a warm apricot. The trees in the park had turned a breathtaking mix of russet, gold and crimson. It was beautiful here. Yet perhaps like Amanda herself, beneath the surface of Wolfram, an undercurrent poisoned all that was good. There would be an investigation or inquest into Mallory's death. Laura didn't want to leave Nathaniel to handle this alone. She wished he would allow her to help him, but knew he still planned to send her away. She needed Dora's calm commonsense now. Even as she thought it, Laura acknowledged she would miss

Nathaniel and Wolfram every minute of every day she was gone from here.

Laura found Nathaniel busy with paper work in his study. As if to blot out what they had both witnessed, he had the ledgers open and totalled up rows of figures. He had demanding investments both abroad and in England, which, despite having an accountant in London, often required his attention. On the open page she saw the name, Gateley Park. Another of Nathaniel's properties, it was quite modern by Wolfram standards, built in the 17th Century.

He closed the book and smoothed the leather cover beneath his fingers. Leaning back in his chair, he said, "I'm sorry you had to see that grisly sight this morning. Are you all right?"

She stroked the inlaid leather of the mahogany desk, facing him. "I think so."

He took her hand. "We had words this morning. I don't like it when we do that."

"I don't either, but sometimes something good comes from it. It clears the air."

He kissed her fingers. "And did it? Clear the air?"

"I suppose I need to be more patient." Laura stroked his dark head.

He pulled her down onto his lap and kissed her lightly on the lips. "When I said I wanted you to go, it wasn't because I don't want you here." He hugged her to him. "You understand that, don't you?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm trying to."

"I'll miss you, Laura."



Laura leaned her head against his shoulder, loving the feel of his strong arms around her. "I'll miss you too."

"I hope it won't be too long before I sort out this business and it's safe for you to return."

"I'll visit Aunt Dora, and see my parents." Laura studied a hunting print on the wall. "Is Gateley Park tenanted?"

"No, *why*?"

Ignoring Nathaniel's heavily accented, "why", she said, "I'd like to see it. Is it in a good state of repair?"

"I have an able caretaker. It was my mother's childhood home. I haven't been there for years."

"But, why not?"

Nathaniel rose and set her on her feet. "I've had no reason to," he said briskly.

She gazed up at him. "Would you mind if I spent some time there?"

He rubbed his brow. "I've no idea why you would want to."

"Perhaps, I don't wish to spend too long under my parent's roof again."

He smiled. "Very well. My coachman is at your disposal. But it's miles from a village. You'll be thin of company."

"I might take Aunt Dora with me."

The furrow in his forehead softened. "That's a good idea."

"I'll stay for the dinner party, shall I?"

Nathaniel ruffled the papers on his desk a look which might have been impatience on his face. "Yes, my love, now if you'll excuse me, I must get some work done."

Nathaniel worked closely with the police constable interviewing Wolfram inhabitants. The man Mallory had told

them about, a wealthy businessman from London, had been arrested, and soon they would know the names of the rest of the gang. Nathaniel confessed to Laura his worry that members of his staff had been involved. He had driven to Penzance this morning to the Police Station and on the way home; a rock had been thrown at the carriage. Laura heard about it from the maids gossiping on the stairs. She went straight to Nathaniel to verify it.

"Don't worry about it, Laura," he said coolly. "Some children playing no doubt."

She came away with frustration building to fever pitch. He was determined to handle this on his own and continually shut her out.

To distract herself from what was going on around her, Laura busied herself planning Nathaniel's birthday dinner. The enthusiastic response to their dinner invitation from the guests, particularly the two elderly sisters, made them decide not to cancel. And Laura couldn't let down Mrs. Madge.

Eager for something to take her mind off her loss, Mrs. Madge enthusiastically proposed several dishes for the menu, determined to try her hand at something exotic and new. Laura knew she discussed the menu with Rudge, but if he contributed anything to it, it didn't reach her ears. She sensed his outrage at being left out of the decision of the wines and, feeling a little guilty, went to speak to him about it. She found him supervising the cleaning of the silver and polishing of the furniture in the dining room.

"May I speak to you, Rudge?"

"Of course, my lady?"

He followed her to the cosy room where Laura conducted her correspondence. He stood before her with his hands behind his back, balancing on his toes.

"I wonder if you'll look over this wine selection for me, Rudge." She held out her list. "These were my father's favorites, but tastes may vary in Cornwall." She smiled. "And you know the preferences of the people here far better than I."

Rudge frowned, but took the list and scanned it. "Perhaps a Rhine wine might be added, my lady," he said in his stiff fashion.

"Oh, yes, I hadn't thought of it. Excellent choice."

Rudge nodded. "Is that all, my lady?"

"Yes, Rudge. You may go." Laura watched his stiff back as he left the room and sighed. Little had changed. Shrugging, she made her way out into the gardens in search of the head gardener. It would be a challenge to find suitable flowers for the table decoration, now that autumn was upon them.

The morning of the dinner as Laura inspected her gown, Nathaniel came into her room. "Do you like my gown?" She held her silver-blue satin and chiffon evening gown against herself and peered in the mirror.

"I'd save that for Paris." Nathaniel stood with one hand on the bedpost. "I'm sure that's where it came from. Something simpler, perhaps."

Laura laid the gown down on the bed and sashayed closer to her husband. "We were to go to Paris this autumn, remember?"

His eyes clouded. "I know. I'm sorry. When all is settled we will, I promise."

She gazed up at him. "What if it's never settled?"

He pushed back a lock of her hair and traced the line of her throat with a finger. "It will be. Then I'll come and get you." He kissed below her ear. "I can't be worried now about your safety."

She sighed, wishing he would say he couldn't live without her, but she no longer expected fulsome demonstrations of love. She moved back to the armoire. Throwing open the doors, she said. "Something simpler, you say."

He came to stand beside her. "What about this?"

"The watered silk?" Laura took it from its hanger, red threads glinting among the russet and gold. "It's hardly what I'd call a simple gown."

"It's perfect. You'll look magnificent. Come next door, I have something to show you."

Laura followed him through the sliding panel feeling like a stranger in his room. She stared at the bed they had never shared, and frowned.

Nathaniel went to the rosewood chiffonier and opened the panelled door, then pulled out a drawer. Taking out a box, he flipped the lid with his thumb, and held it out to her. "I've had these cleaned and reset. I brought it back with me from London."

Nestling in a cream satin bed was a ruby and diamond necklace, a diamond bracelet and earrings.

Laura gasped and reached out tentatively to touch them. "You brought this back and didn't show me?"

His eyes gleamed. "I waited for the right moment."

"Exquisite!" Laura laughed. "Were you waiting until I was well behaved enough to deserve them?"

Nathaniel chuckled. "I'd still be waiting."

"Oh, you!" Laura pouted at him. "You don't deserve such a good wife."

His eyes clouded. "No, probably not."

"I was only joking, darling." She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

He held her close, his bristly cheek rasping against hers. "Wear them at dinner."

"But, didn't you say you didn't want me to be overdressed?"

"You are my wife, Lady Lanyon. And these will embellish your beauty."

Taking the necklace out of the box, he clasped it round her throat, his fingers gentle at the nape of her neck. He drew her over the mirror. "Look at how much they suit you."

When she could draw her eyes away from the dazzling necklace, she studied him, amused that he'd indirectly chosen a gown to suit it. "I've never worn anything so fine. Mother said I was too young for lavish jewelry."

"Your coloring is perfect." He met her gaze in the mirror. "They might have been made for you."

"Were they made for your mother?"

"No. My mother never wore them. She preferred sapphires. They were made for my grandmother. She had red hair like yours."

Night Garden  
*by Maggi Andersen*

"Did she?" Laura studied her husband's face in the mirror, surprised to find a loving expression had softened his features.

"A grand lady," he said quietly. He turned away. "I'll return them to the safe after dinner."

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## Chapter Fifteen

Laura appeared at dinner in her low-cut russet silk evening gown, the ruby necklace at her throat, earrings sparkling at her ears. Her hair had been arranged in large loose waves, the front a soft Pompadour with tiny ringlets on her brow.

Nathaniel, handsome in dark broadcloth and crisp linen, came forward to take her hand, a proud and proprietary expression on his face where she would have preferred to see a husband's love.

Their guests arrived. The portly Vicar escorted his wife inside, her thin body clad in purple satin. The two quietly spoken spinster sisters, Misses Parthena and Orpha Fairfax, girlish in white chiffon, perched on chairs. Mr. Kyle Wedderburn, Nathaniel's rowing chum from Oxford, squired his wife Victoria over and introduced her to Laura. The woman's gown looked exquisite with touches of embroidered lace. She had a soft face and she seemed good natured with it. Laura hoped to see more of her. Cilla arrived wearing an olive green gown, an orchid corsage pinned to her breast. There wasn't a speck of paint to be found anywhere. She was escorted by tall, serious, Hugh Pitney. Nathaniel had asked him to make up the numbers.

"What a lovely orchid bouquet," Laura said smiling as she kissed her cheek. "It is the same type as we have right here in this room, over there by the window."

"Your kind husband sent them to me." Cilla smiled at Nathaniel. "You have no need of flowers, Laura, you look wonderful."

"Thank you, my dear." Laura ushered her guests to the dining room.

The dining room, with its new curtains and chair coverings looked warm and inviting in the soft glow of the chandeliers and candelabrum. A fire burned in the grate. Brilliant copper beech leaves arranged in Chinese urns decorated the room. In the center of the table stood an elaborate floral centrepiece of late blooming roses, their delicate perfume wafting through the air.

Laura ran a practiced eye over the table, just as her mother had taught her.

The silverware gleamed, twenty-four pieces at each plate. Two rows of glassware for the chambertin, latour, champagne, sauterne, and sherry. A red glass had been added for the Rhine wine, a nice addition that Laura was grateful for. Placed each side of the centre piece were silver bowls filled with fresh fruits and dishes of celery, olives or radishes.

Mrs. Madge outdid herself with six courses, beginning with oyster soup, sole in cream sauce, roast chicken, ham timbales with cucumber sauce, a souffle as light as air, and ending with ice-cream and pastries. Even Rudge, well turned out in his black suit and crisp white gloves, looked pleased with himself as he poured the wine. It was a quiet evening, the events of the last week discussed in hushed voices, but Laura



thought Nathaniel enjoyed it. It seemed so long since they'd been amongst good company.

The women left the men to their port and cigars and retired to the drawing room. While the sisters talked to the Vicar's wife, Victoria drew Laura aside. "My husband and I were both delighted when we heard Nathaniel was to marry again. He was left so devastated after his first wife's death, we feared for him."

Laura took such a deep breath, her chest hurt.

Victoria laid a gloved hand on her arm. "I can see you will be good for him. He has not made the mistake of marrying a copy of his first wife. Many men do, you know."

"Our looks are in no way alike," Laura said.

Victoria's gaze softened. "I don't know you well, my dear, but I can assure you, you are nothing like Amanda."

"I know very little about her."

"Amanda was very pretty and vivacious, but you, I suspect have a quiet strength."

Cilla moved abruptly away to pull back the curtain and gaze out into the darkness. Laura was suddenly aware of how out of place she seemed here. She felt sorry for her friend.

"Don't you agree Lady Lanyon?" Miss Parthena Fairfax turned to Laura with raised brows.

"I'm sorry." Laura's head spun. "I missed your question."

As Miss. Parthena repeated her question concerning the Vicar's last Sunday sermon, Laura tried desperately to gather her scattered wits and answer it.

She was saved by the door opening to admit the men. A short time later, the guests departed into the night.

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"Did you take pleasure in the evening?" Laura asked as they stood at the door waving goodbye.

She saw respect in his gaze and her heart lifted. "Yes, it proved a great diversion. You are an accomplished hostess like your mother. Thank you."

"We should do more of it." She hoped he might have changed his mind about her leaving, but he had not.

"When you return, we shall." He put his hand to her cheek. "You look lovely tonight."

"When do you wish me to go?"

His face was half in shadow and difficult to read.

"Tomorrow, my love."

Laura swallowed. "So soon?"

They began to climb the stairs.

"We have tonight. Let's make every minute count. Hurry up and dismiss that maid of yours."

Laura sent Agnes away and quickly undressed. Naked, and trembling slightly at her boldness, she pushed back her hair as it swung to her waist in tousled waves. Her hand at her throat found the necklace. She searched for the spring hidden within the carved molding and the panel slid back. Nathaniel spun around, his shirt in his hands, his broad chest bare. "My God, Laura!" He came swiftly to her.

He would remember this night long after she was gone from Wolfram, of that Laura was determined.

Laura had hoped until the last minute that Nathaniel would change his mind and ask her to stay, but instead, he had seemed relieved to see her leave. She traveled by carriage and stayed at an inn two nights along the way. It was lonely,

and the hours crawled by, as it rained for most of the trip and the roads were impossible. She arrived in Wimbledon at the end of the three days travel, having had too much time to contemplate the state of her marriage. Although Nathaniel was undeniably a passionate lover, and a generous man, at other times a wall would come up between them which nothing she did could breach.

Laura wanted to fall into her father's arms, but held back when she saw how grim and tired he looked. He seemed to have aged since she left home. His dream of becoming Prime Minister had failed. It made her wonder if her dreams too would not eventuate. The thought was too depressing to contemplate and she thrust it away. She kissed his cheek and turned to do the same to her mother, but was held at arms length.

"Let me look at you, Laura," she said. "You look pale. Not increasing are you?"

Laura sighed. "I don't think so, mother."

"It won't happen if you two spend too much time apart."

"Come and rest," her father said. "Let's have a glass of sherry in the conservatory before dinner."

It was odd being home. Laura glanced around at the potted orchids and rhododendrons in their urns arranged about the marble floors, with new eyes. This wasn't her home anymore, and the rush of homesickness she now suffered was for Nathaniel and Wolfram.

After dinner, as Laura brushed her hair and prepared for bed, her mother entered her chamber. She sat on the crimson velvet chaise. "Why are you here?"

"Do I need a reason to come and see you and father? It's been a while."

"A woman doesn't leave her husband's side, but for a very good reason."

Laura sat on the bed. "Mother, did you and father always have separate rooms?"

Her mother pursed her lips. "So that's it."

"That's what?"

"Trouble in the bedchamber."

Laura flushed. "Most definitely not."

Her mother's eyebrows rose. "No? Then what?"

Laura looked down at the brush in her hands. "Something bad happened in Wolfram. Someone was killed. Nathaniel wanted me somewhere safe until it's sorted out."

"And that's all of it. Just staff troubles?"

How like her mother to sanitize it. Laura was tempted to say more, but just nodded.

Her mother rose. "Well, I'm relieved. I pray you'll have a happy marriage. As successful as your father's and mine has been."

Laura watched the door close behind her mother. Was theirs a happy marriage? If you scratched beneath the surface would you find bliss and fulfilment? Or the reluctant acceptance and compromise she sometimes found on their faces? She was determined her marriage to Nathaniel would be as perfect as she could make it. Filled with a new sense of purpose she began to plait her hair.

Nathaniel watched Laura leave in the carriage with a sense of relief. He called to the dogs and walked back to the house.

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The thought of being without her tore at him, but at least she would be safe. There were distinct rumblings in the village since Mallory had died, and yesterday, someone had yelled at him, accusing him of murder. Two is one too many for coincidence, the man had cried. He was a stranger to Wolfram, but Nathaniel knew there were others who shared the same thought. Well, he deserved what he got. The police worked hard to round up the smugglers, but he doubted even when justice had been served, the rumors surrounding him would ever die down completely.

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## Chapter Sixteen

It was just after breakfast when Laura walked into Aunt Dora's familiar little house. As usual, it was crammed with new possessions: pen and ink drawings, painted fans, embroidered cushions and poetry books. Laura spied fresh pages of verse on her desk, written in Dora's spidery hand. Dora followed her gaze. "You're in luck, darling girl. I've just finished, sending it off to my publisher."

Dora held Laura's face in her ink-stained fingers and studied her. "You look peaky."

Laura hugged the soft little body in its drab cotton dress. "I've missed you."

Dora's large eyes widened. "Are you all right Laura?"

Tears pricked Laura's eyes and she blinked them away. She hadn't planned to bring tales of woe to her aunt, but she wasn't feeling well, and it weakened her resolve. She straightened her shoulders. "I'll tell you everything later. I'm here to coerce you into taking a trip with me."

"A trip?"

"I'm on my way to visit Gateley Park, another of the Lanyon properties. It's in Hertfordshire."

"Without Nathaniel?"

Laura nodded. "Will you come with me?"

"Well ... I ... don't have much to wear dear, in exalted circles."

"It's deep in the country. Society will be thin and a trifle dull, I suspect."

"Then, of course I'll come and keep you company. And you must tell me all, there was a dearth of description in your letters about Wolfram."

"Have you been at your Tarot cards lately?"

Dora looked sheepish. "Well I had to get information from somewhere ...."

Laura gave a small smile. "Anything you want to tell me?"

She patted Laura on the shoulder. "I'm just glad to see you, that's all."

Laura hugged her again. "I'm so pleased to see *you*."

Dora drew away frowning, "There *is* something wrong. I knew it; I found the Tower and the Death card again this morning."

"Have Sarah pack your bag, we'll talk in the carriage. Hurry, Barnes is walking the horses."

"Goodness me, you don't give a body much notice, do you?" Aunt Dora said, rushing to pull the bell.

The trip into Hertfordshire gave them plenty of time to talk, yet again, with the swaying of the carriage, Laura was too queasy to delve deeply into her life at Wolfram. Instead she spoke in glowing terms of its wild beauty, and she talked about Cilla.

"I'm glad you've made a friend." Dora fiddled with the strings of her bonnet. "An artist too, so interesting. But you've told me nothing of Nathaniel."

"He's loving and very generous. I have no cause for complaint, but he's distracted by events at Wolfram that he needs to deal with."

"I don't like buts." Dora's eyes narrowed. "Is he kind to you?"

A bout of nausea rose in Laura's stomach as the carriage rocked. "Yes, of course he is."

"I can see you are not well, so we'll talk no more on it." Dora gazed out the window at the empty, rolling hills passing the carriage. "We've seen nothing but fields and cows for miles. Where on earth are we?"

"The Chilton hills. It's very pretty here don't you think?"

"I can't argue with that, but we must be close, we've been traveling for hours, and I could do with a cup of tea."

As Dora spoke, the carriage slowed, and then stopped in front of a pair of ornate iron gates. The groom jumped down to open them. The lane ahead was bordered by gnarled oaks, with the massive roof of a stately home rising above them. Some minutes later, they reached a turn in the drive that offered a pleasant aspect of the house on a far rise.

The magnificent mansion drew a gasp from Aunt Dora.

Another ten minutes passed as the carriage drove through pleasant parklands. Climbing a hill, they approached the front aspect of the house.

Laura left the carriage and removed her bonnet. Waiting for her aunt to join her, she studied the impressive balustrade parapet and elegant ornamentation of the Baroque building. Despite its size, it was a dainty piece of architecture.

A short man with a red face hovered on the steps. "My dear lady Lanyon," he said coming forward. "Lord Lanyon wrote me to alert me of your visit. We've been in quite a state



ever since. I do hope you will be comfortable here. We have only a small skeleton staff."

"Have you? Everything looks to be in excellent order." Laura came up the steps to take his hand. "Mr Charleton, the caretaker, I believe."

The flush spread to the man's neck. "Oh, yes, do forgive me."

"This is my aunt, Miss Lawley."

"Miss Lawley." He nodded to Dora who was slowly climbing the steps. "I'm sure you've had a long and dusty ride from London. Please come into the salon and I'll have tea brought."

The salon was a large room furnished entirely in the sensuous curves of Louis XIV furniture, its walls covered in china blue embossed paper, the white marble fireplace an intricately carved Adam's creation.

After a fortifying tea of scones and cake, Laura found herself in a lovely rose papered bedchamber with windows overlooking a topiary garden. She sat for a moment on the satin coverlet of the gilt four-poster. This had been Nathaniel's mother, Lady Olivia's childhood home. It gave a glimpse of the woman and made Laura keen to learn more about her. She felt better, the tea had been reviving. Jumping up, she went to ring for her maid. Tomorrow, a ride about the estate was in order.

The next morning, Laura found Aunt Dora in the breakfast room, spooning eggs onto her plate.

"Did you sleep well, Aunt?"

"I found it difficult to get used to the quiet." Dora laughed. "But this morning the birds made such a racket outside my

window, it was like a busy street in London." She eyed Laura's riding outfit. "I see you're going out. I'm a little tired; I think I'll spend the day with a book. I peeped into the library, it's an impressive collection." She sat down beside Laura. "I'm surprised, seeing as Nathaniel never comes here, that he hasn't sold this house. The cost of its upkeep must be immense. It's like a shrine."

"A shrine to whom?"

Dora shrugged. "It would have to be his mother, surely?"

"Cilla told me he barely knew her. He was young when she died."

"You know how men are about their mothers."

Laura rubbed her forehead where a headache threatened.

"He refused to speak of her."

"That could mean many things," Dora said. "I'm sure you'll find out what you wish to know."

Laura tilted her head. "What makes you think I'm looking for anything?" She refused to accept that anything more than mild curiosity had brought her here. But apparently her aunt thought otherwise.

"That's why you've come, isn't it?" Dora pulled her Tarot cards from her reticule. Perhaps I can help you find out ...."

Laura smiled. She was determined to take anything her aunt suggested with a grain of salt.

Laura left Dora to the library fire and rode out over the Gateley Park's acres, sending a deer bounding away into the beech woods. Tall ashes in the park were aflame with autumn color. She came to a break in a high hedge and found herself out on the lane. A signpost pointed to the village of Little

Gaddesden. Spying a church spire in the distance, she urged her horse into a gallop.

Woodlands ringed a quaint village of thatched-roofed cottages and lodge houses, clustered around a small village green. When she reached the modest grey stone church, Laura dismounted and tethered her horse to the iron railing. She found the church empty, and knocking at the vicarage was told by the housekeeper that the Vicar was away from home. Laura walked around the churchyard reading gravestones. She located the headstones of Nathaniel's grandfather and grandmother. Off to one side, she found his mother's grave. Lady Olivia was thirty-six when she died. The plain inscription gave no clue to the reason for her passing. Laura picked a wild briar rose and laid it on the headstone. "I'm sorry we never met," she said quietly. "Rest well in heaven."

Riding back to the house, Laura left her horse with the stableboy and made her way back to the house. She found her aunt still curled up before the fire in the library, her head nodding, and her beloved, well-worn Tarot cards neatly stacked beside her. Laura left her and began to investigate the house, but it was so big, she grew tired of opening doors onto bare rooms. In the long gallery on the upper floor, she studied the family portraits. A pretty fair-haired woman featured often, as a babe in her mother's arms, a young child with braids, and again as a young woman with ringlets wearing a full sleeved, ice-blue gown. This was Nathaniel's mother. Mystery surrounded her, and Laura had no doubt

that whatever happened when Nathaniel was away at school, affected him still.

Laura joined her aunt for lunch in the dining room. While she'd been out riding, a neighbor had come to pay his respects. A Mr. Jeffrey Burrows, whose lands adjoined Gateley Park on its southern border. "An elderly gentleman," Mr. Charleton informed them. "I doubt he'll call again."

"I'll ride over and see him after lunch," Laura said. "Or if you'd like to come, Aunt, we'll take the carriage."

"I wouldn't miss it," said Dora.

Mr. Burrows lived four miles away in Birkhamstead. A white haired gentleman of advanced years, his warm-brick home was much smaller and simpler in style than Gateley Park. He was delighted to have company, and insisted they partake of an elaborate afternoon tea.

"I couldn't contain my excitement at having neighbors at Gateley Park again, despite it being, as you say, a brief visit. It's quite a few years since a member of the family has come here." Mr. Burrows offered Laura a plate of small cakes. "And Lord Lanyon is he in good health? I did wonder."

Laura assured Mr. Burrows that Nathaniel was well and extremely busy, with his business affairs and the House of Lords demanding a lot of attention. She took a nibble of cake. Her stomach churned so these days. She felt sure it was the uncertainty of her future and worry about Nathaniel's safety. Did he miss her as much as she did him? When would he ask her to come home?

Laura learned much about the family at Gateley Park. Mr. Burrows was older than Olivia by eight years. He had met her

often as they grew up. "She was a fine-looking girl, but a bit flighty." He began to fill his pipe. "I hope you don't mind if I light this?"

"Not at all, Mr. Burrows." Laura said quickly. "I quite like the smell of pipe smoke. It reminds me of my father."

"I'm not one to speak ill of the dead, but Olivia gave her parents a difficult time until they married her off at eighteen. She returned years later, very ill. She died here. Far too young" He shook his head.

"Why here, why not in her own home?" asked Dora. "Was her husband at her side?"

"I don't believe he was." Mr. Burrows brow furrowed in a disapproving frown. "But I don't listen to gossip."

As the carriage returned them to Gateley Park, Dora said, "I wonder if we can discover what that scandal was about."

"Scandal?" Laura felt both queasy and uneasy in equal measures. She wished Dora would stop probing. She gave Laura the exact same eagle-eyed stare as did her mother.

"Of course there was a scandal. Where there's smoke there's fire, and where there's gossip there's surely a reason for it."

"Ever heard of idle gossip? Anyway, I don't believe we should." It seemed unwise to delve into family scandals Nathaniel obviously didn't wish her to know. In time she hoped he would tell her himself.

"You know you should," Dora said. "To learn exactly what you are dealing with."

Laura loathed having his secrets between them, and didn't wish to learn of something she might be forced to keep from him.

She followed her aunt into the library.

"We shall see what mysteries *l'art de tirer les cartes* can reveal to us. Let us consult the oracles," Dora said. She spread out her Tarot cards across the table.

Laura couldn't resist pulling up a chair to watch her. The placing of each card was heavy with import, as Dora laid them out in their familiar configuration.

"I have asked a question."

Laura folded her arms on the rosewood table. "What have you asked?"

"Let's see what evolves," her aunt said mysteriously. The Queen of Cups appeared, upside down. "Reversed!"

"What does that mean?" Laura asked impatiently.

"A woman that cannot be trusted. Vice, dishonour, depravity."

"You cannot mean ...."

"Hush. Look at this, Laura." Dora tapped the cards.

Laura stared. The Queen of Cups had been covered by the Devil. And the King of Pentacles sat in judgement over her. On one side was the Page of Cups, below her, the Knight of Wands, on the left of her, The Fool.

"Who is the Page of Cups?" Laura asked.

"Nathaniel as a boy." Dora pointed to the last card. "The outcome card is Death as we already know."

"Death?" Laura asked anxiously, caught up despite herself. "For Nathaniel?"

"I believe it is his mother's death here."

"I don't approve of this." Laura threw back her chair.

"Please put the cards away."

Dora did as she was bid. "If you don't believe the cards, we shall have to find further evidence," she said pragmatically. "In my humble opinion, your life won't be as good as it should be until we discover the truth of the past. It greatly affects the present and the future."

"Dear Aunt Dora," Laura kissed her aunt's soft cheek. "I wish you wouldn't talk like a proverb, it gives me goose bumps."

The days passed slowly, there was little to do beyond reading and riding, and Laura became more and more anxious and impatient for word from Nathaniel. At the end of the third week, she rode to the village post office and sent him a telegram. She wrote: *Darling, I long for word from you. Please tell me you're alright, your loving wife, Laura.*

Laura rode back to the house. The woodland trees shed their leaves, leaving their branches stark and bare, as autumn's beauty faded into winter. She found Aunt Dora happily ensconced in the library, surrounded by tomes of poetry.

"Sit down, dear girl. Find a book to read."

"Very well," Laura said with a sigh. "But I have no intention of spending winter here."

Laura began to stitch a linen sampler she'd found in a work box, the birds and flowers left unfinished. She had never been inclined to such things, but needed to keep her hands busy. Gold green, black, magenta, dark brown and copper silks

decorated the meandering border with the family initials. In its centre, beautifully stitched, was an autumnal scene with an elegantly dressed lady, wearing a bonnet and standing amongst trees, a house and a church in the background. Sewing failed to soothe Laura's mind, and after hours of work, and all the flowers almost completed, she threw it down and began to walk the carpet from one end of the room to the other.

"My goodness. You're like an African lion I saw once at the zoo," Aunt Dora observed.

Laura sank onto the settee beside her. "I can't help feeling there's something seriously wrong at Wolfram. There's been no answer to the telegram I sent Nathaniel."

"But that was only two days ago."

"Suppose it's come and there's no one to deliver it. I think I'll ride to the post office."

"Very well. The fresh air will do you good."

On the way to the village, Laura called again at the church. This time, the Vicar was at home. He smoothed his grey hair and apologized for not calling on her. There had been an epidemic of whooping cough in the village. Several children had died.

"How sad," Laura said.

"I believe we are at the end of it, God willing."

"Thank goodness." Laura hesitated, aware that her request was badly timed and would surely sound odd. But she was determined. "I wonder if you might assuage my curiosity, Vicar."

"If I can, Lady Lanyon."



"My husband's mother, Lady Olivia is buried here. I am curious to learn more about her. Did you know her?"

"I'm afraid I didn't know her well. I came here after she married and only saw her at the end. She suffered greatly poor thing. And the baby, of course, did not survive."

Laura's heart began to beat faster. "I'm sorry to hear she suffered."

He rocked on his heels. "Her parents were good people. They took her in and cared for her until she died. Many would not have done so."

"I suppose not." Laura suddenly realized to admit she knew so little about her mother-in-law would be an insult to Nathaniel, it may also become village knowledge.

"Is there anything else I might help you with, Lady Lanyon?"

"Thank you, no. I'm on my way to the village. It looks like rain, so I'd best hurry."

There was no reply to her telegram waiting at the post office. On the way back to the house, the dark clouds fulfilled their promise. By the time Laura arrived home she was wet through. She hurried up to her bedchamber to change.

She came down to find her aunt in her usual spot, huddled by the library fire.

When she told her the news, Dora nodded sagely. "Her reading showed much suffering."

Laura sneezed.

"Come closer to the fire. You should not have been riding in the rain. You could catch a chill."

"Why would Nathaniel's father cast his wife out?"

Dora tilted her head. "The baby wasn't his?"

Laura nodded. "If not, then I wonder whose. Poor woman, what if he was wrong?"

"A man generally knows these things."

A smile tugged the corner of Laura's mouth. What would her spinster aunt know of such things? But then she thought of the girl in the gallery portraits and her smile faded. Her head began to throb more fiercely. "I think I'll lie down for a while."

"Lie down in the daytime?" Dora's eyes widened. "I do hope you're not coming down with something."

Laura climbed the stairs, her legs like lead. It was probably just from worrying about Nathaniel's safety. Why hadn't he replied to her telegram?

The storm had battered Wolfram for four days, the gale-force winds uprooting an old oak on the village green. Horizontal rain pelted anyone with the courage to leave their homes. In their oilskins, Nathaniel worked beside Hugh and the farm workers securing bales of hay with sheeting, tied down with ropes and shepherding livestock and the horses into the shelter of barns and stables. They came back to the abbey for a hot meal to find a man from the village with terrible news, a ship had foundered on the rocks.

Nathaniel and Hugh raced up to the tower. Leaving over the stone parapet, the men located the three-masted vessel on the rocks, in danger of being broken up as the mountainous waves battered it ruthlessly.

"I can see the men on board," Nathaniel yelled above the roar of the wind and sea. He wiped the end of his telescope.

"They are trying to launch a rowing boat. They'll never make it."

As they ran down the circular stairway, Nathaniel yelled, "I'm going to ask for volunteers. We'll have to go out there."

"Count me in," Hugh responded grimly.

Nathaniel glanced at the man, one of the few he considered a friend. Hugh was calm and capable, a valuable asset he valued greatly here at Wolfram. Since Mallory's death Nathaniel feared he would leave for a more attractive position a man of his capabilities would have no difficulty in finding, but he stayed and remained loyal.

The men were joined by two volunteers from the village. They took a small fishing boat out to the founding ship. The precipitous waves were dotted with floating boxes as the men on board the three-masted vessel struggled to stack the rowboat lashed to side with goods.

"Why the devil don't they just save themselves," Nathaniel yelled, his words caught by the noise and flung away. A man's body floated close by in the water, Nathaniel reached down and grabbed at him, but a huge wave took him away.

"He'd be gone," Hugh shouted shaking his head.

Nathaniel nodded.

They reached the vessel as with a groaning shriek, a mast fell across the deck, pinning a man beneath it.

"I'll have to go and get him," Nathaniel shouted.

"No milord! It's too dangerous," Hugh yelled.

"Tie a rope round me."

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*by Maggi Andersen*

The crew of the founding ship clambered over the side into the rowboat which was low in the water, and in danger of sinking.

"Get those men onboard." Nathaniel dived into the swirling waters, a sturdy rope around his waist. He broke the surface and was immediately swept away as the men gave him slack on the rope. It took almost all of his strength to swim to the stricken ship. When he reached it and hauled himself on board, the ship gave a large groan and the bow dipped into the sea, the waves breaking over it and flooding the deck. It rose again as Nathaniel tried to keep his balance on the tilting slippery planks. He reached the man and found him alive, wedged beneath the mast. The boat rocked again and another mast fell, missing Nathaniel by a foot. The rain and spray and waves almost blinding him, Nathaniel dragged the man free. He hauled him to the side as the bow, with another groan slid beneath the sea.

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## Chapter Seventeen

Laura slept deeply on and off for what seemed like a month, finding her worried aunt's face beside the bed whenever she opened her eyes. Her limbs ached and her head pounded.

Finally, she woke to a fine day feeling much better. She pushed herself up on the pillows, surprised at how weak she'd become.

"You've been sick for three days. We were concerned that you might have contracted whooping cough." Dora hovered over her with a bowl of broth. "I'm so relieved you've recovered."

Laura tried to eat, but had little appetite. She pushed away the bowl and wiped her mouth on the linen serviette. "I'm sorry I worried you, Aunt. Has a telegram come?"

Dora smiled. "This morning." She took it from her pocket and handed it to Laura.

Laura eagerly read it, and her smile faded. "He says he has been busy working with the police. He is fine, but makes no mention of me coming home." And no mention that he loved or missed her.

"You can't expect much from a telegram," Dora said soothingly. "At least he is alright."

Laura's spirits rose. "I shall get up today."

Dora frowned. "If you're sure."

"I am. Send my maid will you please, Aunt?"

Laura came downstairs on wobbly legs. Entering the library, she caught Dora tucking something under a cushion. She looked up with a guilty expression.

"What do you have there, Dora?"

Dora retrieved a bundle of letters and handed them to Laura. "I thought to wait until you were stronger." She shrugged. "While you were sick, I searched the attics."

"You searched the attics? That was naughty of you, Aunt." Laura frowned, but her attention was drawn to the letters. They were spotted with age, tied up with a faded blue ribbon.

"I haven't read them," Dora said with quiet dignity.

Laura patted her aunt's knee. "I'm sorry I was mean. We shall read them together."

Dora brightened. "I'll ring for tea."

As they nibbled cake and drank their tea, Laura opened each letter, smoothing the fragile paper out carefully.

"They are love letters to Olivia," she said. "From someone who signs himself, *Your loving protector*."

"He did little to protect her at the end," Dora said wryly.

"I'm not going to read them," Laura said, folding them.

"Oh, why not?"

"I know they appeal to the poet in you, Dora, but I'm .... Wait!" Laura examined a plain white envelope. "This one is from Lord Lanyon."

Dora moved closer. "What does it say?"

Laura read quickly. "It's as we feared. He refuses to acknowledge the child as his." She read down. "He accuses Olivia of debasing herself and the Lanyon name with the steward at Wolfram. She has broken his heart, he says, and

he will never set eyes on her again." Tears stung Laura's eyes. "That's so sad."

"Men!" Dora made a disapproving *poof* with her lips.

Laura folded the letter and added it to the rest, retying the blue ribbon. "Nathaniel would know something of this," she said quietly. "Although he was just a young boy. It would have been a bitter and lonely time for him."

"Will you tell him that you know?"

"I can't." Laura handed the letters to Dora. "You must return these just as you found them."

"But, surely this needs to be discussed between you."

"I hope to some day. At the moment it's enough to know," Laura said, thinking it would also help to understand what made Nathaniel behave the way he did. No wonder he found intimacy with a woman difficult. He was more relaxed with his dogs and horses than with her.

"You told me of Nathaniel's first wife's death, and the rumors of an affair with the gardener. That must have been doubly hard for him."

"Yes, even if they weren't true. Poor Nathaniel," Laura said softly.

Dora looked owlish. "How do you know they weren't?"

Laura stared at her. "Cilla told me emphatically that they weren't."

"How could she be sure?"

Laura pulled the shawl closer around her shoulders. "She was Amanda's friend and confidant."

"Can you be sure that Amanda always told the truth?"

"Dora, stop fishing. It's not going to help anyone."

"What do you intend to do then?"

Laura stood. "We shall return to London tomorrow."

"Before we do," Dora said, "I want to show you something else I found on my travels while you were sick. It's in one of the larger bedchambers."

Laura followed her mysterious aunt up the stairs.

Dora threw open the door of an airy chamber. She walked inside with Laura following. "There!" Dora said triumphantly.

A portrait in a gilt frame hung on the far wall. Laura moved closer. A lady with calm, sweet face sat with a small dog perched on her knee. She was dressed in the fashion of a century ago. The folds of her rose patterned damask gown looked almost real, so well it was painted. But it was her auburn hair, pulled back softly from her face and arranged in ringlets behind her head, and her almond-shaped green eyes that were striking.

"She looks like you," Dora said.

"Do you think so?"

"It's not just the coloring, it's her eyes and generous mouth."

"She must be Olivia's mother." Laura studied the woman's face for features like Nathaniel's. She found it in the broad cheekbones and the set of her eyes.

"Judging by the period, I assume so."

Laura put her hand out to touch the painted canvas as if she might connect with this woman who died years ago.

"Nathaniel mentioned his grandmother. He was fond of her."

Dora's eyes shone. "There you are then."



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"She looks kind, and she did take care of his mother until she passed away," Laura said softly.

"Yes, she has compassionate eyes," Dora said.

"If that was what attracted Nathaniel to me, I must endeavor to live up to her."

"Darling girl." Dora put her arm around Laura's shoulders and gave her a hug. "You already have."

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## Chapter Eighteen

Coming from the fresh, clear skies of the countryside, London lost a good deal of its charm for Laura. It was noisy, with a damp cold that seeped into one's bones, and yellow fog fouled the air. The streets were crowded and dirty. She had decided to stay with Dora rather than come under her mother's scrutiny again, but it proved a mistake. Dora's tiny town house was constantly inundated with people. They crowded into her rooms and talked nothing but literature and art. Did Laura once wish for a life such as this? She was surprised to find it no longer held any allure for her. She waited impatiently for Nathaniel to come for her, praying that he soon would. She was tired, and still a little unwell. She wanted to go home to the clear skies where you could hear the birds, and see straight to the horizon with the smell of the briny sea on the wind.

When yet another crowd of visitors departed Dora's home, Laura suggested she and her aunt go out for some air. They decided on a trip to the museum. The fog had been blown away by a gale, to be replaced by rain sheeting down and filling the gutters. It eased off and they left the house as dark clouds hovered low over the rooftops. She and Dora hurried down Great Russell Street from Tottenham Court Tube Station as the rain returned. They stopped to put up their umbrellas. An omnibus raced by, sending a wave of water onto the pavement and drowning Laura's boots. Annoyed, she lowered her umbrella and bent down to inspect them.

"I say, do be careful with that thing."

From beneath the ruffled fringe of her umbrella, Laura saw a pair of male legs dressed in brown tweed standing before her.

"I am sorry," she said, raising her umbrella over her head.

"Laura?" Howard Farmer's hazel eyes crinkled at the corners. He removed his hat and she noted his hair was neatly cut, mutton chops trimmed. "We discussed umbrellas when last we met, did we not?" He gestured to the one he held over his arm. "How very delightful to see you again."

"Howard, I received your letter, I was glad you hadn't gone off to fight the war."

He shook his head. "I tried. I was rejected."

"I hope it was nothing serious?"

He smiled. "Poor eyesight."

"It was very brave of you to try." Laura was pleased to see Howard looked quite prosperous. "This is my Aunt Dora."

Howard shook Dora's hand, as Laura explained where she had met him. "Howard is now a lecturer at the London University."

"What do you teach, Mr. Farmer?"

"I'm a professor now. I teach the Classics."

Laura sighed inwardly as Dora's eyes brightened. "Oh, you must come to my Thursday soiree. You will meet some very interesting people, Professor, I promise you."

Howard's gaze met Laura's. He waited for her approval. "Yes, please come."

It began to rain in earnest. Dora gave him her address and they scattered. Howard strode off in the opposite direction as

they made their way up the stone steps to the museum's front door.

In the foyer, Dora shook her umbrella. "I hope you didn't mind me inviting him."

"He's an interesting man. You'll find you have a lot in common." Laura had to admit she was curious to learn how his life had been since they parted. As long as he didn't ask too many questions about hers.

On Thursday, the usual crowd arrived for Dora's soiree. Soon, there was standing room only and the small heated parlor and dining room became stuffy with the mingling odors of cologne, human sweat, the coal fire and pipe smoke. As conversation settled into a dull roar in her ears, Laura's head began to spin. "Heavens," she murmured, putting a hand up to her forehead. "What is the matter with me?"

The maid let in another visitor, and Howard Farmer walked into the room. Having stripped off his coat and hat, he went straight to Dora, but his glance found Laura and he smiled.

Moments later, he came to her side. His hazel eyes studied her. "How are you really, Laura?"

Laura smiled wanly. "I find it very stuffy in here." As she spoke black spots swam before her eyes. "I'm afraid ...," she began, and then the dots joined and darkness closed over her.

Almost immediately, Laura came to, finding herself in Howard's arms being carried out into the hall. "We'll get you some fresh air," he said. He set her on her feet and held her, his arm around her waist.

The maid rushed to the front door. It opened to reveal Nathaniel removing his gloves. Within the confines of Howard's arms, Laura gazed into her husband's grey eyes as cold as the granite walls of Wolfram.

Laura lay on the bed in the bedchamber she'd adopted. Across from her, too far away for comfort, Nathaniel sprawled in a chair. His eyes were no longer like stone, they held a dangerous light. "Are you sure you're alright, Laura? Dora told me you've been unwell."

She smiled. "I am much recovered, just a slight headache."

Then you can tell me who that man was, who so thoughtfully assisted you."

With a feeling of dread, Laura said, "Dora invited Howa ... Mr. Farmer here." She rubbed her brow. "We met him in the street ..."

Nathaniel's voice was icily polite. "You were acquainted, before?"

"Yes, at Cambridge. He's a Professor."

His brows met in a ferocious frown. "Have you met him socially?"

Laura chewed her lip. "He came to play tennis at Wimbledon one weekend." She held out her arms. "I don't believe you've kissed me."

Nathaniel held off, but did she detect a lessening of resistance?

"Has he ever kissed you?"

"What a question." Laura remembered the kiss in the breakfast room at Grisewood Hall. She hated to lie, but to admit it now would be disastrous. "Don't you trust me?"

Thankfully he didn't pursue it. "You've not seen him again until now?"

"How could I?" Laura twitched a fold of her skirt to smooth it over her legs. "We married soon after." Her gaze wandered over him, admiring the way the light from the window shone on his coal black hair. "Please, Nathaniel, you're making my headache worse."

Relieved, she watched him rise and approach her. His eyes held a strange expression, needy yet wary. "I've missed you." His voice sounded strained.

She understood it was a huge concession for him to make and reminded her of the young boy who'd suffered the loss of his mother at a tender age. She could almost see him, all legs like a young foal, his mother dead and his father vengeful and grief-stricken. She coiled her arms around his neck, delighting in his closeness. "And I have missed you, every minute of every day."

It wasn't a boy who kissed her. It was a man's mouth probing hers. "Have you come to take me home?" she asked when he drew away.

"I have." He took her chin in his hand, his gaze roaming her face. "You do look pale."

"I'll be fine when I get back to Wolfram."

A warmer light sparked in his eyes. "You miss Wolfram then?"

"Not as much as I missed you."

He moved onto the bed and lay close to her, his hand lovingly tracing the line from her waist to her hip.

"Nathaniel!" Laura stared anxiously at the door. "This is next to Dora's bedchamber, anyone might come in."

He gathered her up in his arms and murmured into her neck. "Dora has too much sense. Just let me hold you." His lips found that special place he always liked, on her throat below her ear. "I want you so much."

"I want you too," she whispered, an eye still on the door. She could hear people talking out in the hall, and knew there was no key for the lock. Nathaniel's hand had slipped under her skirt and stroked her thigh. She'd almost reached the point where she would throw caution to the winds. Her body had missed him too and her skin tingled as she moved closer.

A long passionate kiss left them both on fire. "Nathaniel ...."

"Hush." He moved away to adjust his clothing.

Laura giggled nervously. "We can't ...."

He reached under her dress again, and eased off her bloomers. Laura's breath caught in her throat and her heart beat faster. Tucking them under a pillow, he rolled off the bed and held out his hand to her. "Come."

Laura put her feet to the floor. "Where on earth ...?"

He led her back to the upholstered chair in the alcove. Sitting down, he gathered up her skirts and pulled her onto his lap. In the long mirror hanging on the opposite wall, from the waist-up, they looked like a marriage portrait of a well-dressed couple. Her body throbbed with need as he guided himself inside her. "Oh, yes, darling, yes." She put her hand

to her mouth to quiet herself as his hands cradled her bottom beneath her gown, moving her up and down his shaft. He groaned softly and thrust into her. As he kissed her shoulder, she put up a hand to stroke his dark head.

His breath grew heavier, and he demanded fiercely. "You don't want that Farmer chap, do you?"

"Of course, I don't. I chose you," Laura gasped.

As their pace quickened and they teetered on the edge of glorious oblivion, Laura cried, "I love you, Nathaniel. I always have."

"You do?"

She moaned softly. "Why would you doubt it?"

She lost herself in the moment as their fast and furious union, deprived for so long, ended swiftly.

She turned within his arms to look at his face. His thick sooty eyelashes masked his expression. "You've never told me you love me, Nathaniel. Do you?"

A pulse beat at his throat as his breathing slowed. It might have been a fleeting memory that suddenly turned his grey eyes dark. "If it's possible for me to love anyone, then I do love you, Laura." He kissed her, and she returned it passionately. But it wasn't enough and she wondered if his kiss was meant to divert her from further conversation.

Laura thought she heard her aunt's voice on the staircase and decided she would have to make do with that for now. Nathaniel eased her off his lap. He stood and adjusted his clothing. "Get ready to leave. I'll wait downstairs for you."

"Wait! You haven't told me what has happened at Wolfram."



He smiled. "Later, darling."

As Nathaniel closed the door behind him, Laura put her hands up to her burning face and marvelled at his audacity as she went to retrieve her bloomers. She found her headache had gone.

When she came downstairs, Howard sprung from his position on a chair by the door. "Laura! I was worried, are you alright?"

With a feeling of unease, Laura went to take his outstretched hand in her gloved one. "I'm fine now, Howard. Thank you for assisting me."

Howard searched her eyes. "Are you happy, Laura?"

"My wife is very happy." Nathaniel stood at the sitting room door clenched fists at his side. A dangerous fire smoldered in his eyes. Alarmed, Laura thought he looked like a tiger ready to spring. "And I'll thank you to release her hand." He took a step forward.

Laura snatched her hand away from Howard's. The look of fury on her husband's face was unreasonable and she would have been angry had she not known what caused it. How many years would it take before he trusted that she loved him and only him? "I can answer questions for myself, Nathaniel," she said mildly. "I am extremely happy, Howard, and I apologise for alarming you with my rather dramatic collapse."

Howard took his hat and coat from the maid. He nodded to Laura and gave a frowning glance at Nathaniel. "I trust that is so. Good day to you both."

When the door closed behind Howard and the maid left the room, Laura went to place her hands on Nathaniel's chest. He breathed heavily. "You must learn to trust me," she said urgently. "If you don't, our life together will suffer."

He raised her chin to look deep into her eyes. "Then don't throw suitors like Howard Farmer in my way."

"I didn't. I told you, Aunt Dora asked him here."

He shrugged, but his indifference didn't fool her. "Let that be the end of it then."

"As our paths will never cross again, it will be."

Nathaniel and Laura left Dora with her promise to visit them soon, then drove over to Wimbledon to say goodbye to Laura's parents. On the way in the carriage, Nathaniel told Laura about the arrests in Cornwall.

"We had a very bad storm, it raged for three days and nights without pause. I had to go out with other men from the village and save the crew of a ship that founded on the rocks. It was a three-masted vessel ...."

"I've seen that ship," Laura interrupted. "It sailed across round the point from where I was standing, the day I rode along the coast. You know, the day I met Thomas Mallory."

Nathaniel stared at her. "You didn't tell me you met Mallory that day."

Laura bit her lip. "I'm sure I did."

"Tell me again."

Laura began to explain how Mallory had emerged from behind a rocky outcrop.

"Did he make advances to you?"

"What? No. For God's sake, Nathaniel, don't you think I would have told you if he had?"

Nathaniel's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

Laura sighed. "It was after he had left that I saw the ship. It sailed quite close to shore traveling from the same direction Mallory had come from. Do you think they might have ...?"

"Did you speak to him for very long?"

"No. We spoke a word or two only and then he left, and in a little while I rode back to Wolfram. After I watched that seal ...."

Nathaniel held a finger to her lips. "Very well. Let me finish my story. We reached the ship as it began to break up on the rocks. The crew attempted to load a rowing boat with boxes. The rest of the cargo floated in the waves, destined to be washed up on the beach, or some of it. We were lucky to get the men safely onboard the fishing craft. We lost one man, got the rest to shore. One was trapped under a broken mast and suffered a broken arm. Another had swallowed too much seawater, and died a few days later. The next day we examined their cargo, it matched those found stored in an empty cottage at Wolfram. With a bit of pressure from the police the men talked. The under groom from Wolfram, Throsby, and two fishermen who helped bring the contraband in from across the channel, were arrested."

"Is the ship still there?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "It sank to the bottom minutes after we left it."

Laura shivered and held Nathaniel's hand to her cheek. "I'm glad I didn't know of this."

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Nathaniel laughed. "Don't be so melodramatic. I know those waters, remember?"

Laura thought of Shelley's poem. "Man is weak against the might of nature."

He flicked her cheek with a careless finger. "Too many books, Laura. Perhaps your mother was right."

"You would take my mother's case against me?" she said, firing up to release the emotions he denied her.

Nathaniel smiled a teasing smile. "You know I wouldn't. The inquest into Thomas Mallory's death is to be held next week," he added soberly.

This caused a shiver to rise up Laura's spine when she thought of Thomas, his face disfigured and bloodied, rolling in the waves at the bottom of the cliff. She nestled against her husband as the carriage rolled down the drive of her parent's house.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Three days later, Laura and Nathaniel arrived back at Wolfram. It was early evening and the lamps were alight along the waterfront. The sky was black velvet tumbled with stars, and it was hard to see where sky and ocean met. Wolfram village looked soft under the moon. The whitewashed cottages climbed over the hill, milky-white, windows aglow with candlelight. Across the water, the solid granite walls of the abbey rose from its dark gardens.

Laura smiled, she was home.

The tide was just receding and water caressed the rocky banks of the carriageway as the carriage crossed it. They pulled up at the stables and the dogs raced out with excited barks. Laura left Nathaniel to greet them and see to the horses. She entered the house, delighted to be home, gazing at everything anew. Even Rudge, standing impassively at the door, appeared less formidable. She hurried up to change for dinner. As Agnes tugged at the straining hooks on her gown, Laura began to think more clearly. And count. Her breath caught in her throat. Was it possible she was going to have a baby? Her first thought was to go to Nathaniel. But she held back, she had to be sure. She would wait another week.

That night after dinner, Nathaniel came to her. And when she woke in the morning, she turned to find his tussled head on the pillow beside her.

She raised herself up on an elbow as he turned to her.  
"Good morning."

"Good morning." A smile lit his heavy-lidded eyes and he reached for her.

She rested her head on his shoulder, trying and failing to hide her absolute delight in finding him still in her bed.

Walking through the park, Laura breathed in the cold, salt-laden air with relish. The dogs found her and came along for the trip, rooting about in the deep drifts of papery leaves.

At Cilla's cottage gate, Laura ordered the dogs home. They obediently turned and ran off. She went to knock on the yellow door.

Cilla opened it dressed in her smock. She'd been painting furiously for her coming exhibition. A testament to her hard work was lined up along the walls, canvases bursting with bright color like nothing Laura had ever seen before.

"They're magnificent." Laura turned to Cilla and laughed. "You have a daub of violet paint on your nose."

Cilla smiled and rubbed at it. "Look at you, though, you are blooming."

Laura flushed, remembering what had recently taken place in her bedchamber. Nathaniel had tarried over breakfast and they enjoyed a long conversation. She told him more about her trip, withholding Dora's findings for a better time, and he related his news. A prize mare was in foal.

"Which painting may I buy?"

Cilla's brows rose. "You wish to buy one?"

"I do."

Laura was surprised to find Cilla looked vexed. Then it occurred to her she would want to show them all in London. "If not all of them are sold, of course."

Cilla looked relieved. "What about I paint a portrait of you?"

"I'm not sure."

"It would make a lovely present for Nathaniel."

Laura couldn't help thinking of the magnificent painting that had once hung over the fireplace. But Nathaniel had taken it down, hadn't he? "I suppose it would."

"I've finished up here, why don't we start now?"

"Now? Today?"

"Why not? The light is still good."

"Very well. Where do you want me?"

Cilla took her arm. "Come and sit by the window." She studied Laura with a practised eye. "The soft moss green of your dress is perfect, but a little plain. We need a touch of color." She went to her bureau and opened a drawer, returning to place a coral necklace around Laura's neck.

As Cilla set up her canvas and prepared her pallet, Laura glanced in the mirror at her reflection. She put her hand up to the beads. They were similar to some she had seen in Amanda's room. "These are pretty," she said, "Where did you buy them?"

Cilla turned to look. She frowned. "I can't remember, London probably."

"I've never seen you wear jewelry."

"That's true." Cilla's sure hand began to sketch the outline. "I bought them for the color." She bent her head over her pallet mixing paint. "I remember I bought Amanda one too."

After half an hour of sitting, Laura began to fidget, and Cilla put down her brush. "That's enough for today." She grabbed a cloth and threw it over the painting.

Laura stretched. "I hoped to see what you've done. But I shan't break your rule again."

Cilla smiled, shaking her head. "You've been very patient, may I offer you tea?"

"Thank you, but I'd best go home."

"Tomorrow then?"

Laura smiled. "Tomorrow." She envisaged her portrait hanging in the library, somehow making Wolfram feel even more like home to her.

Laura gripped Nathaniel's hand as he pushed through the people into the hall for the inquest into Thomas Mallory's death. They slid onto a hard bench next to Cilla. Villagers and servants from the abbey crowded the seats. More people jostled and elbowed one another, standing at the back of the building. The air stank with unwashed flesh. Mutterings rose and fell around them. The post mortem was read out. Thomas had died from several severe blows to the head and face. He was dead before he hit the water. A gasp went round the room.

Laura sighed with relief that he hadn't jumped from the cliff with a broken heart, an outcome which would have embarrassed Nathaniel. But who might have killed him? Loud whispers swirled over her. A few villagers glanced Nathaniel's way. She studied her husband's stony profile. Although she never considered him guilty of such crimes, did he know more than he said?



Mrs Mallory took the stand. She pushed back her shoulders and lifted her chin. "My son Thomas returned to Wolfram to remove any dishonor from the family name," she said in a defiant tone.

Florrie Havers, who was well known to the sailors around the dock and the inns, stood up. "Pity you didn't ask him where he got 'is money. Thomas gave me a bottle of port and some silk, 'e did," she said with a laugh, and a hand on her hip.

Mrs Mallory moved more quickly than Laura thought her capable. She was across the room and had a good grasp of Florrie's hair before anyone knew what was happening. The hall was in an uproar with people shouting, as the two were pulled apart, Mrs Mallory still with Florrie's curly hairpiece clutched in her hand.

A man dragged Florrie out and the room settled down to a low murmur.

As the facts came out, witnesses placed Thomas with the under groom, Will Throsby from the abbey. The two had been seen arguing late in the evening near the sea wall. Will was now being held in jail for smuggling. Mallory, in an attempt to distance himself from the gang, had put his life in danger when he'd given the name of the head man to the constable.

The Coroner gave his verdict of murder and set a trial date, banging his gavel.

The hall erupted in noisy debate as everyone filed outside.

Nathaniel and Laura walked across the lawn to the carriage. "One thing less to worry us," he said, smiling at her.

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Would it be possible now for the vicious gossip to end? She glanced at him as he strolled along, his big, warm hand holding hers. Surely now, they could get on with their lives. A thrill passed through her, making her want to laugh with joy. Soon, she would tell him her news. The sickness had left her and she felt well. Every day that passed confirmed what she prayed for. A baby would bring them closer together and wipe out all the sadness that still clung to Wolfram like a dark cloud.

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## Chapter Twenty

Something woke Laura. She raised herself on her elbows and saw that Nathaniel was gone from her bed. The moonlight swept in through a crack in the curtains casting a strange silvery glow into the far corner of the room. As she watched, transfixed, the light seemed to take shape and she felt a force had entered the room. "What do you want?" she asked. The shape shifted forming into the outline of a woman's body. Her heart pounding, Laura whispered. "Is it you, Amanda?"

Silence.

Laura sat trembling, trying to see in the dark. A breeze stirred the curtains and the moonlight dispersed. This is ridiculous, Laura thought. With trembling fingers, she lit a candle. The room looked the same as always. How foolish she was. She checked the gilt clock on the mantle. It was one o'clock. Her disappointment at Nathaniel cut deep, a sob escaped from her throat. Then a steely determination took over her. She would find out just where his nightly jaunts took him, even if the truth was a bitter blow to her heart. Surely he did not return to that cold, lonely bed next door?

She had to trust he would welcome her company, now that the danger was gone from Wolfram. If he didn't, they needed to have that talk. She slipped from her bed and pulled on her silk gown and slippers. A touch of the lever on the panel confirmed his room was empty, the bed still made. Moving out into the hall, she saw a light flickering beneath a

doorway. She almost gasped out loud. It came from Amanda's old chamber.

So he was there. She took several calming breaths and walked towards it.

Her fear stirred again. But Amanda's bedchamber was empty now, wasn't it? Laura seized the doorknob and turned it. The door eased open. Apart from the furniture, the room had been cleared of most of its contents. A candle stub burned low on the mantle, its feeble glow failing to light much around it. A man in dark clothes bent over in the shadows, his back to her. She heard a strangled sob.

Certain that it was Nathaniel still mourning his dead wife, Laura shut the door quickly. She rushed back to her room and collapsed on the bed. Although her heart pounded in distress, her mind went over what she saw. Perhaps she'd jumped to a hasty conclusion. What if it wasn't Nathaniel in that room? Ignoring her commonsense, which told her to go back to bed, she jumped up and ventured out again, determined to face the truth, no matter how hard it would prove to be.

This time, when her trembling hand opened the door, she found the room empty. Only the acrid tang of a recently extinguished candle remained. She closed the door and glanced up and down the corridor. The draft stirred a tall tapestry hanging from an iron rod on one wall, and she shivered. Had he heard her and crept away? She peeked into Nathaniel's bedchamber to make sure he had not returned.

Disappointment turned to anger. It roiled in her stomach washing away any sense of fear. She gave up any attempt at stealth. After opening all the doors along the corridor and

finding empty rooms, she rushed to the staircase and made her way downstairs. Beneath her, a shaft of moonlight shone in from the high window. The moon played hide and seek with the clouds causing shifting shadows to fill the Grand Hall. The massive fluted stone columns were wide enough for someone to hide behind, and she feared someone would reach out and grab her as she hurried past. Laura's throat turned ash-dry, which no amount of swallowing could fix. She stopped to listen in the corridor leading to Nathaniel's study, but heard nothing but the faint sound of the waves beating against the seawall and a night bird calling its mate. The study stood empty and in darkness as all the rooms on the ground floor proved to be.

Her candle stuttering, Laura continued down to the kitchens, praying to find Nathaniel enjoying a second helping of Mrs. Madge's apricot tart. But that room, too, was empty, the stove unlit and the scrubbed table bare, pots and pans gleamed softly, hanging from their hooks. Just the lingering smell of lemon oil and coal mixed with something sweet and freshly baked.

Laura's knees threatened to fail her as she faced the bitter truth. Nathaniel was not in the house.

One hand on the steps to the main floor, a creaking noise made her turn. A cool breeze caressed her cheek like a ghostly hand. She knew from where it came, the stairs leading down to the cellars. Fear and anger in equal measures drove her on. She went carefully down, past the wine cellar and onwards. The chill breeze encircled her and she shivered.

She clutched the rail, her feet seeking careful purchase on the slippery stone steps.

Continuing down, Laura tried to ignore her thudding heart and noisy breath. She passed shadowy doorways leading into the cavernous storerooms that had once been the vaulted cloisters of the abbey. The ceiling lowered and the walls turned to granite. She heard the drip of water. The weight of rock pressed down on her and the damp breeze caused her candle to flutter treacherously. Gripping the stair rail tightly she prayed it would not go out. It would be disastrous if she were forced to return in the dark. The door to the garden lay open and she saw an expanse of star-studded sky beyond it. She rushed forward and eagerly stepped out into the air.

Laura found herself close to the water's edge. A still night, with only a playful breeze to ruffle the trees, yet the roar of the waves against the rock wall blotted out all other sounds. The patch of grass on which she stood was bordered on both sides by tall shrubs. In front of her, a step or two away, the moon danced over the water. Of course Nathaniel was not here. How foolish to think he would be.

Laura's skin crawled and she longed to return to her bed. She retreated, but before she reached the doorway, a dark figure exploded out of the bushes and rushed at her. She had no time to evade the forceful shove, strengthened by the momentum of their mad dash. Hands struck at her, punching her in the stomach. She careened backwards. Her candle sailed off into the dark. She caught sight of a figure disappearing among the trees as she flew through the air. Arms flailing, she splashed into the water. She stiffened in

shock. The icy water sucked her under as fear made her go rigid. Down into the dark depths of the sea she sank, gulping in a mouthful of seawater in her heart-stopping panic.

Laura never learned to swim. But now, she fought to survive. She instinctively kicked herself to the surface and burst up with a cry, swallowing saltwater and choking. She spat it out and wheezed in one breath, to fill her lungs before sinking under again. Her thrashing arms and feet brought her up once more and she took another desperate breath as she bobbed around. Dimly aware, she cried out and heard her voice fade into the ocean's roar.

The pull of the waves caught her and swept her away from land. A thought rendered her weak with horror. What if the tide carried her around the point to be dashed to her death on the rocks? Would she be found floating at the base of the cliff just like Thomas Mallory and Amanda?

Sobbing with terror and dread, she watched the solid lines of the abbey highlighted against the moonlit sky, grow distant. Laura knew she tired fast. She would die never knowing the reason. Her chest constricted with small abrupt spasms as the cold churned inside her. Her legs cramped painfully and she strained to keep them moving. The freezing water drenched to her bones, her hair and clothes plastered against her skin made her so cold, her teeth chattered.

She had no concept of time. Everything slowed down. She slipped beneath the surface again. The idea that it would be easy to let go and drift to one's death, began to appeal to her. *Her baby!* She forced her legs to work and fought her way up. She broke the surface and dragged a large amount of

air moist with sea spray into her laboring lungs. Resignation stung at her more than the salt in her eyes. It was hopeless. She might keep herself afloat for only a little longer, and could not swim to shore.

The last of Laura's strength ebbed away, and her limbs faltered in their fight to keep her afloat. Her mind wandered as she came to accept her fate. She would drift until she sank one last time to her death. She forced open her sore eyes. Over the swell of the waves, a blur of lights shone directly ahead. Trying to make out if it was a ship or land, she bumped hard against something beneath the water. The solid mass grazed her side, the flash of pain waking her.

She groped and clung to the pitted stone against the pull of the tide. Her mind cleared and energy surged back into her limbs. Was it the rocks beneath the cliff? She glanced up but saw nothing but patches of star-lit sky amid the dark clouds. She could not be below the cliff, for the lights were now straight ahead. In a rush she realized it must be the village, and a fragile hope threaded its way through her.

Could this be the causeway? With renewed energy, Laura clawed at it, breaking nails and scoring flesh from her fingers as she pushed her way up. Her bare toes—her slippers long gone—scraped across its rocky, shell-encrusted edge. Her icy feet registered little pain. She heaved her way over the top and onto her knees. The fine silk and lawn of her dressing gown and nightgown ripped away. Finding her feet, she stood, swaying with the pull of the tide as it threatened to drag her back into the inky black sea. *No*, she would not go that way. Her sight fixed on the abbey tower as she waded



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across the causeway, pushing each foot forward to make sure of the path as if she were blind. The tide ebbed, and water swirled around her calves. Her feet found the edge and she lurched away, turning her head to keep her goal in sight.

When Laura felt the hard packed earth beneath her feet, she collapsed sobbing. Several minutes passed as she lay exhausted. Violent tremors held her in their grip. If she remained here she would die. She pushed herself to her feet, now with time to consider who would have done such a thing. Who wanted her dead?

The half-moon shrugged off the clouds and sailed free through a sky filled with stars. Laura reeled beyond exhaustion. Her legs and feet scratched and bloody, stung with pain. The lane to the house was dark, and her sore eyes tried to penetrate the dark shadows. She jerked with fear at every sound, and cried out when a bird launched itself from a bough of a nearby tree, its huge wings majestic as it went in search of prey. A light glimmered in the stables shining out over the blue-black cobblestones. She struggled towards it.

Gasping, as her muscles twisted into spasm, she stumbled forward through the doorway. She swayed on her feet. A lantern hung from a beam, shining on a horse lying on its side, groaning. Two men bent over it, their voices low. The two dogs sat on the floor.

"Nathaniel," Laura whispered, finding her throat too raw to speak.

He laughed at something the groom said, and turned. Seeing her, his gaze widened. "What on earth ...?" Nathaniel

jumped to his feet and raced to her as her knees gave way. His strong arms caught her up against his chest.

"You'll get wet," she whispered, and gave a laugh that turned into a cough.

"Steady." Lying her down in the hay, he pulled off his coat. She looked down at the ripped satin ribbons of her dressing gown, her breast revealed through her soaked nightgown. Nathaniel tucked his coat around her. "Laura, what happened? Can you tell me?" he asked, his voice filled with incredulity overlaid with gentle concern.

Laura swallowed, discovered it was painful and grimaced. "Someone pushed me into the sea."

"The sea?" Nathaniel watched her. He had left her sleeping in her bed, and she wondered if he believed her.

He turned to the young groom. "I'll leave you to manage here, Hobbs."

Hobbs stood in the stall beside the fretful horse, his mouth agape. "Of course, my lord."

"Good man." Nathaniel hefted her into his arms and strode to the house. She rested her head against his warm chest as he climbed the stairs.

"Your prize mare is in foal, you should go back," she murmured.

He frowned down into her face. "Is that what you think of me?"

He placed her tenderly on the bed. Throwing his coat onto a chair, he swiftly returned to her side.

"These wet things will have to come off."

He stripped her naked and grabbed a towel, vigorously drying her while diligently avoiding her wounds. The friction warmed her. Her head fell back on the pillow and she closed her eyes.

"You can sleep when we've attended to these cuts." He examined her closely, studying the cuts on her legs and feet, his touch on her sore limbs gentle.

"These will have to be cleaned and dressed." He covered her with the bedclothes. "We'll get you into a dry nightgown, and then I'll send for the doctor."

"Is that necessary? I'm all right, really."

Nathaniel went to a chest and opened the drawer where her nightgowns were kept. He returned and tugged one over her head. His long fingers quickly tied the bows at the neck. Going to the panel, he disappeared into his room. Minutes later, he returned with a tumbler of brandy, handing it to her. "Sip this. What happened, Laura? Tell me for Christ's sake."

Laura took a deep sip and choked. The liquid burned like fire warming her frozen insides. After another sip, she gave him back the glass and rested her head on the pillow, and closed her eyes. A hot tear traced its way down her cheek. Haltingly, she told him what happened.

"You found a man in Amanda's room, weeping?"

She nodded wearily.

"And you thought it was me?"

A sob rose in her throat, threatening to turn into a torrent. "Don't chastise me, Nathaniel. I can't fight with you now."

"Chastise you?" His grey eyes were soft and clear. "What sort of brute do you think me?" He took both her hands and

chaffed them between his large, warm ones. "It's my fault." He shook his head. "*All my fault*. I thought by not drawing you into the trouble here, I would protect you from it. Instead, I've thrown you straight into danger."

Confused, Laura said, "I thought all the danger was gone."

"It may never be," Nathaniel growled. "But I couldn't remain here without you any longer. I had to bring you back. I'm sorry, Laura."

"What is this danger you speak of? Did a smuggler attack me?"

He shook his head. "I believe someone killed Amanda and possibly Thomas Mallory, and now he's tried to kill you." He rose from the bed and stalked to the bell pull. He tucked it savagely then swiveled and came back to her. "I knew it was wrong to bring you here, I'm so sorry darling. But the moment I set eyes on you, I was lost."

Despite her discomfort, Laura's heart swelled at his words. "You do love me then?"

"I tried not to love you, Laura. I was afraid I'd be hurt again."

"Did Amanda hurt you very much?"

"Amanda? No, she merely convinced me that I was right. Women were not to be trusted."

"And you don't trust me either."

"Oh, but I do, darling. I do." He ran his hands through his dark hair, leaving an errant lock resting on his forehead.

Laura reached up and smoothed it away.

He caught her hand and kissed it. "I thought I could have you here beside me, but at the same time keep you from

getting too close." He smiled wryly. "*Madness*. You did get close, Laura, almost from the very first. I didn't have a hope."

"Where did you go at night, Nathaniel? I could never find you."

"I took the boat out. I'd watch Wolfram from the water."

"You sailed at night?"

"When all this is over ...." He frowned. "I'll take you out with me next time. We'll take a bottle of wine and a couple of Mrs. Madge's pasties and throw a line over the side. Many times I've brought a catch home for the kitchen."

"Did you wish to keep guard over Wolfram from the water?"

Nathaniel nodded. "That wasn't the only reason. I'm ashamed to admit it was part of my plan not to get too close to you." He shrugged. "It didn't work."

"*My love*." Laura drew his face down to hers and kissed him. "I understand, Nathaniel," she said when he drew away. She told him about the letters Dora had found at Gateley Park.

Pain flickered in his eyes. "My father was a reserved man, and my mother wanted everything from life. It was a bad mix."

She placed her hand on his cheek. "You must have felt very hurt, my love, very much alone."

"I did grow up with a cold heart. Amanda got no prize in me. But very recently I discovered I don't feel that way any longer." He wound one of Laura's curls around his finger. "I thank God you came into my life."

"There's something else, Nathaniel." As she spoke she felt a surge of fear for her baby. So tiny and so new, would it survive this terrible trauma she'd been put through?

A knock came at the door. "Come," Nathaniel called.

Agnes entered sleepily, her hair hanging in a braid down her back. "You rang, milady?"

"Bring hot water, salve and bandages," Nathaniel ordered. "Your mistress has hurt herself."

Agnes's mouth fell open.

"Don't just stand there, girl," Nathaniel roared.

Agnes rushed from the room.

"What were you going to tell me?" he asked.

Laura's lids drooped. "It can wait until later. I'm very tired." She felt an ominous heaviness low in her stomach and was afraid to tell him. She couldn't bear to disappoint him now.

He drew the blanket up around her shoulders. "Rest, darling. When Agnes returns, I'll leave you. I must check the house and grounds. I won't be long."

"Keep safe, Nathaniel."

He looked grim. "My hunting rifle's in the study. I'll load it."

After Agnes brought bandages and salve and bound up Laura's cuts, Laura sipped more of the brandy. Feeling dizzy, she drifted into asleep before the door closed behind the maid. She woke, gasping in fear when Nathaniel returned. He held her and convinced her he was safe and sound, but shook his head at her unspoken questions. She returned to an exhausted sleep.

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## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Worried about her baby, Laura stayed in bed for two days. Nathaniel told her that Cilla came to enquire after Laura failed to make an appearance. Cilla did not tell him about the portrait she painted of Laura, however, for which Laura was grateful. She wished it to be a surprise. Laura had wondered if she should have sent for the doctor, but the pulling sensation in her stomach had eased, and when she rose from her bed the following morning, she felt quite well.

Nathaniel had not left her side during the night, his shotgun propped close by the bed. He had found nothing unusual when he searched the abbey and the grounds. The constable had questioned Laura at length, but she could tell him little.

"Tell me again what you remember," Nathaniel asked, as they ate in the breakfast room. He smiled. "Judging by your appetite, you seem to have recovered very well from your ordeal."

Laura put down her knife and fork. She'd eaten two eggs and a pile of bacon and nibbled at a piece of toast and jam. "I saw a man in dark clothes, bent in sorrow, sobbing."

"Try and think now, anything you might remember."

She took a sip of tea and returned her cup to its saucer. "He was turned away from me and in shadow. I think I smelled something though."

Nathaniel leant closer. "What? A lingering perfume from the cosmetics left there for months, tallow, coal dust, roses?"



Laura's mind swirled like the yellow fog in London. "No, nothing like that." She frowned and put her hand to her head. "Something that shouldn't have been there."

"Don't worry about it now, darling." Nathaniel placed his hand over hers and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm sure it will come to me. Given a little time." Laura took a last bite of toast, and eyed the fruit bowl as she considered a banana. "I'm so hungry. I can't understand it. Maybe it's shock."

"It probably is." Nathaniel's eyebrows rose when Laura gave into temptation and reached for the fruit.

"These are hard to get and I do love them so." She began to peel back the banana skin, and then took a bite, enjoying the smooth, sweet taste. "I wish I could remember something to help you."

He studied her. "Perhaps you will later."

Rudge came in to replenish the tea and they lapsed into silence. Laura studied him as he fussed around the sideboard, narrow-shouldered in his dark suit, a slightly built man. She remembered how he spoke of Amanda when he showed her the painting. Had he loved her desperately? Enough to want to kill her replacement?

He bowed and left the room. "I think Rudge loved Amanda." She watched Nathaniel's expression.

He straightened in his seat. "Did he, by Jove?"

"And he's never liked me."

"I can't believe anyone would dislike you. And I find it hard to suspect old Rudge. Don't you think you've had enough breakfast, my dear?"

"Thank you, yes. I'll take an apple with me to eat while I write my correspondence."

Nathaniel slipped his arm around her waist. "That tiny waist of yours will become but a beautiful memory."

"And if it does, shall you still love me?"

He kissed her. "Every extra inch of you."

She opened her mouth, yearning to tell Nathaniel her news. But she closed it again. He might ban her from Wolfram and send her somewhere safe until she gave birth. Her bargaining abilities would be useless against his need to protect both her and the baby.

They strolled to the stables. The smell of leather, horse manure and warm hay greeted them at the door.

In the stall, the young foal wobbled unsteadily on its four white feet close by its mother. "She's beautiful." Laura said. "What will you call her?"

"I thought, *Eliza Girl*."

"After my sister?" Laura reached up and kissed his cheek as he bent down to her. "That's a wonderful idea."

He grinned. "I thought you'd like it."

Nathaniel soon became engaged in conversation with the groom as they discussed the welfare of their new addition.

"I think I'll walk over and visit Cilla," Laura said.

"Wait just a moment and I'll go with you."

"Don't be silly. It's broad daylight and only over the hill."

Nathaniel frowned.

"I'll take the dogs with me," she said quickly, before he insisted.

"Very well." He whistled. Orsino and Sebastian came running. "They are well trained and quite fond of you now. Ask anything of them, they will obey."

"Come dogs." Laura walked over the grass and through the trees. The bare branches were etched against the sky. The sea wind rustled through the dead leaves on the ground. Signs of the coming winter were everywhere, yet she needed only a light cloak over her walking dress. Here it seemed the seasons advanced slower and with less aggression than in northern climes. The dogs gambolled around her. Orsino spied a red squirrel and chased it up a tree. After a bout of frenzied barking, he gave up and ran back to join Laura and Sebastian.

At the roar of the waves, Laura shivered, keeping her distance from the cliff. Her fear of some unknown assailant wanting her dead, returned like a living nightmare. She called the dogs to heel as she approached the cottage.

Before she reached the door, it opened. "My dear," Cilla strode forward. "It's so nice to see you on your feet. What happened? Can you tell me?"

Laura ordered the dogs to remain at the front door. Glad of a friendly face, Laura followed Cilla into the cottage. The smell of oil paint made her feel slightly nauseous. She'd taken an aversion to it recently. She told Cilla the details. "I haven't a clue who would do such a thing." She settled on the chair, trying to push away the frightening memories that invaded her dreams.

"No recollection at all?" Cilla went to her easel.

"Nothing useful."

"Do you think you should leave Wolfram again? Maybe visit your parents for a while?"

Laura frowned. "You sound like my husband."

"Well, it seems to be dangerous here for you, doesn't it?"

"I'm not leaving," Laura said firmly, folding her arms.

"I've almost finished your portrait," Cilla said, changing the subject in her adroit fashion.

"Have you? You didn't need me?"

"I wanted to finish it before I depart. My memory for detail is excellent. Once I have the outline down, I know exactly what I'm about."

"When are you leaving for London?"

"My exhibition is next week."

"Are you prepared? Nervous?"

"Cilla bit her lip. "Prepared and nervous."

Laura fell silent as Cilla worked. She didn't feel comfortable in this room. It seemed airless, despite a window being open. An hour later, they stopped for tea. "Let's have it outside under the loggia," Laura suggested.

The creeper over the loggia had shed its leaves and allowed a weak sun to shine directly down on them. Laura didn't bother with her bonnet, she loved the warm sun on her face.

"You'll get freckles," Cilla said dispassionately.

"I've never had any."

"Amanda had to be careful." Cilla stirred her tea. "She had that milk-white skin of a blonde, and she freckled if she went without her hat and parasol. She had a frilly pastel blue

parasol she always took everywhere." Her laugh had a bitter edge. "She was quite aware it matched her eyes."

"Didn't I see it in that painting you just finished?" Laura said. "The one I peeked at on the easel?"

"Yes, I did it from memory, as they never found it. Lost in the sea, I gather."

"She had it with her that day?" Laura glanced across to the sea. Today, there was a channel of dark purple through the blue-gray water. She remembered how cold the water was and how frightened she'd been. She took a deep sip of hot tea and it warmed her.

"I remember she brought it when she called on me."

"But, didn't Amanda disappear at night?"

Cilla shook her head. "Amanda posed for me for most of the afternoon. Then she went off at about four o'clock. She never arrived home."

"Where would she have gone?"

"She might have gone to visit Mallory."

"You told me she wasn't having an affair with him."

Cilla's mouth formed a hard red line. "She assured me she wasn't."

"But, you didn't believe her."

Cilla stood so swiftly she knocked the table and spilt the tea. She peered into the teapot. "More hot water, I think."

When she returned, Laura repeated her question. "You didn't believe her, did you?"

Pouring water into the pot, Cilla spilled some onto her hand. "Ouch!" She sucked a finger. "She was too vain to take a lover."

"Too vain?"

"She needed to be sure of people's undying love, but she didn't enjoy the physical side of it. She would have worked hard to get Mallory, and maybe she went to him that day for another bout of his cringing devotion."

"Doesn't sound like he killed her then."

"Who knows?" Cilla shrugged. "Maybe she spurned his advances. It's possible."

"But she was pregnant!"

"That wouldn't stop Amanda."

But it might stop Mallory."

Cilla's eyes narrowed. "You're such a prude, Laura. This is beyond your ken, isn't it?"

"I don't think I am," Laura said coolly. She stood. "I believe it's time I went home."

Cilla flung back her chair. "That's right. Run off. I'm sure you always do that when you face conflict."

Laura flinched and stared at Cilla. This reaction came out of the blue. She seemed furious. "Whatever is the matter?"

Cilla shrugged and began to stack the cups onto a tray. "Talking of Amanda does that to me. Maybe I need some time on my own."

"Then I'll let myself out." Laura walked to the front door. Her heart sank at the troubling mood that now stood between them.

"I'm sorry." Cilla put a hand on Laura's arm. She seemed to have regained her composure. "Come tomorrow and I'll finish the portrait."

Laura felt a rush of relief. "One more sitting?"

"Just one."

"Very well, tomorrow then."

Outside on the step, the faithful dogs waited. She bent and patted each satiny head. "Good boys. Let's go home."

She walked through the park, thinking that it didn't matter who a person loved, they could still suffer the same depth of pain when it was unrequited. The dogs suddenly took off and she saw Nathaniel approaching through the trees.

"I thought I'd escort you home," he said when he reached her side.

Laura was so overcome with love, she slipped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest.

"Why? What's this?" He hugged her to him.

"It's just that I love you so."

He bent to kiss her with a smile. "And I love you."

Nathaniel whistled at Orsino who sniffed the bushes a distance away. "I'm for a good dinner and a brandy by the library fire."

"Me too." Laura smiled up at him. "A good dinner, anyway."

He shook his head and laughed.

"Do you know," Laura said, "I don't know where Rudge's room is. Is it with the other servants' on the floor above ours?"

"Yes. Do you still think it might be him? Have you remembered something more?"

"No. But it would be so easy for him to slip down the back stairs and go to Amanda's room, wouldn't it?"

Nathaniel frowned. "I suppose so."

Laura paused and turned to him. "I know you don't like to talk about the day Amanda died ...." She almost stopped when she saw his bleak expression. "Do you remember where everyone was that day?"

"Of course I remember!" he said savagely. "Do you think I'd forget?"

Her heart began to pound. "I'm sorry this hurts you, Nathaniel, but where was Rudge that afternoon?"

Nathaniel passed a tired hand across his brow. "Amanda disappeared in the late afternoon. She did not return to the house." He thought for a moment. "I was in my study, Rudge on an errand to the village."

"What was the errand?"

He sighed. "Something personal, I believe."

"He often goes to the village, doesn't he?" Laura said. "I remember he was absent the day I arrived."

"Yes, that's true. I'm not a tyrant, Laura. If he wishes to purchase something or have an airing it's fine with me, as long as his work is done to my satisfaction. And it always is."

"I think you should ask him."

"Ask him what? Where he went on that day? I believe it all came out at the inquest. He was seen in the village, but he returned to the house around five o'clock."

"So he could have ...."

"So could I, ever thought of that?"

"Nathaniel ...."

He turned to her. "You've heard the rumors of course." A tick formed at the corner of his mouth. "You could not avoid it. There are those who suspect me."



"But I *don't*."

"They are right to suspect me," he said grimly.

Laura stopped and stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He looked away from her. "That day, we'd had a terrible quarrel. I was consumed with jealousy and accused her of being unfaithful. Amanda became upset, she rushed out of the house. I didn't go after her, I had too much pride." He shook his head. "I never saw her again."

Laura grasped the lapel of his jacket and forced him to look at her. "You didn't kill her, Nathaniel."

"I drove her to it. I should have been more patient and gentle with her in that condition. But her actions, which may have been nothing more than the desperate needs of a lonely woman, stirred up too much of my unhappy past. It's possible she plunged to her death in despair."

She reached up and touched his face. "Do you really believe that?"

He shook his head bewildered. "I wish I knew. It's driven me crazy not knowing."

"We will find out the truth." She squeezed his arm. They reached the lane that ran down between the stone cottages. "And we'll begin with Rudge. Ask him where it is he goes." She stopped walking. "This was Mallory's cottage, wasn't it? And it's still empty? Might we go inside?"

Nathaniel stared at her. "I'm planning to prepare it for staff. I have employed a new under-groom who is married. But it is empty at present."

They walked up the weedy path. A pile of dead leaves gathered at the front door. The wooden lintel was swollen

with damp, and the door creaked as Nathaniel forced it open. The narrow hall smelled musty and cobwebs swung from the ceiling in the draft. In the tiny parlor, a chaise covered in brown cloth faced the fireplace. There was the acrid odor of recently extinguished candles, and a candlestick still perched on the mantle, a match box beside it.

Nathaniel squatted before the fire. He stirred the ashes with a stick. "This fire's been lit recently."

Laura rested her hand on his shoulder. "Yes, I can smell it." She wrinkled her nose. "And something else." She turned away. "Let's see upstairs."

The low-ceilinged bedchamber under the roof felt cold. The support beams above were thick with dust. The bed made with sheets, a blanket and two pillows. Logs and kindling stacked in the fireplace waited to be lit. Two wine glasses sat on a small table by the bed. Laura pulled back the bedcover. "The linens should feel damp if they've been here long. Someone has slept here since Mallory left." She turned to Nathaniel, her eyebrows raised. "I know what that pungent odor is. Lovers have used this room."

Nathaniel must have realized it at the same time for he looked distastefully at the bed. "No doubt."

"This cottage has been used for assassinations."

"Mallory? No, it's more recent."

"The servants?"

"Most likely." He held his arm out to her. "Let's leave, the place unnerves me."

Laura smiled. "Don't you like to think of your staff making love?"

"No, I do not. Although, what they do in their own time is entirely their own business." He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "Except for what happened to you. If murderous outsiders are visiting Wolfram at night, no one is safe."

They left the cottage. Nathaniel called the dogs to heel. "I intend to find out who comes here."

"There's sure to be a way we can find out. If someone was to ...."

"This will have nothing to do with you, my dear."

Laura sighed. "Oh, very well. What do you plan to do?"

"I don't intend to leave you at night. I'll have someone trustworthy watch the place."

"Who?"

"Ben Jarvis."

"Of course, he's been at Wolfram all his life, hasn't he?"

"He's a good lad."

At dinner that evening, Laura couldn't help her eyes straying to Rudge as she ate her oyster soup.

His impassive facial expression belied his sharp gaze as he watched the servants every movement. He appeared so contained, surely a person like that would burst out if he didn't give vent to his feelings in some way? Might he explode into violence? Had he become too attached to Amanda? Fallen under her fatal spell? Had she spurned him? A strong aversion to him gripped Laura's throat. She didn't want this man wandering the house at night and wished him gone from their lives. Might Nathaniel consider replacing him? Or would he think her too emotional?

Laura's corset tightened even though Agnes had only lightly laced it. She pushed her dessert plate away. Rudge hurried to pull back her chair with spotless white gloves as she rose. He wore a distinctive pomade, which was more pronounced tonight.

The next morning, Laura came down to find Nathaniel closeted in his study with Ben Jarvis. Moments later, he entered the breakfast room and sat down. He smiled at her as Rudge began to serve him.

"What did you learn from Jarvis? What happened last night?" Laura hissed when Rudge left the room.

Nathaniel glanced over his shoulder. "Not here. After breakfast."

Laura waited impatiently for Nathaniel to finish his bacon and eggs. He toyed for an age with his coffee, while reading the newspaper.

Laura banged down her cup. She folded her napkin. Moments passed and she almost burst with curiosity. "I believe your cup is empty, my lord."

He gazed at her with heavy-lidded amusement. "You'll spoil your digestion if you eat so fast."

"Never mind my digestion. Come to the study."

He folded his paper and rose leisurely. "Very well."

Nathaniel shut the study door and Laura stood waiting, her arms folded.

He leaned back against the desk. "Ben took up his post behind the large tree in the lane, as we decided. At midnight or thereabouts, two people entered the cottage separately."

"Who? Who were they?"

Nathaniel chuckled. "Old Rudge, for one."

She gasped. "Surely not. Rudge? And who else?"

"Sophie, the barmaid from The Green Feather."

Laura widened her eyes. "No!"

"Yes."

She giggled and came close to gaze up at him. "I don't believe it."

"They were there until almost dawn."

"Well, I never."

Nathaniel frowned. "It would be amusing I grant you, if things at Wolfram were not so serious."

"Will you question Rudge about it?"

He ran his hands through his hair. "I'm afraid I must."

"I wish I could be there."

"Well, you can't."

Laura gathered up her skirts. "Then I shall go and see Cilla."

"Take the dogs."

"Your wish is my command, Sire."

Nathaniel spanked her bottom as she sashayed past.

"My lord!"

"I hope those bustles are a thing of the past. I enjoy the sight of a woman's bottom." He drew Laura into a passionate kiss, his hands roaming over that part of her.

"After last night, husband, I believe you to be greedy." Laura gasped, her own response to his nearness as swift and startling as ever.

Nathaniel laughed and released her. "Off with you then, before Rudge finds us making love on this desk."

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"As if he has the nerve to talk," Laura said with a giggle.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

Laura found Cilla in a better mood, far more conciliatory than yesterday. As she settled on her chair, she asked, "How long will you be away?"

Cilla frowned. "I don't intend to return to Wolfram."

"Not at all?"

She blended blue and green and a dab of yellow paint on her pallet. "My time here is over. After the exhibition, I plan to return to Paris."

With surprise Laura found she wasn't as sorry as she expected. Cilla had acted quite difficult of late. "I suppose it is a better place for an artist."

"That, and other things. I'm keen to put the past behind me."

"You may find someone to love in Paris."

"Love?" Cilla halted, brush in the air and gazed out the window at the scudding clouds. "I don't believe I shall ever find that again."

"What about the lover you once knew, would there be a chance you might rekindle that?"

Cilla began to paint wild brush strokes onto the canvas. "She died." Cilla's voice sounded oddly implacable.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Are you?" Cilla gazed at her with brows raised. "You would find it hard to understand my life, Laura. It's so different from yours."

Fearing they would enter dangerous territory again, Laura said, "I suppose so." She shifted on her chair wishing for this to be over, suddenly wanting to return to the house.

Mollified, Cilla grew quiet. Twenty minutes later, she wiped her brush and placed it in the jar of turpentine. "I believe I've finished."

"Have you?" Laura could hardly contain her excitement. She jumped up. "I can see it?"

Cilla stepped back. "Of course. It just needs a touch of varnish."

Laura gazed at the painting. She understood in a flash that Cilla's moods played out on the canvas. The calm settled look in the eyes of her subject contrasted greatly with the wildness of the background. She'd placed Laura beneath the loggia in her green gown. Behind her, the cliff appeared so real she might step off into space. Above, gulls wheeled in the sky and thunderclouds threatened on the horizon. The slashes of violent thick paint on the background might have been painted by another artist than the one who rendered Laura's face and dress, her hair with its pearl combs and the delicate lace work around her collar and cuffs, so exquisitely. All in all, the portrait was as breathtaking as it was disturbing.

"It's a very fine work," Laura said soberly. "You are a talented artist."

Cilla undid the bottle of varnish and began to apply it. "I'll have to wait until it dries before I varnish the rest of it. You think it a good likeness?"

"It's clever; I do see something of myself here."

"I'm proud of the eyes."



Laura bent closer. "Are my eyes really that shade of green?"

"Yes. Don't you know?"

Laura straightened. Something about the painting repelled her. She didn't understand why, and felt ungrateful. "It's flattering, Cilla, thank you."

"I merely paint what I see."

Laura watched Cilla clean her brushes. She studied the painting again. Rendered in oils, she sat calmly, hands folded while chaos raged around her. It was in the threatening sky, the wild trees, and the turbulent sea. She was like the calm centre of a storm. Unsettled, Laura took a deep breath. Was that how Cilla saw her?

Cilla screwed the lid back on the bottle and rose. She looked out the window. "I think it's going to rain."

"I'd best get the dogs back to the stables. I didn't bring an umbrella."

"I'll lend you one." Cilla went to a cupboard and threw open the door. She reached in and pulled out a mannish black umbrella.

Laura stood transfixed. A pastel blue parasol stood in a corner of the cupboard. A dainty pretty thing, so unlike anything Cilla would have bought for herself. It had a pearl handle like the one in Amanda's painting. Laura couldn't help herself; she drew a ragged, sharp breath as she recalled the smell in Amanda's room, the memory of which had been gnawing at her. It was the smell of varnish.

Cilla swung around eyes wide. "You are too sharp by far, Laura. You shouldn't meddle."

"Then it's true." Laura stepped back. "That *is* Amanda's parasol."

Reaching into the cupboard, Cilla took it out. She twirled it in her hand. "Pretty thing, isn't it?" She opened and closed it. "Oh, I shouldn't have done that." She laughed. "It's bad luck isn't it?"

Not wanting to believe what she feared, Laura swallowed a knot of dread. "Why did you tell me you didn't have it?"

Cilla tapped her chin. "Now, why do think?"

Laura's voice sounded raspy to her ears. "You killed her? You killed Amanda? I thought you loved her."

Cilla's hazel eyes turned stony. "You've never loved anyone to distraction?" she asked, her tone brisk.

"I love Nathaniel. I would die for him."

"But if he made love with another woman, would you want to kill him?"

"No." Laura tried to breathe, the air stagnant, like heat in her lungs. Her head spun. She grew fearful that she might faint. "I could never kill a living soul."

"*Passionless!*" Cilla eyes darted around the room.

Laura leaned back against the sofa, grasping the rough textured fabric in her curled fingers. "Why, Cilla?"

"Do you know what it's like to love and hate in equal measures?" Cilla shrugged. "When I told Amanda I loved her, she laughed at me. The way we once both laughed at Mallory, and her other conquests. While I enjoyed participating in her games, I did not like being the subject."

"What games?"

"She tested every man she met, and had no respect for any of them. The only one she obeyed was Nathaniel. She would never speak badly of him. Perhaps she knew I wouldn't have been party to it."

"She must have loved Nathaniel."

"Nathaniel is one of the few men I do like." Cilla shook her head at Laura as if she was a child who couldn't learn her lesson. "I told you, Amanda was incapable of love. But she knew on what side her bread was buttered. Nathaniel wanted a child and she was prepared to oblige him."

Laura edged towards the door where the dogs waited.

"No, you don't!" Cilla leapt forward and grabbed Laura's hair twisting her fingers through it.

"*Let go, Cilla!*" Laura tried to pull away and winced in pain. In her hand Cilla held a small knife that she must have snatched from her paintbox. She held it to Laura's throat. "Now you know the truth, you are going to disappear in the same way your predecessor did, my dear."

The knife ice-cold against her flesh, Laura's throat squeezed shut with panic. Her heartbeat thudded behind her eyes like the beat of a drum. She swallowed desperately. "You'll never get me to the end of the lane."

Cilla hissed in her ear. "Of course I won't. Out the backdoor come on. I don't mind cutting your throat, but it will make a terrible mess I won't be able to explain away."

Ice pulsed through Laura's veins. She was still exhausted from her fight to stay alive in the sea. As her strength deserted her, she felt how strong Cilla was, her grip like a man's. Laura wished she could think, but fear for her baby

filled her mind. And for Nathaniel too. He must not go through this again.

"How did Amanda die?" Laura desperately tried to slow Cilla's intent as she pulled her towards the back door of the cottage.

"I asked her to pose nude for me after the baby came." Cilla took an unsteady breath but her grip on Laura grew tighter. "She sneered at me. Told me I was lewd. I fancied women because no man desired me. It isn't true. I had a male lover once." She laughed with a guttural sound, low in her throat. "Amanda began to walk home, it was early winter and almost dark. She remembered she had left behind her parasol and, because she tired easily, I told her to wait for me at the end of the lane, while I went and retrieved it. I was half-way home when I knew we couldn't both go on living at Wolfram. I couldn't continue to see her knowing she had so little regard for me. I turned and stalked her from behind the trees until she grew close to the cliff."

Cilla looked at Laura blindly, as if she gazed inward. "She rubbed the small of her back as she stared out to sea."

The tender image of a pregnant woman rendered Laura silent with compassion, and fear for her own baby tore at her heart. Her legs trembled.

Cilla held Laura's hair in an iron grasp, and stroked the edge of the knife over her throat, as if it was Amanda's throat laid bare. "Killing her was easy, after Simone."

Laura's hair felt like it was being ripped from her skull. She bit down on a scream and forced herself to sound calm. "Who is Simone?"

"My French lover. She fell to her death down a flight of stairs."

"You killed her too?" Laura's voice choked over the words.

"She deserved it." Cilla sounded unmoved by her devastating pronouncement.

"Why?" Laura was almost past caring, but knew she had to keep Cilla talking.

"She thought she could replace me with a man."

"Did you kill Thomas Mallory?"

"You can't blame me for that one, Laura. He mixed with the wrong people. A weak fool he was, beneath my contempt."

"It was you in Amanda's bedchamber the other night."

"Amanda often invited me to her room in the early days. She gave me a key and showed me the secret passage."

"Secret passage ... where?"

"Has Nathaniel never showed you?" She made a clucking sound with her tongue. "It lies behind the large tapestry in the upper corridor, quite near your bedchamber, as a matter of fact. Steps lead down to one of the storerooms near the sea door. When Nathaniel was away, I slipped in often. I continued after Amanda's death. Until some fool took all her things away."

"Those coral beads were hers."

"She owed me." Cilla gave Laura a push and they went through the back door. "You are observant."

"Perhaps you wanted something to remember her by," Laura said.

Cilla gave a growl like a wounded animal. "Shut up, Laura."

"And it was you who tried to drown me."

"I didn't plan to kill you, Laura," Cilla said, her words chilling and pitiless. "But you saw me in Amanda's bedchamber."

"It was dark. I didn't know it was you."

"No. I realized that when no one came to accuse me after you turned up safe and sound. You fool, I was going away. I would not have tried to hurt you again." She dug the knife in and a sharp pain stung Laura's throat. Warm blood trickled down her neck. "How did you survive the sea? You told me you couldn't swim. I was amazed."

Laura swallowed. "The direction of the tide helped me."

"It won't help you this time."

"Cilla!" Laura cried out. "They'll know it's you. This time, you won't get away with it."

"Why would they suspect me? I'll think up a good story and be gone from Wolfram before they finish gathering their evidence."

They stepped only a few feet from the cliff edge. The prick of the knife brought Laura out of her weak trance. Cilla was intent on her awful threat. Laura's pulse hammered at the prospect of a grim death like Amanda's awaiting her. She shoved away from Cilla, falling to her knees. As Cilla grabbed at her again, she yelled, "Orsino! Sebastian!"

The dogs bounded around the corner of the cottage. Cilla laughed and shook her head. "Useless animals. Nathaniel chose them for their looks. As he chose his wives."

Looming over Laura, she raised the knife.

With a fierce growl, Sebastian ran at Cilla. He leapt at her sending her reeling. She stumbled back to the edge of the cliff and, for one long moment, teetered, arms flailing, hands grasping at air. With a cry, she tumbled over the edge.

"Oh, my God," Laura cried, placing her hands over her eyes. When she looked again, Cilla was gone.

Laura caught her breath as her pulse raced. Her hands found the wound in her throat, her fingers sticky with blood.

"Good dogs. Good dogs!" Laura patted the animals as they milled around her, tongues lolling.

Laura climbed shakily to her feet, pushing her dishevelled hair out of her eyes, and edged as close to the cliff rim as she dared. The froth-tipped waves pounded the base of the cliff, surging up in a cloud of spray and swirling around the dark jagged rocks. Heart pounding, Laura searched the water, but found no sign of Cilla. Worried that the dogs might get too close, she turned and hurried for home. By the time she'd left Cilla's tidy garden, the pain at the back of her throat turned to racking sobs. The dogs danced around her, staring up into her face. She stumbled along, trying desperately to compose herself with the thought that life must go on, despite the shadow of death hanging over Wolfram having claimed another victim. How would Nathaniel deal with this? Would she be able to help him?

Laura found Nathaniel in the stables talking to his groom. He looked over and paled. She put a hand to her throat and found it drenched with blood. It had soaked her collar.

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"Hobbs, send for the doctor." Nathaniel gathered Laura up in his arms. She looked up at his grim face.

"Cilla ...."

"Don't talk, Laura," he said as he strode to the house.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

The doctor assured Nathaniel that Laura would survive. But when he returned to Laura's bedside after seeing the doctor out, Nathaniel looked like a man walking to the scaffold.

Night began to fall on a long tragic day. He went to pull the curtains across the windows, then returned to sit beside her on her bed.

"Don't worry so." Laura straightened a lock of his hair as he bowed his head over her. "You were right, darling. The dogs did protect me."

"Thank God!" He rubbed a hand over his cheeks. "I knew Cilla was a trifle eccentric, as artists often are, but I could never have suspected her of such violence. I thought she was a friend."

"She liked you. Respected you," Laura said. "But she was a damaged soul."

Nathaniel looked so tired, she caught her breath.

"I brought her here, like a cuckoo in the nest, and she repaid me by killing Amanda, and our child." He took a deep shuddering breath. "She almost killed you. If she had ...."

"*I'm fine.* And it's over." She was relieved to be here with him, but she felt as he did, an overwhelming sorrow.

She had gasped out the whole story as they waited for the doctor. He'd immediately sent Hugh to organize the retrieval of Cilla's body. But so far, there had been no sign of her.

"One thing is sure," Nathaniel said. "Her body will turn up, they always do."

Laura realized she must be positive and strong. *For the three of them.* She put her hand up to stroke his cheek.

"Darling, the pall that has hovered over Wolfram has gone. Now we can look to the future."

He bowed his head and nodded slowly.

A wave of fierce protectiveness for her family consumed her. The past would not destroy their future. And she had just the means to right all wrongs. "I have news. I asked the doctor not to tell you, but he's confirmed my belief."

Nathaniel raised his head, his eyes suddenly alight with hope.

"Yes, my darling. I'm going to have a baby."

"Laura!" He took hold of her face in his hands and kissed her. "I hoped it might be true."

"You guessed?"

He gave his wolfish smile that pulled at her heart. "It crossed my mind this morning. You seemed to be eating for two."

"Despite everything, I'm in surprisingly good health. This baby wants to be born."

Nathaniel shook his head. "I don't deserve it."

"Of course you do. We both do."

"God sent you to me." He grasped her hands in his warm, large ones. "Perhaps He took pity on me."

"You went through so much pain losing Amanda and the baby. Your heart must have broken in two."

He sighed. "Amanda and I were never happy together, Laura. We were mismatched from the beginning. But she did not deserve what happened to her. She was just a girl." His brows drew together. "If Cilla had survived that fall I would likely have killed her myself."

"Hush."

"Oh, I can hate, with great ferociousness, I've recently discovered. But you're right. We have our lives together to look forward to now."

"There are three things I'd like changed here at Wolfram," Laura said.

"What are they, my love?"

"I want that secret passage in the corridor boarded up."

He kissed her fingers. "I will have it done immediately."

She decided this was the perfect time to broach another matter. "And I want a new butler."

Nathaniel laughed. "You wish me to fire Rudge?"

"I'm sorry, Nathaniel. Try as I might, I can't like him. Can you find him another position, with a good reference?"

"I've already discussed it with him. His behavior here has made his employment untenable. As the mistress of Wolfram, you may select the next butler and the housekeeper too. I believe you'll have the house in tip top order in no time."

"And won't Mother be pleased." Laura chuckled. "She will want to come and visit when she hears I'm increasing."

"And you'll allow that?"

"Oh, yes. It will give me great pleasure to gain her approval at last."

Nathaniel laughed. "You are a dutiful daughter, Laura."

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Laura screwed up her nose. "It seems I am."

He tilted his head. "You mentioned a third request?"

Laura gazed into her husband's smiling grey eyes. "When you go next to the House of Lords, I wish to go with you."

"You mean to London?"

"In my father's last letter, he talks of women fighting in Parliament for equal rights. While I don't wish to join Emmeline Pankhurst, or do anything to embarrass you, I'd like to see women become aldermen or even higher if they so choose."

He shook his head. "The next thing you'll be wanting a political career like your father."

She studied him. "Would you mind if I did?"

"Do you know, Laura, I don't think I would." He kissed her cheek. "I'll even purchase a house in London, if you wish. We'll celebrate with a small glass of Champagne. Shall we?"

"Oh yes, please."

Nathaniel stepped out of the room. Alone in her chamber, Laura watched the beams of moonlight enter the room through the gap in the curtains. Tonight she was quite sure it was only moonlight, and not some ethereal manifestation that danced along the wall. But just in case, she said softly, "Rest in peace now, Amanda."

\* \* \* \*

The End

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